
7
story by
HISAGO
AMAZAKE-NO
illustrations by
KUROGIN
Knight's
&Magic


7
story by
HISAGO
AMAZAKE-NO
illustrations by
KUROGIN
Knight's
&Magic

Table of Contents

Cover

Prologue

Part 13: Country of Giants Arc

Chapter 56: The World of Giants

Chapter 57: Fighting in a Sage's Query (Battle)

Chapter 58: Omens of Battle

Chapter 59: Attending a Sage's Query (Congress)

Part 14: Country of the Small Ones Arc

Chapter 60: The Long-Awaited Reunion

Chapter 61: A Loud Incident in a Quiet Village

Chapter 62: Almost to the Sky

Chapter 63: The One Who Knows

Chapter 64: Let's Try Being Welcomed

Color Illustrations

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Prologue

A beastly cry rumbled through the forest, shaking the trees.

A giant bearlike monster swaggered through the boundless forest like it owned the place. The beast was over ten meters long and of very solid build, easily able to mow down the forest's thick trees. It was like the king of the forest.

Though it fearlessly strode along, it suddenly noticed that the sunlight had disappeared and looked up to the sky.

Something large was flying overhead.

It could see what seemed like a giant bird's wings flapping through the trees. Could it even be called a bird? It was so large it blocked out the sun like a cloud.

The bear could hear the sound it produced as it cut through the wind and shook the trees, and the beast's bravado immediately shriveled to nothing as it hid under the shade of a tree. Though the bear itself was a dangerous beast, the hierarchies of nature were set in stone. This was a land where survival of the fittest was the law.

The dense forest that covered Setterlund's eastern half and bordered the Kingdom of Fremmevilla was anathema to humanity, as destructive monsters wandered around like it was paradise. This forest was named the Great Bocuse Forest, and it had long refused human invasion.

The greatest weapons available to humanity were giant knights of steel—silhouette knights. In the past, humanity had used these weapons to challenge the forest of monsters, but their ambitions were crushed by the massive creatures hidden in the forest's dark corners.

Since then, the Great Bocuse Forest had become a forbidden land to be treated with fear and awe.

Still, everything had its turning point.

The trees were not shaking from monsters. Some small and light beings were using their branches as stepping stones.

These living things were too small and insignificant for this place, crawling with duel-class monsters as it was—they were

humans.

“We’re in danger of losing sight of them at this rate. Let’s pick it up a bit.” A small boy with light and fluffy-looking purplish-silver hair kicked off a tree branch.

“But they might notice us if we get too close… This is pretty annoying!”

The boy was named Ernesti “Ernie” Echevalier. He was the knight captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, and he was currently stranded in this forest.

His companion was wearing a large suit of armor—a silhouette gear. She was stranded person number two: Adeltrude “Addy” Alter.

“Now just what could be awaiting us?” Ernie wondered aloud.

They’d come to this forest as part of the second expedition’s forward scouting force, organized by their order. The force had consisted of the newest flying vehicles—levitating ships—and it had gone well at first. But as they’d gotten deeper into the forest, they had encountered one of the place’s true threats.

An aberrant monster—a bug-type creature that could produce poisonous acid that corroded metal.

Their skirmish had been extremely fierce. The monsters’ deadly poison could threaten even Twediannes. In the face of this dangerous situation, the Order of the Silver Phoenix had decided to retreat. Under the direction of their flagship, the *Izumo*, the fleet had shaken off the monsters’ pursuit and managed to safely escape.

However, Ernie and Ikaruga had deployed to protect the fleet, and he had been brought down at the end of this intense battle.

As he’d been surrounded by the monsters’ deadly clouds of acid, Addy, who had chased after him, had been the one to save him from his predicament.

Though they had escaped that situation, they had still ended up lost.

What awaited them in this monster’s paradise was an encounter beyond the scope of their imaginations. And this encounter was currently only a little ahead of the pair…

Part 13: Country of Giants Arc

Chapter 56: The World of Giants

Two giants were walking ahead of them through the thick vegetation.

They were each around ten meters tall. All giant life-forms living in the forest were considered monsters without exception, and those of this size were usually deemed duel-class. These monsters used the supernatural magic phenomena unique to this world to grow their bodies and expand their destructive potential.

However, this pair of giants were very different from normal monsters.

They wore armor processed from monster leather, shells, and bones. Their muscular forms rippled under their armor, and they also walked on two legs.

Yes, this pair of giants was humanoid—quite literally giants of Earthen folklore.

Since this forest was home to many duel-class (or stronger) monsters, there were a lot of very large animal trails all over. The giants were walking along these trails that had been pounded flat by the passage of large beasts.

One was looking every which way with his mono-eye from under a monster skull helmet. He had a primitive axe in one hand made by attaching stone to a large log—though it was of rough make, its weight alone would produce amazing power. He held the weapon ready as he proceeded with caution.

Meanwhile, the other giant was quite a bit different from the first. He was a size larger, with a robust build bursting with might. His armor was more intricate, decorated with various furs. Most striking, though, was what lay under his helmet. While the smaller giant had one eye, this one had *three* eyes that were somewhat smaller.

While the mono-eye's gaze was frequently darting around, the tri-eyed one seemed to be trodding along without a care. Eventually, the mono-eye lagged too far behind and had to hurry and catch up, and that was when Ernie and Addy noticed the tri-eye's back. Or, more specifically, what was on the tri-eye's back.

Said giant was carrying a conspicuously long and narrow package wrapped in monster leather. The mono-eye, recalling the contents of the package and the situation which had led to it being brought out, opened its mouth to *speak*.

“We were lucky, weren’t we, Tertius Oculus? We managed to obtain a kratovastia’s shell unharmed.”

Though the mono-eye was talking to the tri-eye, the other giant didn’t turn around. “Yet obtaining it unharmed makes the feat nothing but dull. I came for battle. Picking up leftovers is something for lesser eyes.”

“You would say that even about a kratovastia? One was said to have eaten a many-eyed Fortissimos. I can only think that we were reflected in Hundred-Eyed Argos’s gaze when I consider that.”

Finally, the tri-eye slowed his pace, one of his eyes turning to look at his cohort.

“Still, this comes with an interesting turn. Someone or something other than us defeated that beast of defilement. Was it another beast? Or a person? Either way, they would be a worthy opponent for a hero. Our paths will certainly cross…” The tri-eye grinned fiercely.

Meanwhile, the mono-eye’s expression only got stiffer and stiffer. Those with only a single eye were servants—armigers—and not possessed of as fierce a heart as heroes. After all, he only had one “manifestation of valor.”

“At any rate, we should first report to the mage, Marga. Let us hurry.” With that, the tri-eye turned around and walked off, leaving the mono-eye to hurriedly follow.

They continued down the winding animal trail for a while before reaching a clearing—a village in the forest. This village was populated by more giants.

The arranged buildings of the village were made by using trees as frames to drape monster leather over. There were less than ten of these, so the settlement wasn’t very big. Still, it was populated by giants. Naturally, each tent was extremely large. The monsters used for these leather hides had probably been duel-class or above. Nothing else would yield a hide big enough to be useful for their large frames.

The pair of giants entered the clearing and proceeded to the center of the village. The other giants noticed them and called

everyone to gather. By the time the pair reached the center square, they found themselves completely surrounded by the other residents. There were less than thirty of them in total, meaning this settlement might consist of only a single clan of giants, which might have been a relatively common arrangement for the race.

The tri-eye swept his gaze over his surroundings and raised a powerful voice. “Fortissimos De Tertius Oculus has hereby finished his battle and returned!”

A section of the crowd parted after his shout. A single giant was slowly walking toward them from inside the village’s largest tent.

The forms and appearances of these giants were truly varied.

Almost all of them were as large as the term “giant” implied, but some smaller ones that seemed to be children were also present. They clearly had males and females as well. What was most distinctive, however, was that they all had a differing number of eyes.

There were those with only a single eye as well as those with two eyes. Including the one who just returned, only two of the villagers had three eyes.

Then, there was the giant who appeared from the large tent.

Her clothing was made with monster parts that were much more colorful and flashy, and it was clear at first glance that she was special when all the others only wore hides and furs.

Her face was bare, exposing a multitude of wrinkles. The colorful giant also walked with a slow gait, as her limbs were also thinner than the rest. She seemed to be a truly old woman.

However, the four eyes buried within the wrinkles told of a profound intellect.

The returning tri-eye bent his knee, folded his arms, and closed two of his three eyes, with only the top eye on his forehead looking up at the old woman. Beside him, the returning mono-eye did the same, though his singular eye remained open.

“O Marga De Quartus Oculus, I have finished my battle and returned,” said the tri-eye.

The old woman trained her four eyes upon the pair and nodded. “Well done, Fortissimos. So you claimed victory?”

“No, I could not claim victory,” the tri-eye replied immediately. This surprising report sent a stir through the crowd.

“Then what did you gain?” asked the old woman.

“This!” The returning tri-eye opened the package on his back, revealing what looked like a monster’s shell, complete with a long and thin horn. The old woman let out a large sigh, and a commotion quickly spread through the surrounding giants.

“Ohhh, that is from a kratovastia…”

“So he slew one? What a daring feat! That’s our Fortissimos!”

“But then why did he not claim it to be a victory? He retrieved its head!”

The four-eyed, elderly woman paid no heed to the tittering of the crowd as she inspected the head with a stern look.

Then, the returning tri-eye began his explanation. “O Marga, it pains me to say that I was not the one who slew this beast. I simply found its corpse.”

“I see, so that is why it is not a victory. Still, that does not change the fact that you left prepared for battle.”

The tri-eye continued without any visible change. “That’s not all. I only picked up one, but we found a great many of these carcasses.”

The woman’s wrinkles stretched slightly. “Truly? What could have opposed these poison-spreading disasters? To even defeat more than one…”

“I do not know,” replied the tri-eye. “I only found kratovastia carcasses.”

The elderly woman sank into thought. Meanwhile, the rest of the village erupted into heated discussion.

“Did something truly defeat those beasts? Then this is our chance.”

“Indeed! Without those beasts of defilement, the Genos De Rubel are nothing to fear!”

“A messenger! We must send a messenger for another sage’s query!”

The four-eyed elder silenced this excitement with a shout. “Quiet! We must not take reckless action!”

She rapped her staff against the ground as she strongly scolded them. The giants instantly settled down, but it didn’t take long for them to start launching impassioned arguments.

“The Rubels are nothing without kratovastias!”

“There is no guarantee all of them are dead. In the first place,

we are outnumbered. Do not underestimate them," the elderly woman calmly countered. She wanted to cut this rising fervor to fight off at the pass, and it worked.

The other giants started to calm down, but one still opened their mouth. "But you should know, Marga, that their throne is not true. They couldn't gain the recognition of Argos in the previous sage's query. This outrage shouldn't be allowed. At some point, there will be a need for questions."

The old woman narrowed her four eyes slightly, almost burying them in her wrinkles as she sank deeply into thought. "Listen to my words. I am the only mage left with at least four eyes. If offering my eyes up would solve this, I would not hesitate. However, I am more than a little too old. No successors have opened their eyes fully, so I cannot afford to do so."

She swept her gaze over the crowd before stopping on something. There lay a toddler with four eyes, who seemed disturbed by the attention.

Most of them were silenced after that last point, but then the other three-eyed hero who had been keeping quiet up until now stood and looked straight at his elder. "We should relay this to the other clans first, Marga. If we talk to them, someone may open our eyes."

"Don't be hasty," replied the old woman. "Do you want to relive our last mistake? They may have used brute force, but we were unable to stop the Rubels' violence. In fact, it is thanks to that we are now feuding."

The other three-eyed hero's response gummed up in his mouth. He couldn't bring himself to thoughtlessly claim that the enemy of their enemy was their friend. Truthfully, they'd directly experienced the fact that those with a common enemy wouldn't necessarily join hands.

"But you're right, someone or something was able to accomplish this feat," the elderly woman admitted. "No matter who or what did it, they will not stay quiet. The eye of opportunity has yet to open... We must wait."

With that, the crowd calmed down once more, and the four-eyed old woman picked up the head. "O Fortissimos De Tertius Oculus," she said reverently, "I laud your bravery. You should decorate yourself with the head of this kratovastia with honor."

“I understand. Witness me, Argos!”

The elderly woman proffered the monster head, which the returning tri-eye respectfully received. It had originally been part of a carcass, but the course of this conversation had rendered it an official medal of honor. Wearing a piece of a monster they’d felled held very significant meaning to the giants.

He raised the head high. “I did nothing but pick up this carcass. But next time, I *will* bring one low with my own hands and wear it!”

The surrounding giants cheered appreciatively.

“Fortissimos! Fortissimos! Fortissimos!”

They beat their fists and stomped on the ground. The giants’ shout shook the air in all directions.

◆

A couple quiet gazes were concentrated on the giants as they crowded around with frenzied fervor. The gazes were coming from atop the trees surrounding the settlement, where some figures were clinging to the trunks.

The figures were far smaller than the heated giants—just regular humans. They were Ernie and Addy. After they’d found the giants on their trek through the forest, they’d used the anti-monster skills they’d learned as knights to tail them in secret.

“Wh-What does this mean?” Addy’s arms—which were currently wrapped around Ernie in a hug—tensed. The sight in front of her was giving her goose bumps.

“I’m surprised too. Not only do the giants have a language, we can understand it as well. How shocking.”

Giants were very different from humans like Ernie and Addy. Even so, they were humanoid and possessed intelligence and culture. It wasn’t strange for them to have language as well. Still, it was completely unexpected that their languages were similar enough to be almost immediately comprehensible.

“What’s going on?! What…are they? I thought they were just monsters that kinda looked like people, but was I wrong?” Addy was a seasoned knight runner. She wouldn’t shy away from a fight against duel-class or even division-class monsters. After all, though they were dangerous, they were still within the scope of her understanding. But her mind was completely unable to keep

up with the scene in front of her. This caused an indescribable feeling to creep up slowly within her.

"This means we'll probably be able to communicate with them. In which case...maybe negotiations would work?" Ernie summarized.

"Whaaat?! I can't believe it! Are you really going to try talking to those *things*?!" Addy's face betrayed her utter surprise.

"Of course not right now, since I don't know if it would be safe," said Ernie. "But we'll have to consider it as an option when it comes down to it."

"Well, yeah, I guess..." Addy hugged Ernie tighter as she searched for a real answer.

Ernie paid her no mind as he concentrated, trying to hear what the giants were talking about. "Look at the head that one is holding up. That's from one of those bug-type monsters. Heh heh heh heh... So they call those 'kratovastias,' huh? Aha ha ha! Okay, I've memorized the name of my enemy."

"So you heard *that* loud and clear..." Addy muttered. Her exasperation reached its limits and came out in the form of a looong sigh. "Gah, you're just so...*you*, Ernie! You know, those giants are so *human*, but they're also *monstrous*! And they *speak*! Isn't that crazy?! Don't you think it's like, a little scary, or like...creepy, even?"

"No, not at all. In fact, we should learn more about them. We'll need to figure out how to make best use of them, after all."

Seeing him act as usual, even in this situation, Addy started to feel stupid for being so shaken. So eventually she was able to calm down and begin to observe the giants as well. "But this is still kinda, like...weird. I can't describe it... Like, the way they speak is...old? Stuffy? It's hard to figure out what they're trying to say."

"As expected, though their language is similar to ours, it's not the same."

As they watched, the giants finished their gathering and scattered. Some returned to their tents, while others got back to work.

Ernie crossed his arms together and started to think. "Now then, how do we make contact? They understand language, but the way they act is quite violent. There's no reason for them to be friendly with us."

“Urgh, you’re really serious about this idea, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am. They have technology of sorts, and we can even communicate. This means it’s much more likely that they can help fix our silhouette knights.”

It would, of course, be much more efficient to have the giants do the reconstruction rather than tiny humans. Still, that didn’t mean they could just come out and ask these large, (assumedly) humanoid monsters with an unfamiliar culture to do smithing work. That would be insane.

In the end, though, Ernie’s decisions were solely based on whether they could be useful in repairing his beloved silhouette knights. Though there were limits to how much he would accept, his excessive boldness and shamelessness were necessary for his current lifestyle.

The giants’ potential attitude toward them aside, Addy couldn’t help but worry. “But will it really go well?”

“It’s not like giving it a try would ruin things. Even if it doesn’t work, we’ll know they’re our enemies—it wouldn’t be for nothing.”

Naturally, Addy’s issue with this plan wasn’t the notion that they’d come up empty-handed—but she’d given up trying to retort. After all, it was true that they couldn’t just spend this time just twiddling their thumbs. They needed to do *something*.

“Anyway, we should gather some more information first,” said Ernie. “If possible, we should learn how they live their lives and figure out whether we should negotiate with them or make enemies of them.”

“So we’re going to sneak in?”

Ernie nodded. “We’re obviously not going to barge our way in out of nowhere. Let’s wait for nightfall and sneak in.”

Considering the size difference, it was definitely possible to sneak into the village. Still, out of an abundance of caution, Ernie decided they would wait for the cover of darkness. Not that this assuaged Addy’s vague worries.

“It’d be great if they knew how to work metal. I hope we can get them to help us. And if they’d be willing to retrieve Ikaruga…” Meanwhile, Ernie was rather busy making weirdly wishful and optimistic calculations.

◆

Soon enough, the day ended, and the veil of night fell. The moonlight shone silently down on the village, and the far-off howl of an unknown beast echoed.

In a stark turn from the afternoon, the giants' village was quiet. As Ernie had expected, they slept at night.

Ernie and Addy in her Descendrad, two dark figures in the night, flitted from shadow to shadow cast by the large tents dotting the village. They were tiny compared to the tents, which allowed them to move around without standing out. On top of that, they were using Physical Boost to go so quickly that they were almost flying, making it even harder for them to be seen in the darkness.

Before long, they approached a certain tent and looked up at it.

"It feels like we're little mice creeping around a house," Addy commented.

"Well, our goal isn't to nibble on their food. Not that we aren't going to nibble on *something*. Their information, namely." Ernie quietly pointed, and Addy used her Descendrad to lift up the hem of the tent. Then, they snuck into the giant's abode.

The inside was totally dark. There *was* a gap at the top of the tent, but the dual structure of the building meant there was a cover on top of it, and almost no light was getting in. There was even an extra flap covering the entrance to cut off more light.

The two strained their ears and heard the telltale sounds of someone fast asleep. These sounds came from deeper inside the tent, and the source clearly wasn't moving, so it was safe to assume that the resident giant was asleep.

"I can't see *anything*," Addy complained.

"Hmm... This seems like it'll be tougher than expected."

The pair conversed in hushed voices. They were in total darkness, which was making it impossible to do what they'd come here to do. Still, that didn't mean they could just make light, even if the giant was asleep. The situation was near hopeless.

"It wouldn't be impossible to investigate by feel," said Ernie.

"That'd be dangerous...and we don't know where all the giants are either."

They couldn't afford to wake the giants up by being reckless in this darkness. After some trial and error, the pair ultimately gave up on their original goal and left the tent, leaving behind only the

quiet breathing in the darkness.

Unfortunately...the sound of breathing suddenly stopped.

A large presence rose from within the darkness. It stifled its breathing despite its large frame and started to move, almost like a wild animal.

During this time, Ernie and Addy were out in the moonlight, at a loss for their next steps.

“The giants *are* asleep as planned. But it’s too hard to look around without light.”

“So do we try sneaking in during the day next?” Addy asked.

“That would be our only choice if we want to investigate, but it *will* be dangerous. What to do— Ah...”

Something had suddenly obstructed the moonlight, casting a large shadow over them.

Their gazes shot upward to see the head of the large figure that had emerged from the tent.

Just its head was bigger than Ernie was tall. It was a giant—it couldn’t be anything else. Though its face was covered in shadow, three pinpricks of light were clearly visible as its eyes reflected the light bouncing off the ground.

◆

The giant—astragali in its own tongue—Wiltos Fortissimos Tertius Oculus De Caelleus—had wrinkles form around his top eye as he stared down at the small creatures at his feet.

These creatures were like miniaturized astragali. He had an idea of what they were, as well as who their *owners* were...

“What are goblins doing here? Could it be...? Are you owned by the Rubels?!”

“Huh?”

Though they understood the words, Ernie and Addy couldn’t divine the meaning behind them. Heedless of their confusion, the giant flew into a rage, grabbing for something close by that could be used as a weapon before leaping out of the tent.

“The Rubels must be hurting without their kratovastias! But their eyes must be clouded over if they thought to send measly goblins to our midst!”

“No, I think you’re mistaken,” Ernie said.

“Ernie?! I don’t think this is the time for calm replies!”

Ernie almost reflexively argued back, but before he could finish, the giant swung his makeshift club at the young knight captain. The improvised weapon was massive and gouged out the ground, making a dull sound almost like an explosion that reverberated into the night.

Even in the darkness, the weapon gave off such an intimidating presence that it was easily identifiable. It wasn’t just a random object—it was a stone axe. The giant’s three eyes glared at the small goblins. The next moment, he flexed his arm and swung the axe down with scathing momentum.

The power behind the strike was worthy of a man with the title of Fortissimos. There was no way for the goblins to escape its overwhelming destructive force.

Only, that is, if they were truly simple goblins.

He was in fact facing the members of the strongest and most foolish of Fremmevilla’s knight orders: the Order of the Silver Phoenix. Ernesti Echevalier was their captain, and Adeltrude Alter was his disciple.

No signal was needed. They’d both already drawn their gunstaves and deployed scripts through the Magius Circuits, bringing forth familiar spells that they’d shot off countless times. At this point, they could do this at the speed of thought.

Air was gathered and compressed. The clump of highly pressurized atmosphere was then released in a guided direction as Ernie and Addy threw themselves aside with casts of Aero Thrust.

Immediately after, the huge axe slammed into the ground, gouging out the earth with a tremendous sound that would serve to awaken more of the giants.

“What?!”

The three eyes held by this giant hero were not for show. He caught sight of the goblins evading his attack, though only barely. His eyes reflexively widened. The shock on his face was obscured by the dust thrown up by the attack.

“Mere goblins dodged my attack?!”

He was a Fortissimos—a title held by only the strongest of their people. How could puny goblins escape him? The truth set in front of him irritated him to no end.

He ground his teeth together and lowered his stance before dashing forth. He burst through the cloud of dirt, closing in on the escaping goblins all at once.

◆

Ernie and Addy had immediately turned around to escape; they wouldn't wait for the enraged giant to come after them.

"Hrm... I don't like this. We aren't goblins, or whatever he said," Ernie muttered.

"Agh, jeez, now's not the time for that! What do we do?!"

The giant's strides were naturally long; he was able to produce fearsome speed through simple running. He was in hot pursuit of the pair who were speeding off like bullets using Aero Thrust.

"We'll retreat for now. To the forest!" Ernie shouted.

They maintained their speed as they made for the darkness of the trees.

The giant didn't slow down either, but he was forced to stop shortly after going into the forest.

"Grk?! Damn you!"

It was too hard on his eyes to chase the "goblins" through the darkness of the forest, especially at the speed they were going.

He glared into the inky blackness, rage evident on his face. He could hear the faint sounds of their escape, which mixed in with the rustling of the trees.

"They escaped from *me*? I suppose they shouldn't be underestimated, despite their size." He continued angrily glaring into the trees for a while, but eventually he shook his head and returned to the village.

Once the hero returned, he found other giants who had been awakened by the noise waiting for him. Marga was at their center.

"What is the meaning of all this noise on a night like this, Fortissimos?"

"I found a couple of goblins scuttling around, Marga. They're most likely eyes from Genos De Rubel."

"What?!"

A commotion arose from the giants. Their elder closed her eyes, silent, but it wasn't long before she spoke. "Goblins, you say? No other clan would keep such things. Relying on *them* to be eyes?

Pathetic. Where are these goblins now?"

"They escaped into the forest with terrifying speed. It is a great failure that I was not able to end them, as one with the title of Fortissimos." The hero knelt and closed two of his three eyes. The stone axe in his hands creaked as he gripped it tight.

The elderly woman shook her head. "No need to focus your gaze on what's past. It was inevitable that the death of the kratovastias would become known. Yet I never would have expected the Rubels to be desperate enough to use goblins. Are they really in such dire straits?"

"It is impossible for the Rubels' eyes to still be closed, Marga. I'm sure the goblins are not the only ones here."

Marga nodded. If goblins were here, their handlers must also be near. In short, the Rubel clan would be hiding somewhere in the forest.

"They're panicking, the fools. Send a messenger! We must let the nearby clans know."

"Marga?! Does that mean…?" A rumble went through the surrounding crowd of giants.

"My eyes are now open. We must gather the other clans and open a sage's query before those damned Rubels can make their move. There's no time. We must make our preparations."

The old woman's words were met with a shout from the giants. It was loud enough to shake the forest and astonish some birds enough to take flight. Meanwhile, a pair of small figures continued dashing through the forest, as if they were being chased.

◆

After that night, the atmosphere in the giant village changed markedly.

"Prepare for the hunt!"

"Ready your armor! The query is where you will show your bravery!"

Going out to hunt for food wasn't in itself unusual. However, the giants were so animated that it stood out in stark contrast to before. They were hunting many more creatures than normal.

What's more, they aggressively aimed for monsters that they normally wouldn't, such as those with sturdy shells that were

larger than the giants. These boasted overwhelming durability and required quite a lot of effort from the giants to hunt. They weren't usually worth it.

Against such enemies, the giants banded together to persistently layer in attacks, all while trying their best not to harm the shells. They aimed for the small gaps in the natural armor, taking their time to attack. Eventually, the gigantic monsters would weaken and fall to the ground, shaking the earth.

"Okay, withdraw!"

At that signal, the giants all pulled along their loads—monster carcasses lay upon arrays of logs—with strong ropes made of woven monster fur.

The giants might have been strong, but it was still hard to move the absolutely massive bodies of monsters over battalion-class. The giants' cries of victory, as well as their shouts of exertion as they dragged the massive bodies, resounded through the forest.

The village belonging to Genos De Caellus was never heavily populated. While most of them had gone out to hunt, a small number had split off in a different direction. These were messengers sent to the other clans, whose equipment had nothing to do with hunting. They wouldn't return for weeks. In order to open a sage's query, they needed at least six clans to participate. As such, Genos De Caellus was mainly focusing on the relatively smaller clans.

"It's a huge haul! One more push, everyone!"

The hunters, meanwhile, had transported their prey back to the village. Everyone aside from the messengers had participated, regardless of their gender. Then, they all started butchering together as well.

The dead monsters had all become more fragile without their Physical Boost spells supporting them. Thanks to that, they were surprisingly easy to take apart. The giants peeled away shells and hides with practiced ease before finally cutting into the meat.

The hides would be tanned, while the meat was cut off the bone and lined up. Anything not eaten today would be dried. The giants tended to only hunt what they needed for the day, so there wasn't much reason to make preserved food—though one reason would be to prepare for a sage's query.

They silently processed their prey before cleaning up and

returning to their own tents with shells and leathers in hand. They would be reinforcing the armor they'd worn during the hunt with the new materials they'd obtained.

Old pieces were swapped out, and shells were layered atop leather to provide both flexibility and durability. Fur was intertwined to make thread, though sometimes monster tendons were used in place of thread to sew it all together.

With the addition of materials from battalion-class monsters, their armor had become stronger. They believed that these suits, made with materials that had been personally hunted, would draw the attention of Argos and bring them great power.

And thus were preparations steadily being made.

◆

Dawn broke, and the Great Bocuse Forest was awash with red light. The various animals living in the forest started to awake, poking their heads out from their abodes. The forest was filled with the whispering sounds of small monsters.

Ernie opened his eyes, greeted by this peaceful melody. The first thing he saw were layers and layers of leaves. He'd slept on top of a tree.

Ernie launched into a big stretch before getting up, poking his head out to check out the situation on the ground. With that, Addy realized Ernie had disappeared, and she started to fidget. She stretched out her arms, searching for Ernie and bringing him back into her hold.

"Is something the matter, Ernie?" she asked sleepily.

"Not nearby, at least. Even the ringer bird is still asleep."

Their sleepy conversation was taking place in something like a huge bird's nest made out of branches and leaves—actually, a literal bird's nest.

Right in the center of the nest was a huge bird with at least a ten-meter wingspan. Of course, it was a duel-class monster. They had, of all things, snuck into the nest of a duel-class monster. They had even been using it as a pillow.

The move was far past mere recklessness, but it hadn't been done without a reason. This species of bird monster was known to be gentle and amicable, and they didn't feed on humans.

Furthermore, while it was interesting that the ringer bird was disinterested to the point of incaution toward anything it knew not to be a threat, they were extremely sensitive in the opposite direction. If they were to detect a threat, they would let out an ear-piercing cry to warn their friends; that was how the bird had gotten its name. Ernie and Addy had decided to use this to their advantage, getting two birds with one stone by turning one into both an alarm system and soft pillow.

They'd even brought the Descendrad into the ringer bird's nest, though they'd refrained from bringing it all the way to the center with them. They'd left the silhouette gear uncovered so that Addy could easily get back in. No matter how useful the monster was, that wasn't a reason to not be fully prepared.

While the two humans were still drowsy, the bird monster tensed up a little. It opened up its cute, round eyes that had just been closed and restlessly looked back and forth. The pair looked over the rim of the nest to see a large humanoid through the trees. The moment they saw the figure, they withdrew back into the nest.

"Hmm... The giants have been pretty active in the forest for a while now. They're really looking for us, aren't they?" Addy asked.

"If they were, they'd be far more than just persistent... Actually, they're going exclusively for monsters. It might just be some sort of special hunting season."

There was no way they could come up with a clear answer, no matter how much they crossed their arms and thought. Their abortive attempt at research had come up with nothing, so they had no information on the giants.

But no matter what the reason was, the giants being so active was a real pain. The forest might technically be a large place, they were now in danger of encountering a giant anywhere. And if they did, they would once again be attacked without question.

"I can't get a full grasp on the situation; this isn't good. At any rate, we need more options," Ernie muttered to himself.

As the giant passed by, the ringer bird relaxed. Ernie stroked its wing in appreciation, and the bird glanced at him before losing all interest and closing its eyes. As always, it kept to its own rhythm.

"Now then, it's about time we consider stealing some cards from our opponent."

“Yeah, it’s going to be really annoying if we don’t do something about those giants,” said Addy.

The two of them started exchanging ideas as to how to proceed while leaning on their large bird alarm pillow.

◆

A short distance into the forest, a three-eyed hero was walking along as boldly as he always did. Because he was titled as a hero, he always led the group during hunts.

His three eyes peered through the trees, finding tracks. It was difficult to find tracks left by small ones like the ones he’d chased off, but prey was large enough to be easy.

Something had left feces by the base of a tree. Naturally, its producer would be above their heads. The giant lifted his gaze up to the canopy, where he saw a nest built among the branches.

“A ringer bird? Right.”

He knew what kind of monster lived in that nest. The prey up there wasn’t worth much as sustenance to giants, but its feathers would make for good decoration. Since they were on the verge of a sage’s query, decorating their armor would be important. There was more to armor than just being tough, after all.

With that in mind, the hero grabbed a nearby rock of appropriate size.

Almost at the exact same time, of course, the ringer bird’s eyes snapped open.

It immediately let out a screeching alarm. It didn’t take long for Ernie and Addy to tumble over wide awake and alert. As they were getting up, the ringer bird spread its wings and took flight.

Right after, a huge rock came straight through the nest at extreme speed. It blew a hole directly through all the branches and leaves in its way, showing just how ridiculous the power behind it was.

“Addy!”

Though their ears were still ringing, Ernie and Addy forced themselves into action. Addy jumped into her Descendrad and leaped onto a nearby branch.

“So they threw a stone. There aren’t many things in this forest that would use a tool,” noted Ernie.

He searched the ground level with a piercing glare and quickly found what he was looking for: a giant that was staring wickedly in the direction that the ringer bird had flown off to.

“Nooo, my relaxation time with Ernie!” Addy shouted in lament. “Hey, we don’t have to let this one go, do we?”

“You’re right, this is a good chance. Let’s go have a talk with him.”

While Addy was pouting angrily, Ernie wore a ferocious smile as they jumped down from the branch.

“As smart as ever, those birds. It would be too difficult to hunt them from so far away.” The three-eyed hero clicked his tongue as he listened to the bird’s alarmed cries disappear into the distance. Ringer birds used their loud cry to warn their comrades. It would be a while before they could hunt again, since everything would be on alert.

Just as the giant was about to walk away, accepting his mistake, he heard a soft sound. He immediately surveyed his surroundings and found a pair of small figures on a branch.

“The goblins again! So this is where you were hiding.” The hero’s three eyes glinted as his mouth curved upward into a smile.

At the same time, Ernie narrowed his eyes in realization. “That voice is familiar. It seems you’re the same giant as before. This must be some sort of fate.”

“What fortune! To think I would get the chance to amend my mistake so soon!” The giant’s entire body filled with vigor, giving him power not for the sake of a hunt, but for a pure battle. “Your luck ran out when you left your master’s side, goblins.”

“You’re not that quick on the uptake, are you? I told you before that we aren’t being ‘kept’ by anyone,” Ernie retorted.

The giant’s smile was wiped off his face by this unflappable response. He slowly advanced while measuring the distance between them, glaring up at the branch. “You really like to talk, don’t you? Are you trying to tell me that you’re a stray? Then what need is there to sneak around?”

“We just wanted to know a little more about you.”

“I do not understand. Why not just ask for information from your masters? But…you soon won’t be able to spew your useless words anymore.”

The giant had been advancing carefully, and now he took the

last step. At the same time, he swung his stone axe, completely destroying the branch.

Before the axe made contact, though, Ernie had jumped into the air. The stone axe followed him as he tried to fly over the giant's head. In midair, Ernie cast Aero Thrust, forcefully changing his trajectory. The axe struck air once more before uselessly biting into the ground.

"So you can dodge my attacks! You're quite skilled for a goblin. But!"

Ernie sighed. "All giants seem to do is rely on might. Are your words mere decorations?!"

Though the stone axe could be swung with enough power to easily defeat large monsters, it clearly wasn't suited for hitting a small and fast opponent. But regardless of the fact that his attacks had been dodged several times already, the giant lifted his axe once again.

The giant committed in full, stepping in as he attacked. Of course Ernie dodged, but then he felt that something was off—he quickly realized the source of the feeling. The giant's three eyes had followed him.

The giant's multiple eyes weren't just for show. They allowed him a wide field of view and excellent dynamic vision. In other words, he was able to keep sight of his enemy.

Ernie let out a noise of alarm as the axe cut through the air, twisting in its trajectory like a living thing to come at Ernie for the third time. He immediately got out of the way with Aero Thrust, but in a fearsome turn, the axe followed him.

A smile warped the giant hero's face. He'd been purposefully holding back when swinging his axe. That way, he would be able to freely change its course. He was aiming for the small opening created immediately after his prey dodged.

The axe's momentum was negligible, but only to the giant. If it hit Ernie, he would naturally be badly wounded at the very least. This trick was only possible with a giant's strength.

The axe seemed to howl through the air as it sped toward Ernie. It was unclear what he was thinking in the face of this incoming mass, but he brought his Winchesters up to the fore. Was he planning to receive the giant stone axe with just his thin gunstaves? That would clearly be a move of desperation.

Even so, Ernie pointed his gunstaves at the axe with an instant explosion of air. The resulting gale threw Ernie bodily like a leaf in the wind. The cushion of air had served its purpose, allowing him to create more distance.

“It’s been a while since I’ve cast Sonic Boom,” Ernie said before twisting in the air and casting Air Suspension to allow a soft landing on the ground.



“What?!” The hero doubted his own eyes. He could understand dodging with speed, but he never expected his enemy to live after taking an attack from a giant’s overwhelming power.

This shattered the hero’s prejudice against goblins to pieces. He forgot to raise his axe again as his face split into a wide smile. “Incredible… Ha ha! You survived?! Heh heh…ha ha ha! I must apologize to you, goblin! Despite your race, you possess strength worthy of being called a Fortissimos! So I must meet you in battle in a way to not shame my own title! Witness me, Argos!”

He’d been forced to admit that the creature before him was no mere goblin. That it was an enemy too strong to be underestimated—worthy of all his might.

That was why he, a Fortissimos De Tertius Oculus, took a stance that he hadn’t before.

“You really are so selfish,” Ernie said. “It’s basically impossible to communicate. Fine, then I’ll make you listen by force if I have to.” Meanwhile, Ernie was finally pushed to the brink of giving up. Dodging the giant’s attacks wasn’t that hard. However, his opponent was constantly jumping to his own conclusions and getting even more aggressive. They were far from being able to have an actual conversation.

There was only one method to make such a battle-crazed maniac listen.

“I have only one request for you before we fight, giant,” said Ernie.

“Talking during battle is not custom…but you are a goblin. Very well—I will listen to your last words. Craft them well,” replied the giant. He rested his axe on his shoulder, haughtily fixing his three eyes on Ernie.

It was custom for words to be exchanged beforehand in a battle between giants, since they would be unnecessary once the fighting began. However, he was facing a goblin (by his estimation). Was it because he had the composure of the strong, or was it a matter of his pride? Regardless, the three-eyed hero was willing to listen.

Ernie nodded and spoke in a lighthearted tone. “Let’s go somewhere else.”

It took a long moment for the giant to comprehend that. “What?” He had been the one to allow this conversation, and his

obvious confusion impacted his dignity. Even so, Ernie's next line proved astonishing.

"Let's go to your village and duel in front of everyone," said Ernie.

Unable to grasp his intent, the giant was lost for a response. Even though he was hailed as a hero, the questions this raised trumped his desire to fight.

"Such a meaningless fight should only have to happen once," Ernie explained. "Now, please lead me to your village."

The hero doubted his own hearing, and for the first time, he took a good look at the tiny being in front of him. The goblin looked outwardly like a giant, only so small that he could easily squish the little thing flat. But size did not prevent it from being worthy of being considered a Fortissimos. He himself had admitted that.

After some consideration, the giant made his reply. "Very well. A fight between Fortissimoses must be recognized by the masses."

He hadn't needed too long to ponder before nodding gravely.

◆

A while later, the giants in the village were mired in confusion as they saw that their three-eyed hero had returned early.

"Is something the matter, Tertius Oculus? You're empty-handed. Did your eye close in the midst of the hunt?"

He was questioned, and the answer he gave turned that confusion to surprise. "I have agreed to a sage's query. You must witness it."

"What?! The messengers have just left. What do you mean?!"

The giants looked around for his opponent in a panic, and it didn't take long for them to make the terrifying discovery. Behind him was a small figure who had followed him fearlessly into the village.

The giants did not understand. They stood silently with their mouths agape before one hesitantly asked, "You cannot mean…that your opponent is that goblin?!"

"I do indeed."

"You fool! Your eyes must have clouded over!"

"They have not. This one is worthy of being considered a

Fortissimos. You will see the truth during the query."

Faced with their hero's sudden bout of what appeared to be insanity, the giants exchanged confused looks. How could they convince such a hardheaded hero? But a savior appeared as they were mired in this terrifying—yet awkward—atmosphere.

Marga De Quartus Oculus, the four-eyed elder wearing gaudy decorations, appeared and stared the hero down. "The news has reached mine ears, Fortissimos. Is it true that goblin is worthy?"

"I would stake my eyes on it." The hero knelt and closed two of his eyes.

The elder growled. What the hero had said was the highest order of oath among giants. It perfectly conveyed his certainty. "If you are willing to go that far, then I will not stop you. All that is left is to ask Argos…"

"Oh no, please hold on a moment. Don't just move things forward on your own," said Ernie.

The objection seemed to come out of nowhere just as the rest of the giants were about to be forced to capitulate. The elder's eyes, buried within her wrinkles, widened as she looked to its source.

The small thing was standing calm and composed while surrounded by those much larger than him, not showing an ounce of fear. None of the giants had expected this pitiful creature to speak. They had no idea what whim had caused their hero to open a sage's query, but they had believed that the goblin would simply be squished without fuss.

That was, until this moment.

"This is a duel," said Ernie. "And so I will be demanding a prize should I win."

The giants' expressions instantly changed. The tiny one had spoken of winning against their hero.

"Very well. State your wish," said the Fortissimos.

"Fortissimos?!"

"There is no doubt he is a Fortissimos among the goblins, which means this will be a proper query to be offered to Argos. A prize is needed for victory."

The giants' gazes pinged back and forth between their hero and Ernie. The situation was careening in a direction no one could have expected. Why did this happen *now*, when everyone was gathered

together to prepare for a different sage's query?

Only the hero stood calmly.

"Should I win, I want you to listen to what I have to say," said Ernie.

"What?"

But not even he had expected that request, and he couldn't help but look doubtful.

"I don't know what sort of situation you're in, but no matter how much I try to explain things or say that you're wrong, you won't listen to me. If you truly understand language, show me that you can be spoken with," said Ernie.

"Are you sure that is all you wish for? This is a query between Fortissimoses."

The hero sounded confused, but Ernie nodded confidently with his chest puffed out.

The elder had been watching this exchange from beginning to end, and she narrowed her four eyes buried within her wrinkles. This tiny hero was totally unlike any of the Rubels' goblins. Fighting a giant without the aid of a phantom beast was unheard of. The truth of the matter might not be what the elder had hitherto believed.

She buried her questions and solemnly declared, "The preparations are complete. Now, we will hold a sage's query to offer to Argos. State your names!"

With that, the duel had officially begun. The mood among the giants instantly tensed. Now that the query had been opened, there was no stopping it.

The three-eyed hero sucked in a large breath, stuck his axe into the ground, puffed out his chest, and shouted, "I am Wiltos Fortissimos Tertius Oculus De Caelleus. Witness me, Argos!"

Then, he lifted up his stone axe. His opponent might be a tiny goblin, but he wasn't going to show any mercy. Such a thing was unnecessary, since this goblin was not afraid in the slightest even facing off against a giant.

"My name is Ernesti Echevalier. I'm just a simple knight captain."

As if to prove that, he held his tiny blade in both hands and glared up at the giant hero. Then, once they'd both introduced themselves, they dashed forward.

Chapter 57: Fighting in a Sage’s Query (Battle)

The village settled by Genos De Caelleus, an astragali clan, was currently in the midst of an unusually heated mood. This was because they were watching a query between heroes that had been agreed to while they had been making preparations for a different sage’s query.

Every giant, regardless of age or gender, gathered at the center of the village. At the center of the circle they formed was a three-eyed giant with the Fortissimos title, as well as a human boy who wasn’t even tall enough to reach the giant’s knees.

This strange and outrageous pairing was about to fight…

◆

While everyone’s eyes were on the fight, Adeltrude, wearing her Descendrad, snuck into the village.

Each time the three-eyed hero and Ernesti exchanged blows, the giants groaned or cheered. Addy quietly made her way toward the circle of giants to peek at the fight.

When the giant swung his stone axe, shaking the earth, Ernie swiftly evaded.

Addy held up her gauntleted hand to shade her eyes as she muttered, “Is Ernie…mad?”

It was possible he was angry that he wasn’t being listened to, or possibly because this was a fight without silhouette knights.

“Actually, it might be both,” Addy said to herself. “Oh well, whatever. Anyway, I should take this chance…”

Thanks to Ernie fighting the hero head-on, the tents were basically unguarded. Addy kept as quiet as she could as she infiltrated one.

“There’s not much stuff in here.” The inside of the giant-sized tent was much emptier than she’d been expecting. Pretty much everything inside were tools that had to do with hunting or fighting. Armor in the midst of repairs as well as simple weapons

like stone axes or clubs littered the tent too. Some weapons that looked like spears were also mixed in—a line of weapons with sharpened points attached to thin handles. They were most likely for throwing.

There was also a pile of what seemed to be preserved food, so the tent was filled with a terrible smell.

"Urgh... Maybe I should have been the one fighting!"

She found other sundry tools, but nothing that looked like it was for construction or industry. The giants were possessed of powerful bodies, so they didn't need much for survival. They only needed equipment to hunt with, and even their weapons and armor used stone or monster materials at best.

"If this is all they have, it'll be pretty much impossible to make a silhouette knight," Addy said.

The giants' culture was not what they'd hoped for.

Would Ernie be disappointed? Actually, probably not. He was the type to challenge the heights of what was possible, but cleanly give up on what wasn't.

"They have basically no technology, which means at best all they'll be useful for is manual labor," Addy reasoned to herself.

The fact that she was already treating the race she was once afraid of as nothing but manpower showed how Ernie had influenced her.

And so Addy toured around the entire village. With that, even if "negotiations" with the giants went bust, they would have achieved the bare minimum. Then, she heard a large commotion coming from the village square.

"Well, nothing really stood out, so I guess I should go help Ernie?" she said to no one in particular. Addy then dashed off toward the square.

◆

The giant axe crashed through, accompanied by roaring winds.

Attacks from both silhouette knights and giants would easily kill a human. The destructive force generated by their size and weight was tremendous.

But that was only if the attacks hit.

The small enemy fighting the giant Fortissimos—Ernesti—was

fearsomely quick. Not even the wind generated by the axe swings grazed him. The hero had tasted this speed multiple times before the start of this query, but once again the difficulty of this fight was being impressed upon him.

“To think a goblin would prove such a formidable foe! It seems my eyes are still clouded over!”

Normally, to a giant, hunting and fighting meant a task of hitting the enemy as hard as possible while defending against their attacks in return. Tricks and strategies weren’t needed in a fight between large creatures sporting overwhelming power.

Thus, even though the giant had earned the title of Fortissimos, he hadn’t much experience trying to hit a small and fast target. His misfortune was that he’d matched up against Ernesti, who specialized in extreme high-speed combat, even among knight runners.

The three-eyed hero attempted to outsmart Ernie by varying the speed of his swings. However, he’d already tried this before, so Ernie wouldn’t be caught so easily.

The hero realized that he wasn’t getting anywhere, so he boldly started stepping further into his attacks. He’d obviously started to ignore his defense.

It was understandable. After all, the goblin’s tiny blade wasn’t much of a threat. It was already dubious whether it would be able to pierce the giant’s skin, and he wore armor made using monster shells over that. So why was the goblin fighting so confidently? The answer was revealed very suddenly.

The moment the three-eyed hero tried to step in for an attack, a ball of fire appeared out of nowhere beside him.

“What?!” The hero was shocked. The fire was small, but he couldn’t ignore it. He attempted to dodge by forcefully canceling out the momentum from his step and bending backward.

Meanwhile, Ernie backed away from the hero, observing both the giant and their surroundings.

“Where did that fire come from?” The giant was certain it hadn’t come from the goblin’s direction. “Is this goblin a Marga instead of a Fortissimos? I don’t understand.” He understood that the fire was the result of magic. However, the fact that it had come out of nowhere was baffling to him.

“I think it’s about time.” Only Ernie was calm in the midst of this

confusion. “You’ve had plenty of time on the offense. Now it’s my turn.”

The hero stepped in forcefully in lieu of a response. No matter what the goblin was planning, he wasn’t about to allow it to go unchallenged. He would crush his enemy head-on.

Ernie’s plan was revealed immediately. Fire spawned in the air once more, but this time there was more than a single ball of flame. Many fireballs came flying in from multiple angles, and not even the giant could dodge all of them. His armor was left with scorch marks.

Strangely, none of the surrounding giants could understand Ernie’s attacks either. The fireballs seemed to them to spawn out of nowhere—though of course, there was a trick behind it.

Something was flying through the air; it was just too small for them to see.

“If I were in my Ikaruga, these would be called…Rahu’s Fists.” He was referring to one of his partner Ikaruga’s weapons—hands that could fly freely, connected to Ikaruga by silver nerves, to launch magic from different angles. In theory, it was the same thing as a Wire Anchor—something that transmitted magic through a silver nerve while moving using the crystal tissue that surrounded it.

“Unfortunately, I’m forced to fight this without Ikaruga, but…I’ll just have to endure. I need to make sure I don’t lose my touch,” Ernie muttered as he advanced. At the same time, the device at his waist shot out a Wire Anchor. The sounds of gaseous jets were audible as it flew through the air.

Originally, the Wire Anchor was meant to assist in movement. Now, though, it was being used as a terminal for him to shoot magic out of. Following the script it was receiving through its silver nerve, the Wire Anchor continuously cast Fireball.

If the three-eyed giant had been straining his eyes, he might have been able to notice the movement of the Wire Anchor. However, he was concentrating on Ernie. He refused to let his nimble foe out of his sight, so he couldn’t divert any attention to anything else.

So, while sending out his Wire Anchor to do his bidding, Ernie approached the giant with Winchesters in hand. He continuously launched fireballs out of those as well, and before anyone else had

noticed, the three-eyed hero was surrounded.

I'm being toyed with.

That truth, along with the continuous explosions, served to irritate the three-eyed hero more and more. Each fireball was small, but it was supremely annoying to be attacked from seemingly everywhere all at once.

But then, the hero adjusted his thinking. It was surprising for the goblin to mount an offense of this level, but the magic was insignificant in the end. It lacked power, and even if it hit his skin directly it wouldn't cause much damage.

"A splendid display, goblin Fortissimos," he said. "But this is nothing more than an itch!"

The giant forcefully went on the attack, allowing himself to be bathed in spells. This would be over as long as he defeated his enemy first. He built up speed and made a fierce attack. The axe came crashing down with staggering momentum.

"I've been waiting for a telegraphed attack like that," said Ernie with a grin. Then, he switched what spell he was using.

The tips of his gunlike staves glowed faintly with the premonitions of magic. This glow turned into spears of scarlet fire—the Piercing Lance spell.

"Canister Shot," Ernie announced.

No one had noticed the Wire Anchors repositioning so as to pincer the axe. Piercing Lance spells came from both Ernie and the Wire Anchors in a wild scatter, impacting the weapon.

Countless fire spells lit up the handle and stone head. Immediately after impact, the spells followed their script and exploded. While the giant's weapon might have been solidly built, it was still just a rock strapped to wood in the end. The countless spells ate through it in a heartbeat.

"No!" On the other side of the resulting gout of fire, the hero's eyes widened in shock. He'd made one big mistake. He hadn't needed such a large weapon to beat Ernie, given the boy's size. He'd simply picked it because it was his usual weapon, and now its destruction created a fatal opening.

A flash of silver pierced through the fire and scattering axe fragments. Ernie ran like the wind to take advantage of the hero's slight agitation. He landed on the giant's arm—the hero was still in the motion to swing—and traveled up the limb in an instant with a

blast of air. Now, Ernie was right before the hero's eyes.

Instantly, the giant realized Ernie's intention.

He might have been armored and benefiting from Physical Boost magic, but his eyes were still a weak point.

"Not under...my watch!" The hero immediately released the remnants of his axe and brought his arms up to block. He'd responded at impressive speed—that is, if his opponent hadn't been Ernie.

The boy was already right in front of the giant. He activated the Sonic Blade spell, and the blade attached to his gunstaves started to vibrate.

The hero managed to close his eyes just in time, blocking the attack with his eyelid. "Grrngh!!! Gah!"

The slash cut a line across his eyelid. Scarlet blood gushed from the wound, and the giant reflexively recoiled.

He almost fell, and as he struggled to regain his footing, he opened his unhurt eyes, looking for Ernie. However, the boy instantly kicked off the giant's helmet and disappeared. Ernie was planning to use his speed to aim at the giant's eyes from a blind angle—an extremely terrifying tactic to the giant.

Meanwhile, the hero bent backward before translating that into a leap in the same direction. He couldn't allow Ernie to stay out of his sight. If the little goblin had managed to get behind him, he could hit the tiny creature with this jump-turned-tackle. If Ernie wasn't behind him, then the little goblin would be within his sight. The move was a perfect combination of offense and defense.

As expected, Ernie had tried to circle behind the giant and had been forced to evade, flipping over in the air. He landed softly on the ground, and his Wire Anchors returned to his side.

Now that Ernie was back in his sights, the three-eyed hero lowered his waist and brought up his fists. He would not let his guard down or show any discomposure. He was no longer thinking of his enemy as a powerless creature. Both were heroes capable of defeating the other.

All feelings of underestimation had been blown away. He would defeat his opponent with the fastest and most economic strike. If he were to show another opportunity, he might lose more than his eye next time. He strained his remaining eyes, refusing to let any movement get by him.

The blood flowing from his slashed eyelid got in the way, and that eye now would not open. Though losing part of his sight angered him, he clenched his fists and forced himself to remain calm. Large swings were unnecessary. He needed to attack quickly with compact motions. His eyes had never been opened wider; he was learning how to fight small enemies.

The giant onlookers swallowed in anticipation.

They had never expected a single goblin to corner their hero so thoroughly. It was hard to believe, but none would rebuke their hero now. Anyone else would have already lost their eyes and been brought low. The enemy was fearsome, despite his size.

A small while passed, with both sides waiting for the other to make a move.

The giant hero unknowingly smiled. It might have been a stroke of luck that he'd lost his axe. He didn't need such an overblown thing in this fight. With his size, his own limbs were formidable weapons in and of themselves. He was already in the mindset of calmly considering the benefits and drawbacks of his body.

"I thank you, Argos... This is a true query between Fortissimoses!" The hero resolved himself and took a large step forward. He'd sharpened his focus to the limits, and the way he moved now was unbelievably sharp for a giant.

It was an exaggerated approaching attack. Of course, Ernie took to the air to escape. The giant was aiming for that, though, and he threw out a compact jab.

Ernie floated like a leaf, using the wind brought about by the flying fist to get out of the way. Then, he used the fist as a stepping stone to go even higher.

The giant hero spread his arms to try for a wide-area lariat—a suppressing move using his size and armspan.

Once he finished spinning with his arms spread, he was hit with a slight feeling that something was wrong and looked around. *There.* The goblin was attached to his arm with Wire Anchors.

Though the giant had noticed him, Ernie started running before he could try to shake the boy off. The Wire Anchors flew past Ernie at the hero. They started to spawn fire midair, but the hero ignored that and attempted a headbutt. The fireballs weren't a threat.

The Wire Anchors fired their spells regardless of the giant's response with a scarlet flash, brighter than before. These weren't

Fireballs, but Flame Strikes—a much more powerful intermediate spell.

Ernie had restricted himself to using Fireballs, and thus the hero had let his guard down. Intense explosions hit the side of the giant's face.

Piercing Lance excelled in piercing ability, but Flame Strike had more impact—enough for the giant to feel it through his helmet. His stance crumbled.

The giant started to lean to one side as Ernie ran along his shoulder, raising his gunstaves to cast two instances of Sonic Boom. The shock waves summoned by the spells overlapped as they hit the giant's face.

The hero bent backward as if he'd been punched by another giant.

The facial hit had the giant's head now tilting heavily to one side, exposing his jaw. Ernie jumped up as the giant fell, pointing his weapon for the finisher.

He unleashed a rapid stream of Flame Strikes. They seemed to get sucked toward the giant's unprotected jaw, and a huge flower of flame bloomed as they found their mark.

The impact of the explosive uppercut lifted him up into the air. He then flew in a gentle parabola before hitting the ground headfirst, throwing up a huge dust cloud.

Ernie landed on the giant's fallen body with a casting of Air Suspension. The three-eyed hero stayed spread-eagled on the ground.

The giants of the Caelleus clan stood in shock.

Their hero was lying on the ground spread-eagled in the middle of a dust cloud. His small opponent was standing calmly on his chest. A stifling silence fell.

Then, the small opposing hero took a deep breath, tilted his head, and launched an unbelievable question. "Now, how is victory decided in these things? I wouldn't want to take the effort to kill him if I don't have to."

The goblin looked down at the unconscious giant hero.

Before the onlookers could answer in a panic, the four-eyed elder stepped forward. "The answer has been reached, Argos. This query is over. You are victorious, goblin Fortissimos."

The giants exchanged looks, seeming as if they wanted to say

something, but they simply made their confusion known instead. Meanwhile, the fallen hero groaned.

“I see you have awoken, Tertius Oculus,” said the elder.

“So my eyes were closed all this time.” He shook his head to clear his mind as he slowly stood up. He was unexpectedly calm.

“I have lost,” the hero said before the elder could tell him what had happened. He looked down at Ernie and asked, “Why did you not end me?”

“You’re too big,” Ernie answered. “Finishing you off wouldn’t have been easy.”

“Heh, I see.” It seemed something within him had settled. The giant hero chuckled quietly before reining in his expression. He knelt on the spot, not even wiping the blood dripping from his eyelid, and closed one of his remaining good eyes. “Argos has recognized your query, tiny Fortissimos. Your victory will be rewarded. I will follow what you say.”

Ernie thought for a moment. “I get the feeling that this isn’t what we originally discussed, but oh well. I’m happy with the result anyway.” He nodded seriously.

Then, a large shadow fell over him. “Would you allow me to hear what you have to say as well?”

“Marga…” the giant hero muttered in surprise.

The elder giant sat on the ground next to the kneeling hero. If she’d stayed standing, the height difference would have made it hard to talk.

“Before the query, you stated that you were not owned by Genos De Rubel, goblin Fortissimos. Were you speaking the truth?” the elder asked.

“I was. In the first place, you people are the first giants I’ve ever met,” Ernie answered seriously.

This was baffling to the giants. “The first?” the elder asked. “From where do you hail?”

“In a country far to the west of here, named the Kingdom of Fremmevilla.”

While he told the truth, the name was unknown to the giants, and this only created more questions.

The elder narrowed her eyes and sank into thought, but the hero simply nodded. “Argos has recognized you, so I will believe your words. You truly aren’t eyes of Genos De Rubel.”

“I told you that right at the beginning, gosh,” Ernie said sulkily.

The three-eyed hero touched the wound on his eyelid. The bleeding was slowing, but his finger still came away wet from the half-dried blood. “Indeed. With how strong you are, those Rubels would not be able to force you to submit so easily.”

Goblins were creatures to be kept by giants—that was the common perception all giants had. But they couldn’t believe that such a ferocious specimen would meekly allow himself to be owned like that. Any clan, no matter how large, would have their hands full.

The wound he’d suffered caused the hero to realize that this goblin was terribly experienced in hunting larger prey. Likely other giants or similarly large beasts. Either way, the goblin was worthy of the title of Fortissimos, and that was enough for him.

“We will welcome you as guests, tiny Fortissimos. Does everyone agree?” The giant hero stood and looked at the crowd.

The other giants had been watching their hero and mage, and after some time spent exchanging looks and pondering, they eventually agreed. The query between heroes had shown them the truth, which was enough for them.

Then, the elder stood as well. “An unfamiliar name…possibly a clan. I must hear your truth. This may be an important sign to light the way for us.”

Her four eyes looked squarely at Ernie. She seemed to be trying to seek some truth in his small body, as the gaze was sharp.

“Ah, the fight’s over? I knew you’d win, Ernie!” That was when a strange mass of metal slipped through the giants. It was Addy, wearing her Descendrad.

The giant hero narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “Is that also a goblin? Another Fortissimos like you?”

The strength of his gaze grew. Feeling an omen of violence in the air, Ernie groaned slightly. He’d finally managed to convince everyone after a fight, and he didn’t want to have to go through another one.

That was why he pointed at Addy and said, “Yes. She is my…wife.”

“Hm? Your wife, you say.”

Addy squeaked before yelling, “WIIIFEEE?!?!?!”

For some reason, her voice was much louder than any noise

made during the query.

Ernie ignored her and nodded calmly. “Yes, wife. My partner. We are a couple. Do you not have such a concept?”

“No, we do. We do, but...you’re married? I see, I suppose that is understandable, given how strong you are.”

Goblins were but insignificant existences to giants, and Ernie was especially small. Some part of the three-eyed hero felt that the goblin being married seemed wrong, but he was still convinced in the end. The title of Fortissimos held a lot of sway to him.

Meanwhile, Addy was lacking the leeway to notice anything about her surroundings. Even getting out of her Descendrad would create too long of a delay. She charged at Ernie right away and brought him into an embrace. All she could do was babble his name and laugh in a barely intelligible slurry.

“Calm down,” Ernie murmured. “I just said that to avoid any unnecessary fighting. It seems like negotiations with the giants are going well for now, and we’ll be able to obtain safe lodging too.” Though Ernie tried to explain his actions, Addy was, naturally, not listening.

“That’s okay it doesn’t matter I’m fine with it in fact we should make this permanent! Yes totally!”

There was a pause before Ernie said, “Let’s table this for now. Their gazes are starting to hurt.”

They were, in fact, still in the middle of a group of giants. Ernie was also fresh off of defeating their hero, so everyone’s gazes were naturally concentrated on them—not that Addy cared.

“Let’s have the ceremony right away when we get back, Ernie! Everyone can help decorate Fort Orvesius! I’ll have my Tzenny tow Ikaruga, so we’ll be able to go anywhere and everywhere for our honeymoon!”

“You’re talking too far into the future. We just started to get to know the giants, and we don’t even have any idea of how to get back,” said Ernie.

“It’s fine! It’ll all work out! I’ll kill anyone who gets in our way! I’ll do my best!”

Ernie realized she wouldn’t stop for a long while, so he shifted his gaze off into the distance. “I’m glad you’re motivated, at least.”

After that, Addy continued her freak-out complete with creepy laughter for a long while, during which time she was completely

useless.

The hero's confusion only deepened. "What *are* you two?" he couldn't help but ask.

"A lost knight captain and his aide," Ernie answered.

That answered nothing. It would take a long while for the giants to get to understand this small Fortissimos.

And that was how the Caelleus clan—a clan of astragalis—came to welcome a pair of strange guests.

◆

Meanwhile, in Konkaanen, capital of Fremmevilla...

A single silhouette knight marched down the capital's main street. It was shaped like a centaur—a Tzenndrimble. The giant steel knight's hoofbeats mixed in with the hubbub of the street.

The capital's citizens were packed into the sides of the street, and the centaur knight waved as knights on horseback led it forward. It was greeted with cheers, and flags were flying from the buildings lining the street as well. These flags were emblazoned with the national emblem alongside a silver phoenix with its wings spread wide.

Eventually, the Tzenndrimble stopped at Schreiber Castle. The armor on the horse part's back opened up to reveal the cockpit. Ernesti Echevalier, the Order of the Silver Phoenix's captain, popped up from inside.

He wasn't in his usual knight runner garb but in luxurious formal dress for use in ceremonies. His beautifully embroidered mantle fluttered in the wind as he reached his hand back into the cockpit.

He pulled out his aide, Adeltrude Alter, with his thin arms. She also was not wearing her knight runner clothes, which emphasized ease of movement. Instead, she was wearing a gorgeous dress with many layers of fabric. Both of them were dolled up to the max.

Ernie gently pulled Addy up, wrapped an arm around her back because the clothes were making it hard to move, and smoothly transitioned into fully picking her up. Addy was taller than Ernie, so it might have seemed impossible for him to support her, but he managed thanks to the power of magic.

Ernie flashed a smile at her before nimbly jumping off the Tzenndrimble.

Both mantle and dress whipped in the wind, and Ernie cast Air Suspension to soften their landing. As they gently touched down, for a moment their clothes overlapped each other.

Then, they walked into the castle. They were greeted inside with an orderly line of Royal Guards, each of whom were saluting with their swords.

“Knight Captain Echevalier of the Order of the Silver Phoenix has arrived!” someone shouted.

A trumpet loudly sounded, accompanied by the ringing of a bell. Ernie walked forward down a straight carpet, Addy still in his arms.

“Eheh heh heh heh heh... Everyone is celebrating *us*!” Addy muttered.

“Of course. It’s our wedding ceremony, after all. I even heard His Majesty is going to say something,” said Ernie.

Addy wrapped her arms around Ernie in a solid hold, a happy smile on her face. Meanwhile, Ernie continued to carry her, unable to see in front of himself, yet mysteriously not missing a step.

“We’re really getting married... It took so long to get here!” Addy gushed. “It was so hard to get back from that forest!”

As they conversed, they stepped inside the audience chamber. The spacious room had silhouette knights lined up as decoration, with Reidis Ol Villa at the very back. Before it was King Leotamus, sitting on his throne. The other members of the Order of the Silver Phoenix were lined up on the path there.

The boss, Edgar, Helvi, Dietrich, and Batson were there, and Ernie’s and Addy’s parents were also there, ahead of them. Even Archid was present.

“That’s all in the past now. Okay, we’re here. Everyone’s waiting, Addy.”

“Yes, dear. Let’s go!”

Ernie let Addy down, and the couple held hands as they walked through the audience chamber.

The carpet ran all the way to just before the king. It was extremely rare for the king to host a wedding—that was how important Ernesti was.

“I’m really going to be Ernie’s wife...” Addy muttered, checking

their clasped hands over and over again as she walked. The celebration and well-wishes from the crowd were nothing compared to her connection with him.

“From now on, we’ll always be together, Addy. You’re mine,” said Ernie.

“We will! I’m coming with you wherever you go, always!” Addy replied.

They’d even gotten lost in the Bocuse together, so what trouble could split them up? Addy’s determination was backed up with unshakable confidence.

“We’ll be together forever...we’re husband and wife, after all. And eventually, we’ll have kids...” Addy muttered. “Eheh heh heh... Ernie! How many kids do you want?”

“I want lots. Enough to form an entire knight order,” came the reply.

“Ernie!”

They were still in the middle of the spacious room, but Addy was overcome by emotion and glommed onto him. Then, they locked eyes, and their faces drew closer together...

“Come on, Addy. It’s morning already.”

It was a long moment before Addy said, “Ernie?”

Just as they were about to kiss, Ernie said something incomprehensible. Addy widened her eyes in surprise. Ernie’s smile was so close, but—

◆

“How long are you going to keep sleeping? Wake up already,” said Ernie.

—Addy slowly opened her eyes. The first thing she saw was Ernie’s annoyed face. He was shaking her by the shoulder, while she was balled up under the covers. She looked around, seeing that she wasn’t in the palace, but inside a simple tent.

“Mm...fwha? Ernie? Where’s our knight order?” she asked drowsily.

“What’re you talking about? We’re doing our best right now to get back to them, aren’t we?”

It took her a while more to fully wake up. Eventually, she let out a looong sigh. “Oh, it was a dream...”

Ernie happened to be sitting beside her, and though she was still listless, she quickly stretched out her hands, pouting, and wrapped them around Ernie's waist. She dragged herself along, burying her face into his chest and clinging to him. Meanwhile, Ernie let out a wry chuckle as he gently returned the hug.

"So you were dreaming about the order," he said. "A lot of time has passed since we got stranded, after all."

Addy looked like she would fall back asleep, but as Ernie combed her hair, she made a sleepy noise in reply.

Ernie brought his face to her ear and gently whispered, "Let's make all the effort we can to return to Fremmevilla. There's a lot we need to say to both my parents and your mother, isn't there?"

That woke Addy right up. "You're right! We need to report to them and plan out a real wedding! Okay, Ernie, let's do this!"

"Yeah, yeah. Let's have breakfast first, okay?"

Leaving Addy's sudden burst of motivation aside, Ernie set off, pot in hand.

They were in a small tent in the village of the astragali clan, Genos De Caelleus. The tent was like a small toy compared to the others in the village. A small stove had been built in front of the tent, and there was currently a pot sitting over the fire with a small amount of vegetables and some dried meat inside.

Since they'd come to this village, they'd started to go through their rations more aggressively. The food they had might have been preserved, but it would all still go bad eventually. Since they'd settled in the giants' village and gained the leeway to preserve food in their tent, they'd started to sort through their things.

"You've awoken quite late," came a voice from above.

They looked up to see a Fortissimos De Tertius Oculus, in light garb sans helmet and armor, peering into the pot the two humans were huddled around with interest.

"Oho," he said. "So that is the kind of food you cook."

"It is indeed," Ernie affirmed. "Oh, right. Thank you for sharing your prey with us yesterday."

"No need for any thanks. The amount you eat is trifling."

Though they were eating through their rations, rations were of course not all they ate. They'd also partaken of some fresh meat from the giants' kills. Their portion was almost nothing in comparison.

“I see you subsist almost entirely on what you hunt,” said Ernie. “Do you not eat anything else, like fruits or berries?”

“There are almost no trees with bounty large enough to fill our bellies,” answered the giant. “They are not worth the effort to gather. Though I imagine they would suffice for those as small as you.”

“That makes sense, but eating only meat seems like it would get old fast...”

Basically all the giant cooking Ernie and Addy had witnessed involved heartily roasting the meat they’d hunted. Their dishes almost entirely consisted of meat because nothing else would fill their bellies. There were plants that produced large food in the forest, but only enough for giants to snack on. In the end, their main sustenance had to come from meat. This forest was full of beasts to hunt, after all.

Ernie finished his meal as they spoke, and now he stood up. “As your guests, we can’t just keep taking your food for free. We’ll help you hunt.”

“You wish to gather your own food? A good mindset. Argos will look down upon you favorably,” the Fortissimos said with a nod. Continuing to share meat with them would pose no problem, given the size difference. But there was also no problem with them hunting their own food.

Ernie shook his head to refute the giant’s conclusion. “No, we’ll be hunting prey for you as well. We would like to help you, though it might not amount to much.”

“What?” The three-eyed hero tilted his head in confusion. Meanwhile, Ernie and Addy cleaned up their stove and started to prepare.

Though the hero’s confusion wasn’t cleared up, in the end he accompanied the pair into the forest. He felt like he was being forced to go with the flow.

The forest reverberated with the footfalls of heavy giants. Given their size, they traveled fast. This world’s large creatures, supported by Physical Boost magic as they were, tended to be agile for their size.

The two small figures didn’t fall behind though, as Ernie and a Descendrad-wearing Addy jumped from tree to tree. They used Aero Thrust to help them along, using tree branches as footholds,

though they were basically almost flying. It was much faster than running normally.

The party made their way through the forest, eventually spotting a beast through the trees. It resembled a boar, with its distinctive tusks, and it was a duel-class monster. The giant hero stepped out in front, readying a new stone axe.

“Hm… Wait here. I will claim this one quickly,” he said.

“No,” Ernie refused. “We came all the way out here, so you should take this opportunity to watch us hunt first. Addy.”

“Rogeeerrr,” Addy responded.

Immediately, Ernie and Addy surged ahead. The giant, left behind, thought back to his duel with a mixed expression, and he did not follow.

The tiny hunters closed the distance to the monster in a flash. The monster only noticed the pair when they were right in front of it. A duel-class monster would normally not concern itself with things of their size, despite their fearsome speed. This was why it was slow to react.

This would prove to be fatal.

The pair had approached to hunt, and so they had no mercy. Ernie was in front, and he jumped at the giant beast’s feet, instantly casting several spells with an aim to take away its mobility. Though each individual spell was weak, when concentrated on one point, they would produce quite a lot of power.

Small explosions occurred in quick succession, concentrated on the joints of one of its front legs. The monster tilted unsteadily, letting out a short scream. It quickly regained its footing, though. Its four legs weren’t for show, and a single wound would never fell it.

The scream quickly turned to an angry roar. The monster started looking for the tiny enemy who hurt it—Ernie. Normally, it wouldn’t pay any attention to something of his size, but there was no reason to let him go now that he’d hurt it.

Of course, the hunting pair had expected this. Next, Addy approached from the enraged monster’s blind angle. The light of magic appeared in the palm of her Descendrad—she was also aiming for its legs. Specifically, she assaulted its untouched front leg with more explosions.

The boar shrieked once more. This time, the monster couldn’t withstand the pain, and it slumped forward to the ground. Not even a monster as large as it could keep going after having both its front legs wounded. It tried to get back up, bracing against its hurt legs, but its two small foes descended upon it.



The Fortissimos De Tertius Oculus watched their fight, and before he knew it, he was groaning with his arms crossed. “As expected of the Fortissimos who defeated me…”

Before his very eyes, the monster’s neck was cut, unleashing a spray of arterial blood as it fell to the ground once more the blood continued to flow, and gradually the monster weakened.

It was a splendid catch, with a lot of meat on it. Weight lent these giant boars charging power, so they were threatening even to giants. Of course, it was natural for heroes to be able to beat them, but a mere two goblins had accomplished this feat. That fact earned admiration from the giant hero.

“We have eaten together and hunted together. Now you are no longer guests.” He nodded at Ernie, who had come up to him with an apologetic look for some reason.

“Sorry. We need your help with something,” he said.

“With what? You have completed your hunt. There is nothing for me to do at this point, no?”

“No, um… We may be able to defeat it, but it would be too hard for us to bring it back…”

“Ah… I see.”

And that was how the hero ended up carrying back their kill. Secretly, he swore to bring someone else to carry their kills the next time they went hunting.

◆

A crowd had formed at the center of the village. This would have been a rare sight before, but it had become more common since Ernie and Addy had arrived.

At the center of the crowd was a dead duel-class monster—the result of their hunt.

“I, a Fortissimos, hereby swear to Argos upon my eyes. This was hunted by the goblin Fortissimos,” the giant hero explained to the crowd. After seeing their duel, the other giants understood well that the goblins were plenty strong. However, they were still struck with awe at the goblins’ accomplishment.

“So, they will no longer be treated as guests. Those who have hunted and eaten with us are part of our genos. Comrades.”

That was a rule among the giants. Whenever they met up with

other clans for whatever reason, they would welcome a new member to the fold by hunting and eating together. There was no precedent of it applying to goblins, but all the giants agreed.

The hero nodded with satisfaction, but then his expression clouded and he looked over at the tiny people by his feet. “But I never would have expected this… As part of our people, you must decorate yourselves with your kills.”

It was tradition to make weapons and armor out of the results of their hunts. By doing so, they could clearly show others the measure of their strength. Thus, the first kill was very important. Tools made from these materials customarily served as some of the precious few mementos to giants, who tended to not have very many possessions.

And now, this custom was going to apply to Ernie and Addy.

With the beast they’d killed, they could make all manner of tools and equipment. However, the problem was that the giants didn’t have the necessary skill to make a small enough version of anything for their use.

Ernie noticed the hero’s discomfort and smiled, nodding. “Right. Well, since it’s come to this, I’d like to make armor with it.”

“Mm, this is a celebration. I would love to grant that to you, but fitting it to a goblin would be…” The hero crossed his arms and pondered.

But Ernie nonchalantly replied, “No need to worry. You can just make armor of your size.”

“But it would be impossible for you to wear. I know this is a celebration, but there would be no meaning in making something you cannot use.”

There was no way for such small people to wear the same armor as a giant. It wasn’t just a problem of there being too much space—they would surely be crushed under its weight. The Caelleus clan had not kept any goblins before, so they were unsure of how to deal with this.

“Oh no, there’s no need to force ourselves to wear it,” Ernie said. “But I would be able to use it somewhere. This is a celebration, after all.”

“Hm, if you are willing to say that much, then very well. I will prepare your armor personally.” The giant hero was still somewhat dubious, but he was satisfied after he was told it would still be

used with honor.

“Ah… I think I might know what Ernie is up to,” muttered Addy.

Only she, with her long years accompanying Ernie, could figure out what Ernie was thinking. But the giants took this at face value, and thus the hero set to work making a giant set of leather armor.

◆

The leather armor fashioned from the duel-class monster Ernie and Addy had hunted was delivered to the front of their tent. There was no way such a large thing would fit inside the tent, but the giant hero still hesitated to leave it outside where the weather could have its way with it.

This armor was fashioned from their first hunt together. Ernie felt an entirely different sort of joy from the giants as he looked upon it with satisfaction.

Addy watched his happy smile from beside him, leaving some distance between them. “He’s plotting something again…” she muttered.

“Oh no, of course not. How could you say that? I’m just happy that we’ve become friendly with the giants and solved our food problem too. Now that the question of our livelihoods is solved, we can finally get to building a silhouette knight. This is going to be so much fun!”

“Really?” Addy asked dubiously. “Well, I guess as long as you’re happy, Ernie. Are you going to use that?”

“I wonder if we can make a leather silhouette knight if we can get them to make a whole suit like this,” Ernie pondered aloud.

Of course, Ernie hadn’t asked for this giant leather armor just as a keepsake. As always, he was only thinking about one thing: giant humanoid weapons—silhouette knights.

“Hmm… On second thought, it might be a bit too difficult. I think we could use monster bones for the inner skeleton, at least? Maybe.” Addy started counting using her hands. Even if they could assemble the outer semblance of one, that wouldn’t mean making a complete silhouette knight. After all, they’d be missing the innards necessary to make it move.

Ernie nodded in agreement. There were too many problems with the idea to count, but among those there were two standout

difficulties.

“In the end, we absolutely need crystal tissue,” said Ernie.

“Hmm… Then why don’t we get inside a giant?”

“But then we’d just be riding inside another living thing.”

The pair continued exploring their options. Ernie’s hobbies aside, they did in fact need a silhouette knight to get back to Fremmevilla, so Addy put in what effort she could as well.

“But using monster parts… We never even thought of it back home,” said Ernie.

“I mean, wouldn’t it just be too much work?”

“You’re right. It would take a lot of effort to process the materials.”

Back home, they had smiths with skills they were happy to wield as well as the facilities to easily process metal. Furthermore, using metal gave them much more freedom. In that sense, monster materials were hard to use. It was best to think of it as an emergency method, where standards and mass production were not considerations.

“It’s not just a problem of effort,” said Ernie. “Living things have their own mana and script, and can’t receive those from external sources. That’s why crystal tissue is so convenient, since it allows us to control it from the outside.”

What’s more, even if they wanted to use monster parts, it wouldn’t be easy. There were a lot of factors standing in their way.

“Though, taken the other way, that would also theoretically mean that monster materials could be used as parts once they’re dead and their mana supply is stopped,” Ernie admitted.

“Um, Ernie,” Addy started. “I don’t want to pack myself into a monster carcass.”

“I know. In the first place, it would rot quickly. I’m sure it would be terribly inefficient too—totally not practical.”

Addy felt that Ernie’s reasons for rejecting the idea were fundamentally off, but she decided not to dwell on that.

“Crystal tissue is a crystalline catalyst made through alchemy,” said Ernie. “In other words, it doesn’t exist naturally. We can’t just dig it out of the ground. Hmm… I’m not too knowledgeable on alchemy…”

As long as he had the materials and skills, it was definitely possible for Ernie to take his time and make it. However, he was

missing too many pieces.

"If only there were silhouette knights running around this area. We'd be able to appropriate some parts then," Ernie lamented.

"Then what about Sylly?" Addy suggested. "She's broken, but her parts should still be usable."

Ikaruga had lost pretty much everything aside from its core, but Sylphianne had simply stopped working due to the crash. They would likely be able to scavenge it for parts if they were to retrieve it.

"Of course we'll recover both Sylphianne and Ikaruga eventually. But that probably won't be enough. I wonder if there aren't more silhouette knights lying around somewhere?" Ernie sighed. "I want to go back to that wreckage pile in the Occidents."

"There's no way there would be such a convenient pile here," Addy said, exasperated.

But then, Ernie thought of another possibility. "No, wait. Maybe there are."

Addy's confusion was obvious, so Ernie explained with a smile. "It's history. What is the incident that led to both Fremmevilla's founding and the Great Bocuse Forest becoming a forbidden land?"

"Huh? Uh…ah! The expeditionary force into the forest?"

She was talking about the campaign to the east that the west's burning ambition had started, conquering and expanding humanity's sphere of influence. A huge force of silhouette knights had crossed the Auvinier Mountains and advanced all the way into the unknown ground of the Great Bocuse Forest, only to meet with tragedy.

The silhouette knights back then were incomparably weak compared to modern ones, and they'd met with what was a brigade-class monster back then, but would only be a division-class monster now.

The monsters dwelling in the forest had used their destructive powers to annihilate the expeditionary force—and not in the technical definition used by militaries. Barely any had managed to scuttle back alive.

Though the expedition had ended in failure, they had at least managed to secure some land east of the Auvinier Mountains. This land later became the Kingdom of Fremmevilla.

The journey that Ernie and Addy had been on with their levitating ships had been meant to be early recon for an eventual second expedition.

“It’s unclear how deep into the Bocuse they got,” said Ernie. “But there is a chance we come upon their legacy.”

It was a faint hope, Ernie knew, but he couldn’t help but hold on to it. If at least some of the wrecks were still salvageable, he would take a big step toward accomplishing his goals.

“If we’re able to gather materials from them…there would only be one problem left. A big one,” said Ernie.

Addy tilted her head, once again confused. Everything Ernie had said up until now had indicated they’d be able to make it work as long as they had the materials.

“How do we assemble a complete silhouette knight out of our materials?” Ernie elaborated with a question.

If the boss were here, they’d be able to assemble a complete machine, even if it took some time. Certainly, Ernie was very knowledgeable in the designing process, but he’d never actively participated in the smithing of a silhouette knight. In the first place, constructing a silhouette knight needed a great many practiced hands.

“H-Hey, look, we’re already trying to use monster parts. What’s to say we can’t build one different from the boss?” Addy asked in an attempt to cheer him up.

“Right… And there’s always the option to educate the giants in a pinch…” Ernie started to chuckle creepily.

Addy put a little more distance between them before clapping her hands together. “Then let’s start by picking Sylly up! Ah, but maybe we should get Ikaruga back first? Sylly won’t move unless we do something about its Etheric Levitator.”

“Right… Hmm? But wouldn’t the Etheric Levitator be more important if we want to go back home?”

“Oh, right. We wouldn’t want to have to walk back. But isn’t making one of those harder than making a silhouette knight?”

Trying to trek the distance back was out of the question, since they’d originally flown here. Even if they made a silhouette knight with that in mind, walking back would still be difficult.

Doing so would be faster than walking back on their own feet. However, silhouette knights could still be worn down. There was

also the possibility of them encountering monsters. Chances of them becoming stranded again on the way back were high. If they wanted to be practical about getting out of the forest, flying was the only real choice.

“There’s too many problems!” Addy shouted. “Wanna just give up?”

“There actually aren’t, necessarily,” Ernie replied. “Now that it’s come to this, let’s make full use of monsters. Starting off with researching kratovastia materials.”

Ernie thought back to Ikaruga’s last battle. Their wings had glowed a rainbow of colors, allowing them to fly. The light had been the same as what was given off from Etheric Levitators—the light of an ether reaction. In other words, kratovastias used the same property to fly.

Ernie’s motivation was mounting, but Addy tilted her head in confusion again. “Are you sure? Those things are your mortal enemies, right?”

“They are indeed—and they must be utterly destroyed—but they can still be useful in death. In fact, don’t you think it would be wonderful if they were?”

His line was as nonchalant as it was brutal, but Addy was easily convinced, so there was no one around to point that out.

“Right,” he continued. “With that settled, let’s go talk to the giants. We’ve gotten closer, so if we can get them to help us, we can gather what we need… We can think of what else to do then.”

And so, they settled on their direction, and their days with the giants continued as they continued their process of trial and error.

Chapter 58: Omens of Battle

“Well met.”

A voice came out of the darkness deeper inside the large tent. The owner of the tent was Marga De Quartus Oculus, and her eyes that were buried within her wrinkles were locked onto her guests.

Her abode was larger than any other in this village belonging to the astragali clan of Genos De Caelleus, as she was their leader.

The entrance was built to be large in giant terms, so the effect was even more pronounced with the two small figures standing in it. To the giants, they were “goblins”: Ernesti and Adeltrude.

“We were told you have business with us?” Ernie ventured.

“Indeed. Come here.” The giant elder beckoned her tiny guests inside. Two huge bowls were placed in front of them, filled with something that looked like tea. It was likely supposed to be a form of hospitality, but given that the bowls were meant for giant use, they were taller than Ernie. Still, they were used to this, and they simply took out some appropriately sized containers that they’d brought with them to scoop out some of the tea.

Once they’d settled in, the giant elder opened her mouth to broach a serious subject. “You must know why I have called you here. The goblins in this land are all owned by Genos De Rubel. However, you claim to have no ties to them. I would like to hear the truth from you.”

“I see,” Ernie replied. “The story will be long. Do you mind?”

“Of course not. Don’t worry, the duty of a Marga is to see and know. Talk as much as you like.” She nodded, sipping at her tea.

“I understand. Well then, let’s see… I suppose I should start with where we came from.” With that, Ernesti Echevalier started to tell his story.

Far to the west of the forest where the giants’ villages lay was where humans lived. Humans tended to gather together to create great countries—

◆

After she listened for a while, the elder's eyes—which were starting to be indistinguishable from her wrinkles—widened. "A country where many goblins live… A nation of goblins, where no giants reside?"

"From our perspective, we only realized that giants like you existed after getting lost in this forest," Ernie replied.

"Are there truly that many goblins to the west? If so, does that mean all goblins came from the west?"

"I don't know. In the first place, I don't even know if what you refer to as goblins are truly the same race as us."

Addy was leaning on Ernie and dozing off, bored by the long conversation.

"We come from a kingdom named Fremmevilla," Ernie continued. "Our goal was to explore the forest. In order to do that…"

He told them about silhouette knights, the humanoid weapons that they used to be able to rival giants. Then, he spoke of levitating ships, the boats that flew through the air, which they'd used to journey into the forest.

Once he got to flying ships, the elder's eyes widened large enough that anyone could tell. "Is this all true? The goblins of the west cannot be underestimated. Yet if you have such weapons, why are you two here alone?"

"I fought what you call kratovastias during our journey," Ernie answered.

That was all the elder needed to realize what had happened.

"I dealt a hard blow to those bugs. But I also lost my partner, and I've thus been reduced to wandering the forest with Addy," he continued.

"So you also control phantom beasts," the elder said before pausing to think. "Wait… If so, does that mean the corpses our Fortissimos found were your handiwork?"

"Most likely," Ernie said with a nod.

The elder sighed. "I see. You are truly a surprise. Normally, this would never have come into our sight. Yet you have proven your prowess by defeating our Fortissimos. Great Argos has witnessed that as well. This is a great harvest. To think that I would come to know of this just as we are about to return to Argos's gaze."

Once again, the elder's eyes were buried within her wrinkles.

This time, though, it was Ernie's turn to speak. "Would you mind if we asked some questions?"

"You may ask. I will answer anything within my knowledge."

"I'd like to know more about the goblins you say are with the…Genos De Rubel. Do they really resemble us?"

Addy, who had been fast asleep on Ernie's lap, perked up. She was curious about the goblins as well.

"From what I know, their shape is the same. Goblins fail to come up to our knees and are all Second Oculi. However, I have heard far more than I have seen. After all, goblins only exist under the control of Genos De Rubel." The elder's face drew closer to Ernie and Addy.

Ernie looked into her large eyes, and he cocked his head. "Have those goblins always been here?"

"I do not know that either. However, they have existed since before I was gifted my eyes, that is for certain."

So goblins were a race that resembled humans, and they had been living here since before the current generation of giants. They all had two eyes, so it was natural to assume they were closer to humans than giants.

"If that's the case, can we not make allies of them? Ah, never mind, I understand. Then just one more question: I want to know about kratovastias. Are those not monsters? Why do they listen to Genos De Rubel?"

"That is a mystery to me as well! In the first place, those creatures are the enemy of all astragali!" This answer came not from the Marga, but from a rumbling voice in a different direction.

Ernie and Addy turned to see a familiar Fortissimos standing at the entrance to the tent.

"I have heard everything. Well fought!" he exclaimed. "As expected of a Fortissimos acknowledged by Argos, despite being a goblin. So it was your phantom beast that brought all those kratovastias low."

The hero nodded, not hesitating to enter. The elder did not chide him, and instead she served him tea. The giant hero accepted the beverage and sipped on it after dropping down next to Ernie and Addy.

"You believe this story?" the elder asked.

"I am bound to," he replied, grinning toothily. Then, he seemed

to remember something and narrowed his eyes. “Kratovastias are our great enemy—creatures of filth that fly through the sky, spreading their poison. But they do not only attack us; everything in the forest is their prey.”

The bug-type monsters were able to soar freely through the sky, making use of their acidic and poisonous bodily fluids as weapons. It was easy to imagine how much havoc they’d been wreaking within this forest.

“Our ancestors resisted them as best they could. You could say that defeating them is the true job of us Fortissimoses. However...the next thing we saw, they were under the sway of Genos De Rubel! That is when everything started to go wrong.”

“You make it sound as if this only happened recently,” said Ernie.

“Indeed. It happened during the previous True Eye Revolt, not even a hundred eyes ago,” the giant replied.

Ernie and Addy exchanged looks.

“True Eye Revolt?” Ernie repeated.

“That damned Genos De Rubel! How could they employ deceit in the Hundred Eyes’ Selection?! They tainted our throne!”

“Throne? What do you—”

“Indeed! The only one allowed to call themselves our ruler is the Sextus Oculus. Those without enough eyes are not worthy!”

The hero’s breathing had started to quicken. It seemed his rage over the subject was still fresh, no matter how much time had passed.

More importantly though, Ernie had another question. “So you’re saying that you choose your king based on the number of eyes? What about their abilities?”

“Such a thing isn’t worth thinking about. A Sextus Oculus is the closest being to Argos. The more eyes the one who takes the throne has, the more Argos will watch over us, I’m sure.”

Being a king meant something far different to astragalis than it did to humans.

That made the position basically reliant on luck, and rather than a king, the holder of the crown seemed more like a mediator between the giants and their god. Furthermore, unlike humans, they had a clear physical marker: having six eyes.

“I see. So what do you do if one doesn’t exist?” Ernie asked.

“When we do not have enough eyes, our deeds will not reach Argos. That is why we create a council of sages in an attempt to endure until a Sextus Oculus is born.”

“That’s quite the…peculiar arrangement. And you’re saying that no such ruler exists right now?”

The moment the hero heard Ernie’s question, his eyes popped open wide and he stood out of sheer excitement. “That’s right! Damn that Quintus Oculus from Genos De Rubel for cravenly claiming to be our king despite his lack of eyes! Argos will close his eyes to us because of this!”

The elder had been silent all this time, allowing the hero to talk. But now, she opened her mouth once again. “Genos De Rubel is the largest of us, and the most blessed with eyes. They’ve produced many kings.”

“Is that so?” asked Ernie. “So they’ve finally amassed enough power to ignore the eyes.”

“Exactly!” cried the Fortissimos. “Claiming to be king is not their only transgression. Doing so without any sort of message from our ancestors was the height of folly! Something like that would normally stain their name forever!” Finally, the hero calmed down a little. But still, he was clenching his fist so hard it was shaking. “Anyone would stand up to this act of lunacy. Rather…they stood, but…!”

“Their mistakes were backed up by their might and kratovastias,” Ernie finished.

“Indeed. Genos De Rubel had unexpectedly managed to tame the sworn enemies of our entire race. Their taint caused the True Eye Revolt, and so many Fortissimoses died for it!” Finally, the hero sat back down. His earlier anger had softened somewhat, it seemed. But instead, it was replaced with a look of intense regret. “We…couldn’t stop them. However…it might actually have been a good thing we do not have a Sextus Oculus. Argos should not have to see that.”

The hero became despondent as Ernie crossed his arms. “Kratovastias and…goblins? Huh. From what I’m hearing, these Rubels are quite strange.” What could he have been thinking about?

The giant hero rapped his fist against his palm. “However! You claim to have defeated those kratovastias, goblin Fortissimos. That

must be a sign from Argos himself. We must correct our mistakes and wipe away the stain of shame!"

"Meaning you're going to fight Genos De Rubel? But aren't the Rubels the most powerful, even if I've defeated a good chunk of their kratovastias?"

The giant hero fixed Ernie with a downward stare as he nodded solemnly. "I understand your point. However, this will be a true query; we cannot leave this uncorrected. We need as many open eyes as we can get to do this, which is why we are gathering everyone to open this sage's query."

"So the reason you've been so busy hunting is in preparation for this…" Ernie was befuddled by the situation. It seemed their journey and subsequent meeting had been a great influence on the giants. They were being thrown into the midst of a battle without their silhouette knights. "Then we can't afford to just sit around either."

That was when Addy, who'd been beside Ernie this whole time, tugged on his sleeve. "It sounds like the giants are going to fight with each other. What do we do? Do you wanna help?"

"I didn't expect to discover that we're probably the cause of this, but that still doesn't mean we're enemies with the Rubels. Also, I don't want to fight without silhouette knights," said Ernie.

"Really? I should've known that'd be your sticking point."

The giant hero had been watching them deliberate, and now he decided to interject. "You have recently become one of us, goblin Fortissimos, but I will not force you to take part in the battle. This is something *we* must do. For Argos."

"Indeed. You have won enough glory by defeating the kratovastias." The elder nodded as well.

Ernie sat up straighter and looked up at the two giants. "We want to return home if possible."

"I see. We Caelleus do not spare effort to help our brethren, goblin Fortissimos, Viatori. Should you wish it, we shall provide you our aid," said the elder.

"Having your help would be reassuring, thank you," Ernie replied with a smile. Meanwhile, Addy was sure that smile meant more than the giants understood, and so her expression didn't quite mirror his.

◆

Some time passed after that, and the village only grew livelier. The messengers they'd sent off had received their answers from the other clans.

"Many others have joined, desiring a sage's query."

"As expected, they also cannot abide the Rubels' conduct. Argos must not overlook such mistakes."

The other clans had given positive responses to the Caelleus clan's notice of a sage's query. They had sent messengers to all the middling and small clans in order to create an alliance against the large Rubel clan.

"Indeed. The Rubels must be dealt with eventually, and now is our chance with the kratovastias gone. Everyone knows that," said the old Marga.

The giants that had gathered at the center of the village nodded in agreement and applauded. They had all been preparing for this day.

"I will go to the query as a representative. I'm entrusting the village to all of you."

A sage's query was basically an assembly that would result in battle. Naturally, not everyone in each clan would take part; they would send representatives instead. The Caelleus would, of course, send their mage and their hero.

The hero then approached Ernie, who'd been idly watching their excitement. "As you can see, we are going to hold a sage's query. What will you do?"

"We have something we must do as well. We'll take care of this place along with the rest of your clan," Ernie replied.

"Understood. I will assign you an armiger. If you need anything, just ask."

"I will, thank you."

With that, Ernie, Addy, and the rest of the giants saw their mage and hero off as they left for the sage's query.

◆

Though the pair of giants had gone, life didn't change much for the ones left behind. The only difference was that the village was

now filled with an undeniable excitement.

The giants silently continued their preparations for battle, training to get as strong as possible for the time to come. As for whether their training would bear fruit, the answer would come during the sage's query.

While the giants were preparing for battle, Ernie and Addy were spending their days freely.

Though they sometimes aided in hunts, they spent most of their time doing research. They might have been welcomed as members of the clan, but the giants did not want the goblins—at least, what the giants thought of as goblins—to fight. The sage's query was a holy ceremony to be held only between giants.

"Hmm... This isn't going too well," said Ernie.

"We're missing a lot, huh?" asked Addy.

The pair were having a hearty grumble while relaxing over lunch.

A variety of monster materials lay scattered in front of them. The giants who went out to hunt would bring back monsters for their meat, while the shells and hides would be used to make armor. Bones were also used in armor, but most of the skeleton was unusable, so those were thrown outside of the village. Ernie and Addy had gone out to retrieve these scraps to use as research material.

They'd spent every day researching through trial and error, but they had yet to make any real progress. In the end, silhouette knights weren't made in a day.

As they ate, they felt the ground shake. The shaking had a certain rhythm to it—clearly a giant's stride. Someone was approaching their tent.

Their tent was pitched on the outskirts of the village, so a visitor would naturally only be there to seek the humans.

"Is it our armiger again?" Addy asked.

"I wonder. It could be an invitation to hunt," Ernie said.

The single-eyed armiger had been assigned to help them when the hero had set off. Said armiger faithfully followed those orders, and he would come to show his face on occasion. In fact, it would be better to say he was the only one to do so.

Most of the time, he came to invite them to hunt. At this point, Ernie and Addy were thinking today would be the same.

“So you guys’re the goblin Fortissimoses, huh?! Wow, you’re so tiny!”

“The goblins…really are tiny…”

Contrary to expectations, their visitor wasn’t their armiger.

Two giants were currently looking down on the pair as they ate. Ernie and Addy weren’t quite familiar enough with giants to be able to tell them apart at a glance, but they were still able to quickly realize that this pair was unfamiliar.

“You are correct. But what does a pair of giants—and children, at that—want with us?” Ernie asked.

As for why it was so obvious they were unfamiliar, well, the two giants were much smaller than the giant hero or the armiger assigned to them. But they were only small for giants; they were still over four meters tall. In other words, they were three times the height of Ernie.

The pair of giants formed a pretty distinctive set. One was a three-eyed boy who was standing straight with his chest puffed out. Behind him hid a four-eyed girl.

“I’m Nav!” exclaimed the boy.

“My name is…Lamina…” muttered the girl.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Ernesti Echevalier. You may call me Ernie. And this is—”

“I’m Ernie’s wife! My name is Adeltrude, but call me Addy!”

“So she says.”

The two giants—Nav and Lamina—watched with rapt interest as Addy brought Ernie into a tight hug.



“Ernie and Addy, huh? I saw the ceremony the other day. You became one of us and got armor from our Fortissimos! I’m so jea — I mean, that means you’re the newest!” shouted Nav.

“You do have a point,” Ernie admitted.

He and Addy exchanged looks. They had an inkling of why the children had come here.

“We’re not adults yet… But! We need to teach our newcomers, don’t we?!” Nav exclaimed. “That’s definitely a job for one of us! Yeah!”

“I see.”

Nav talked while pointlessly puffing out his chest. Ernie reflexively glanced to the girl beside him to see Lamina looking vaguely apologetic.

Ernie nodded in understanding as Addy whispered into his ear. “I think these kids were the youngest in the clan until we came along.”

“You’re probably right. And now they can finally act like elders.”

“Hmm… Do we even have time to play around? What do you want to do?” Addy sounded fed up already as she looked at the two giant children. They might have seemed like they weren’t really doing anything, but they were actually working hard toward their important goal of returning home. They didn’t have the leeway to play with children.

“Well, we’re stuck anyway. I guess this would work as a change of pace.” Ernie was rather easygoing about it, though. He was right that they weren’t making much progress, so making a change would probably do them good. If the children were absolutely awful to deal with, they could just ask for help from their armiger.

The four-eyed girl fearfully stepped out of Nav’s shadow. “I saw that too. You fight completely differently from any giant. But it’s true you’re strong enough to defeat a Fortissimos, no matter how small you are.”

She seemed very nervous, but Lamina was still looking at Ernie and Addy with great interest. Because she was so young, her eyes seemed very large, and Ernie and Addy could clearly see their own reflections within.

“I may be small, but I was a knight captain back home,” said Ernie. “Also, from your perspective, anybody would be small.”

“Your height doesn’t help, Ernie,” Addy interjected.

Ernie said nothing, resorting to pouting unhappily as Addy maintained her hold on him. The pair of giant children cocked their heads in confusion at the sight.

The Caelleus had never had any contact with goblins before. Only their mage and hero had even cursory knowledge of the race. But now that they’d finally met some “goblins,” they found one had enough strength to beat a Fortissimos. From the perspective of the giant children, Ernie and Addy were real mysteries.

Nav gasped as he realized something and tried to get out in front of Lamina. That was when he noticed something at the edge of his peripheral vision. He swiveled the eye on his forehead to look—some monster materials were scattered about. The materials weren’t garbage, but what the human pair were using for their research. He looked pleased.

“Hmm? Are you playing *beast matching*?!”

“Uh…beast matching?”

Both Ernie and Addy were confused by the unfamiliar term, but Nav ignored them and started to pick up the monster bones. Then, he started to connect them with practiced speed. He didn’t seem to be trying all that hard, but the bones were fitting together perfectly.

“That’s right. You try to piece the skeleton back together correctly. The fastest, rightest one wins. Was I wrong?”

“I didn’t know such a game existed,” Ernie admitted.

His impression of giants as a race was of a boorish lot that only cared about hunting and fighting, but it seemed that wasn’t all they were concerned about. They did in fact have games for children.

“Hm, so goblins don’t do this?” Nav muttered. “Okay! Then as the greatest Fortissimos of beast matching of any Caelleus, I’ll show you the ropes!”

Suddenly, he was *very* motivated. After all, the goblins didn’t know of the game, and it was something he was very good at.

“Yes, please. Show me your skills, elder.” In an unexpected move, Ernie smiled and assented. Addy, unable to see what would come of watching child’s play, looked down at him in her arms.

“Sure thing, just watch!” Nav exclaimed. Regardless of what the goblins were thinking, his heart soared from the compliment.

He looked over at the pile of bones and hides, quickly taking stock. Then, like a seasoned veteran, he picked some up with fluid movements. It was easy to tell he'd done this many times before.

Before long, he came back with a whole pile. He spread them out on the ground and started to assemble the skeleton. Progress was fast as Ernie and Addy watched until the skeleton neared completion.

Ernie was staring fixedly at the boy. Nav displayed true mastery of the game; it made sense why he proclaimed himself a Fortissimos of it. He was able to immediately identify what bone belonged to which monster and where it went before slotting it in its correct place. He never once mistook a bone or put it into the wrong spot.

"So you remember it all. Amazing," said Ernie.

"Nav is the best of us at beast matching," Lamina said.

She'd taken a seat next to Ernie and Addy to watch Nav go. It seemed she was happy as well after noticing how impressed Ernie was. However, what interested Ernie wasn't the master of the game himself.

I see, so this isn't just a game. They can learn the weak points of their prey by memorizing how the monsters are built. They've blended play with teaching life skills.

While Ernie was ruminating on giant culture, Nav had finished the skeleton. He pointed at the neat assembly and puffed out his chest. "How's that?!"

"That was incredible. You weren't lying when you said you were the best."

Bathing in the gushing applause, Nav puffed out his chest even more. Even Lamina started happily clapping.

"I see. This is... Mm-hmm." Ernie nodded as he muttered excitedly. Then he suddenly stood.

"Ernie?" Addy asked.

Ernie walked over to Nav and smiled gently. "Well then, Nav. I challenge you."

"Oh?" Nav's chest deflated again in apparent surprise. He looked down at the tiny figure at his feet.

"Let's see who's better at beast matching."

Nav was caught off guard for a moment, but he quickly returned a fierce smile. He might have been a child, but he was

still a giant, and his heart was one of a warrior. Shrinking from a challenge was unthinkable.

“Oh fine, showing you my prowess is one of my duties too. You may have won against our Fortissimos, but in beast matching I can’t be beat!” Nav exclaimed.

“Goblin—Ernie… Are you really going to challenge Nav?” Lamina blinked repeatedly in surprise at Ernie’s sudden challenge. Beast matching was a simple game, but experience still made a huge difference. Ernie hadn’t learned about beast matching until just now, so she couldn’t figure out why he was suddenly challenging Nav.

“It’ll be fine. Addy is the one that’s going to fight him,” said Ernie.

“Hwhah?!” Addy let out a crazed shout when she was nominated out of nowhere. She’d totally thought that Ernie would be the one taking part.

Nav also seemed a little confused, but he puffed out his chest anyway. “Either one of you is fine. I’ll win no matter who I’m up against, after all!”

“We’re small, so would you mind if we used tools to help us?” Ernie asked.

“Go ahead! Come at me with all you got!” Nav was getting cocky, so he agreed to anything they asked for.

Ernie nodded, satisfied, but Addy came up and poked his cheek. “Errrniiieee… What’re you thinking?”

“Mrgh. Unfortunately, it’s too hard for me to pick up the bones,” Ernie replied. “You’d need a silhouette gear for this, so I was going to rely on you and your Descendrad.”

“Grrr, I guess that makes sense. Hmm…”

This was a game for giants, so they naturally used duel-class monster bones, which were naturally too big for the humans. Ernie would literally break his back if he tried.

“I’m counting on you, Addy. I don’t care if we win, just play with them and make friends,” Ernie said.

With that, Addy finally figured out what he wanted. “You’re trying to make these kids help with the work of putting these together, aren’t you, Ernie? I mean, if that’s the case, I’ll do my best, but Nav is really good…”

“Well you see, Addy, we…” Ernie whispered into Addy’s ear, and

she nodded before climbing into the Descendrad by their tent.

The armor let out mechanical noises as it started. Even with the Descendrad, though, Addy didn't reach Nav's height. Her strength still skyrocketed, however, and it would serve her well for beast matching.

"Ohhh? What's that?" Nav asked.

"It's not the armor you got from the Fortissimos, is it?" Lamina added.

The giant children watched the Descendrad move with keen interest. The humans called it a tool, but to giants who had nothing but simple armor and weapons, these were bizarre in the extreme.

"Okay, if we're going to do this, I'm going all out! As a wife, I need to look cool for my husband too!" Addy puffed out her chest as well, motivated by very unconventional reasoning.

"Addy? Er, well, I'm rooting for you."

The giant boy responded in kind to this blustering, but the four-eyed girl simply cocked her head in confusion.

◆

"Okay, it's ready," Lamina said.

She'd drawn a line in the ground with a stick to denote where to place their completed skeletons. A little ways away were two evenly split piles of monster bones. They would pick up bones from the pile and fit each into place. The one to do so the fastest and with the greatest accuracy would be the winner.

"Uh... Then...start!" Lamina hesitantly declared.

Immediately, Nav and Addy took off. They started by bringing all the bones to the completion area. The more trips they needed to bring all the bones, the more time they'd waste, so how much they could carry was important.

Nav used his large body to pick up all the bones at once. As he was lifting, he glanced beside him, and his eyes widened. "Wh-What?!"

He saw Addy picking up a huge pile of her own all at once using her Descendrad. Even under all that weight, the silhouette gear stayed solid.

"Physical Boost, full power! Graaagh!" Addy shouted.

The source of Ernie's and Addy's ability to compete against giants was magic. The Descendrad displayed great strength when filled with enough mana, allowing her to easily lift the monster bones.

"Aero Thrust!" Addy then took off like she was flying. The Descendrad was originally designed to be part of an escape mechanism, so mobility was its purpose.

"Hm?! No wonder you challenged me—I can't go underestimating you!" Nav smiled boldly after seeing Addy move so many bones at once. Having a strong opponent made things more exciting, and that went for games as well. He got back into it, running off with his own pile of bones.

"How do you even connect these?!" Addy shouted.

Once they'd carried the bones over, it was time to put them together. Addy had been ahead up to this point, but now she was struggling. She was new to the game, and while she was perfectly capable of picking bones up, she didn't exactly know where each one went. Meanwhile, Nav might have fallen behind carrying the bones, but he was quick to start assembling them and was steadily catching up.

"Calm down, Addy," said Ernie. "Monsters are typically quadrupeds, meaning they're shaped like your partner, the Tzenndrimble. Just imagine it."

"Hm?! If you're talking about Tzenny, then leave it to me! I think I get it!"

The Order of the Silver Phoenix was both an organization of knight runners and an unusual order that designed and manufactured silhouette knights. Among their achievements was a centaur called the Tzenndrimble, on which Addy had served as a test runner, so she'd been familiar with its layout from the start. This gave her at least some reference in this situation.

"Amazing; she's keeping up with Nav. It's hard to believe she's new to the game." Lamina made her surprise apparent as she watched the match. She'd competed against Nav in beast matching before, and it hadn't been this close.

"We've been doing something similar up until now, that's all," said Ernie.

She looked down to see him sitting right at her feet. "Are you talking about a goblin game?"

“I am. A game I absolutely love. It’s very, very fun,” Ernie answered without hesitation.

Lamina pondered something for a while, but eventually she shifted her gaze back to the competition.

◆

“I’m done!” Addy raised her hands and exclaimed.

“Gah, I can’t believe I was slower. But I’m done too!” Nav declared a little later.

Lamina stood and checked the completed skeletons. It seemed she would be the judge, and she looked at every inch.

“Addy was the first to finish, that’s worth three stones.” She lined up stones to mark the score.

Addy raised her Descendrad’s arm in celebration while Nav creased his brow.

“But there’s a mistake, so one stone to Nav. Here’s another one, and another one…” Lamina continued.

“Agh…”

This game was a balancing act between speed and accuracy.

In the end, Addy had given up five points due to mistakes. She would lose if Nav didn’t make any mistakes—and of course, he didn’t.

“Whew. Of course I won!” Nav exclaimed proudly. Still, there was definitely a shade of panic in his gloating face.

“Gah, I looost!” Addy shouted.

“That was close, wasn’t it, Addy?”

They were challenging a veteran at the game, so a loss was hardly surprising, but that didn’t make it any less frustrating. Addy charged at Ernie, who wrapped her in a hug and started to comfort her. She cheered up quickly.

“I’m the Fortissimos of beast matching, after all. I wouldn’t lose so easily,” said Nav. “But your speed at the beginning was unbelievable.”

“I thought you might have had a chance. But it seems he’s not that soft.” Ernie crossed his arms, nodding. Meanwhile, Addy had stuck herself onto him and showed no signs of letting go.

Lamina was sitting next to the pair, staring straight at them. “Addy made a lot of mistakes. She definitely didn’t seem

experienced at the game. But it was close."

It was just a silly game, but she was able to see how their guests had been able to best the Fortissimos despite their size.

"That power and speed... Maybe goblins are just skilled with magia?" Lamina seemed very interested in the answer.

Actually, at first, she hadn't been that interested in the two of them. Goblins were unusual, but that was all. There were other things to be concerned about, given they were waiting for a sage's query. If Nav hadn't pressured her to come by going on about how new and exciting they were, she would probably never have bothered talking to them.

Lamina opened her mouth to ask a very important question, but Nav interrupted her.

"Okay, now it's your turn to show us how goblins play!"

"Huh?"

All three of the others gave Nav confused looks.

He was probably satisfied, having displayed his dignity as an "elder" by winning. Now he just wanted to play. He might have been a giant, but he was still a child.

Having lost her chance to speak, Lamina closed her mouth with a conflicted expression. No one else noticed, though, as Ernie sank into thought.

"So you want a game. Hmm... I wonder if there's anything a giant could do too?"

Even to them, this was a real question. In the first place, Ernie and Addy had caused a lot of trouble by playing when they were younger. Surprisingly, he wasn't well acquainted with normal forms of play.

Even if anything came to mind, whether they could actually play any such games with giants was another problem entirely.

"Oh, that's right! I have a good idea! C'mere, you two!" That was when a bolt from the blue seemed to strike Addy, and she shot upright. The giants looked confused.

"Let's form a knight order!" Addy exclaimed.

"A...knight order?"

While the giants were perplexed, Addy seemed very pleased by her idea. "That's right! I hereby establish the fourth giant company of the Order of the Silver Phoenix! Approve it, Knight Captain Ernie!"

“Huh? Uh, okay. Sure.” It took a while for Ernie’s brain to catch up, since her idea had come out of nowhere, but he soon burst out in laughter. “Heh heh! Sounds good. A company of giants in the Order of the Silver Phoenix, huh? I suppose they’ll be directly under you, Addy?”

Ernie continued to laugh for a while longer, but the giants were still confused and looking around, unable to understand what was going on.

“Well then. Here’s your first job as part of the order. Let’s make silhouette knights together,” Ernie, their knight captain, declared the start of their fun with a smile.

◆

“What…*is* this?” a lone giant said in confusion. The Armiger De Prima Oculus blinked his single large eye as he looked down at his feet.

A tiny figure that didn’t even come up to his knees and another small figure that was a little bigger thanks to her armor were bustling about. The smaller one—Ernie—was groaning as he nodded with his arms crossed, but he looked up when he heard the question from above.

“Research,” he answered.

“Uh… Hmm? Is beast matching an occupation among goblins?”

As for what the group was doing, they were gathering scattered monster bones and arranging them in humanoid shape while arguing about how to do so.

“How about this, Ernie?” Addy asked.

“Ah, that looks good. It’s long and sturdy, so let’s use it as a leg.”

Addy used her Descendrad to put the large bone that was longer than she was tall in place.

The armiger couldn’t hide his confusion, even after that explanation. He had originally served as what amounted to an attendant to their Fortissimos—that was why his title was armiger.

He’d been ordered to accommodate the goblin Fortissimos after their own Fortissimos left for the sage’s query. Though the goblin might have been small, he was strong enough to have defeated the clan’s hero. He had no qualms about serving the goblin, but he had no idea what he should be doing.

Beast matching was a common game for children, but that involved arranging the bones into the beast's original shape. The goblins in front of him weren't doing so. The shape they were making was nonsense—almost in the shape of a giant. It was honestly unsettling.

"I must not have enough eyes. I do not understand how goblins think." The armiger shook his head.

Then, Nav and Lamina approached carrying bones and hides, adding to the pile of materials.

"I found some unusual beast bones, Ernie. This one's legs are long and sturdy; you'll probably be able to find a use for them," said Nav.

"Mmhmm, looks good for core materials," Ernie confirmed.

The armiger was in shock. "You too?" This might have been acceptable when it was just the goblins, but now the children had been roped into this madness as well. He was at his wit's end. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, Armiger De Prima Oculus. According to Ernie, this seems to be the role of what he calls a knight order."

"This tasteless game?"

No matter how one considered this game of gathering corpses to construct a giant humanoid, they would come to the conclusion it was in bad taste. The single-eyed armiger was somewhat horrified, so he dutifully stepped in to help.

Unbeknownst to him, though, Ernie was actually feeling the same way. "Hmm... Now that we're actually messing with monster bones like this, it feels kind of sinister, doesn't it?"

"You're only noticing now?" Addy retorted.

The scene gave off an aura that would have gotten him called a necromancer. Of course, Ernie had no intention of making a bold job change.

"We've tried a variety of types, but the various monster bones just don't fit together well. There's no standardization to their size, and there's no guarantee they'll be in the shape we want... Trying to make a design out of this would be truly bone breaking." Ernie was always aiming for only one thing: silhouette knights. This was the first step to creating an alternative model made with monster bones.

"This sure is hard, huh?" Addy groused sympathetically. "These

bones don't have Physical Boost magic on them, so they'd be too brittle to use as the inner skeleton."

"It would lead to a lot of wasted output, wouldn't it?"

They had enough knowledge to shape metal, but they didn't have the experience to do the same with monster bones. That was why they'd needed to do some studying beforehand. Ernie jotted down notes on a piece of bark he'd prepared.

"Let's fix the shapes of the ones that don't fit by binding them together with smaller bones using Physical Boost magic. But even if we do that, we'll lose precision. No matter what, we'll end up having to brute force it somewhat..." Ernie muttered, starting to monologue.

Luckily, Ikaruga's twin reactors—Behemoth's Heart and Queen's Coronet—had enough output to spare. In the first place, Ikaruga had been supported by a powerful Physical Boost created by such excess reactor output.

"We'll definitely have to use Ikaruga's torso. So let's place these to reinforce that, then..." Once Ernie was done sorting out his thoughts, next came actually putting down the design. Setting aside the problem of durability, the basic tenets hadn't changed from any other silhouette knight. It helped a lot that Ikaruga's core had survived in a reusable state.

"If we're going to use monster bones, then we'll end up wasting a lot of mana. Even so, we should be able to secure the strength of a regular silhouette knight."

"*If* we actually succeed," retorted Addy.

Ernie passed his gaze slowly over the arrangement of bones. It looked like the skeletal remains of a real giant. Of course, one that was silent in death.

"There's no point in just arranging it like this. We need to make it move...in the end, the real problem is crystal tissue," said Ernie.

"If the giants are going to war, don't we have a time limit to have them help get Ikaruga and Sylly?" Addy asked. They'd heard that the Caelleus would soon go to war. That would make creating a silhouette knight much harder, so they couldn't just take their time with that.

"You're right, but...even if we ask the giants to help retrieve them, where would we put them that would keep them safe from the fighting?" Ernie asked.

“I guess you have a point. Which means we need to make a silhouette knight or we won’t be able to go back, but in order to make one, we’ll need to bring them to a safe place… Huh? That’s weird.” Addy’s thoughts were going in circles, and she tilted her head as she tried to puzzle through it.

“It’d be great if we could carry them on our own,” lamented Ernie. “If only this could move, we’d be able to carry whatever we needed.”

Their materials aside, if it were through a moving giant weapon, Ernie would happily play courier. Though the order being backward would itself be a problem.

“There’s no point worrying over what we can’t do,” said Ernie. “Let’s hurry and find something that we can use in place of crystal tissue.”

“Hrrrmmm… I can’t think of anything,” said Addy.

“Me neither.”

After that, the one-eyed armiger was bathed in ridiculous questions that made his eye roll back into his head, such as “Is there any monster material that extends and contracts when fed mana and is very easy to process?”

Chapter 59: Attending a Sage’s Query (Congress)

The sage’s query was to be held in an isolated spot deep in the forest that belonged to no clan.

After traveling through well-worn animal trails that snaked between overgrown tree cover, one would come upon a sudden clearing. This clearing was not natural; something, or someone, had gotten rid of the vegetation here and added a neat arrangement of stones. These stones had been crudely polished, and were the perfect size for giants to sit on.

The old, moss-covered stones lined the circumference of the clearing. It was clear that they’d been used for many years.

The first ones to appear in this clearing were the two representatives from Genos De Caelleus. It was common for the ones who called for the sage’s query to arrive first.

“Hmm, this is hard on my old bones…” The old woman with four eyes sat down immediately upon arrival. She might have been a giant with a robust body, but that had naturally withered as the years passed. “I have caused you much burden, Fortissimos.”

“No need to cast your eyes down, Marga. Such is my duty.” The three-eyed hero who had escorted the mage all this way shook his head with a smile. As he said, this was only natural to him.

He then walked through the circle of stones to stand at the empty center of the clearing. Instead of stones, there was a pile of ashes coloring the ground.

He started stacking the firewood that he had brought with him. Then, he put down a heap of prey he’d hunted on the way beside the pile and started to butcher the beasts. Familiarity lent speed to his actions, and the butchering was quickly finished, with each part skewered and stuck in its place.

Then the mage, having finished her rest, stepped forward and pointed her hand at the firewood. “Venit.”

The utterance caused a swirl of fire to appear before her outstretched hand. Before long, the wood caught fire and started burning.

“This query will be an important turning point for us,” the old giant muttered as she looked at the fire.

The hero nodded while looking at the same fire. “As you say. The True Eye Revolt was an unprecedented mistake that exists nowhere in our forefathers’ legends.”

“I cannot go to Argos’s side while his eyes still reflect evil.” Strength flooded into the elder’s four eyes, though they were sunk behind her wrinkles. It was as if she were seeing the future in the flames.

The pair continued to wait, and other giants started filtering into the clearing. Each was a representative of their own clans, in human terms. None of these so-called clans were very populous, but there were many of them. It didn’t take long for almost all the stone seats to be filled.

Everyone added wood they’d brought with them to the fire, creating a large red blaze in the center of the clearing. Some also brought their own meat as well.

Looking around the gathered giants, it wouldn’t take long to realize that most of them had four eyes—making them so-called Quartus Oculi. A small number of Quintus Oculi were also present, but no one other than the hero from Caelleus was Tertius Oculus or lower.

“Oh? So you haven’t returned to the eye of Argos yet, you Caellus fossil?” A Quintus Oculus approached the delegation from Caelleus. He glared at the old mage, his mouth twisting into a sneer.

Before the old woman could open her eyes and turn to him, the hero stepped between them. “I will not allow rudeness to our Marga.”

“What? How dare you prattle at me, you of lesser eyes!” His five eyes bored menacingly down at the hero. Not only did the Quintus Oculus have more eyes, he was also larger than the three-eyed hero. But even while feeling the pressure from the five eyes glaring down at him, the three-eyed hero returned the glare without flinching.

Tension ran between the two of them. The other giants stopped their conversations, sensing this. Attention gathered on the pair as silence reigned.

Before the tension reached its peak, the elder of Caelleus stood

and put her hand on her hero's shoulder. Then, as if switching places with him, she stood in front of the five-eyed giant. "This place is for a sage's query, Quintus Oculus. Thus, we only exchange words between Genoses. Rank is unnecessary here."

"Hmph, is that so? Yes, I remember that rule." The five-eyed giant snorted, having lost interest in this exchange. He walked off, shoving the Caelleus hero aside to sit on a nearby rock.

The surrounding giants exchanged perplexed looks.

"It is about time. Enough eyes have gathered; the sage's query is now open." The Caelleus elder used this attention to convene the meeting. Any remaining tittering quickly died down as the old giant strode slowly to the center of the clearing. Then, she raised her hand to the burning fire. "Witness this, Argos."

The other giants repeated her line in chorus. It was a prayer to their ancestor and guardian deity, Argos De Primus Oculus. With this, the results would be recognized by their deity. This was the prescribed process to open a sage's query.

"Let us start with what must be corrected: the mistakes of Genos De Rubel," said the Caelleus elder.

"Many queries have been raised already. Each time, our Fortissimoses have been defiled!"

It didn't take long for voices to be raised in response.

The True Eye Revolt, perpetrated by Genos De Rubel, had caused major losses. Many Fortissimoses had been poisoned by the kratovastias the Rubels kept in their employ.

"Exactly," agreed the old mage. "However, Argos will not overlook mistakes. Our Fortissimos brought back a kratovastia corpse."

A commotion rippled through the assembly. From the crowd came the voice of a five-eyed giant. "Only one died? Or are you trying to tell us that a Tertius Oculus wiped away all the filth?!"

"No, our Fortissimos only discovered the corpses," the old woman admitted.

"And you would open a sage's query just for that? You've grown senile, Caelleus!" The Quintus Oculus stood.

The old woman turned to face him. Her four eyes, hidden behind her wrinkles, had lost none of their strength. "More than ten of the beasts lay dead."

This time, the shock that ran through the giants couldn't be

contained. Even the Quintus Oculus was silent.

"The kratovastias…"

"How could…?"

"Then we have nothing to fear!"

"The True Eye Revolt, it…"

Noise erupted as conversations sprang up among the giants. Unhappiness over the Rubels' actions was still firmly rooted among them. One of the biggest reasons these feelings had come to nothing were the kratovastias and how threatening they were. Their presence or absence made a big difference.

"We desire a ruling from Argos. Were the actions of Genos De Rubel truth or a mistake?!" the Marga from Caelleus asked.

After that, silence reigned.

The question had been asked. Now, they needed an answer, and nothing else.

—Up until now, at least.

"What about Genos De Rubel's actions was a mistake?"

There was another giant other than the elder from Caelleus that was now standing: a five-eyed giant that stood a head above everyone else. This giant was the one who broke the silence.

"After all, far too few Sextus Oculi are born. When one exists, they of course should bask in the gaze of Argos. But without one, what is wrong with a Quintus Oculus doing so instead?!"

"Have your eyes clouded over?" The Marga De Quartus Oculus from Caelleus realized that this Quintus Oculus was hoping to gain the same privilege by using the Rubels' actions as precedent.

The hero stood, unable to restrain himself. Just like before the query started, he glared at the Quintus Oculus and shouted, "How… How shameless! The sage's query has started. Saying such things before Argos… You do not deserve your eyes!"

"I am sure the great Argos would be magnanimous in his acceptance."

The hero's rage swelled in the face of the other giant's lack of guilt. Not only had the five-eyed giant defiled this holy query, he even wanted to change how they selected their king. The hero found this unforgivable.

"How many of your eyes have rotted?!"

"Oh Caelleus… Are your claims about the kratovastias even true? What if a mere *Tertius Oculus* were to mistake what he saw

out of cowardice?”

“You would claim me a shameless heathen too?! You wretched thing! Argos would never permit this mess!” The Caelleus hero’s indignation nearly took him over as he was about to open a new query.

But just as he was about to, an angry shout interrupted him. “SILENCE!!! We are before Argos.” The voice thundered through the assembly; it was unthinkably loud for someone as old as she. All the representatives turned their attention to the four-eyed mage from Caelleus. Her eyes were open, and the authority she displayed in that moment was enough to make even the Quintus Oculus, who supposedly outranked her, flinch. “If you truly think so, Quintus Oculus, ask it. Tonight is the sage’s query.”

The Quintus Oculus closed his mouth and looked around. All the other giants were staring holes into him. With that, the answer was evident.

“Only Argos himself may guide us to the selection of our king.”

“Allowing kratovastias to disrupt such a thing is unforgivable.”

“We must ascertain this for ourselves.”

“Ask it!”

“We question, once again, the craven Genos De Rubel.”

“Once again, their folly must be questioned.”

One voice led to an avalanche of statements from the other representatives.

“The query has been answered, and Argos has approved this one as well.” The elder from Caelleus raised her hands high, creating a burning ball of fire.

“Once again, we come together as one, a Varies Genos. O Argos, witness us!”

The giants stood up, excited.

Only the Quintus Oculus remained with a bitter look on his face. “Fools, all of them,” he spat out under his breath. He then stood and left, with only his follower behind him.

The three-eyed hero from Caelleus was the only one to follow this giant’s departure. He had fire in his eyes as he watched, but he couldn’t leave his Marga’s side, so he simply observed.

Two giants left the joyful clearing, making their way at a fast pace. One was a certain five-eyed giant, his large body—a head taller than anyone else—swaying as he moved out of his pent-up

anger that had no release.

“That damn Caelleus! Prying open an eye that has already been closed!”

“The sage’s query has resulted in an answer. There was no mistaking the result.”

To most giants, the results of a sage’s query were the binding will of Argos himself. The alliance would clash against Genos De Rubel, that was certain.

“What do we do, Quintus Oculus? As things stand, our genos will be lost…”

“We cannot simply leave things as they are.” The five-eyed giant stopped walking. An idea came to mind, which brought a fiendish smile to his face. “So we just have to warn them.”

He looked over to his companion. “Those Rubels, that is.”

The giant looked off into the far reaches of the forest, his five eyes narrowing.

◆

After the end of the sage’s query, each representative returned to their own village. From here on, they would prepare for war before reconvening later.

The same went for the hero and mage from Caelleus. The other residents came out to greet them when they arrived, like they’d been waiting this whole time. After hearing the news that the alliance had been formed, they stomped their feet to make their excitement known.

The elder pushed aside the fatigue from her long journey to say, “The time to correct that folly is near. Before long, the Varies Genos will come together and question Genos De Rubel once again. But for now, we must prepare!”

Many voices overlapped in a return shout, and the giants each scattered to attend to their own duties. As the questioners, the Caelleus were the most prepared already, so they would probably be fine even if they didn’t hurry.

“I have returned, Armiger! Where are the goblins—?!”

The Fortissimos returned to his own tent, only to see a strange object next to it.

“This… What kind of prank is this?” Even the hero, bold and

daring as he was, couldn't prevent the fluttering of his voice.

He was looking at the leather armor he himself had made for the goblin Fortissimos. If that were all, though, nothing would have changed from when he'd left.

But at some point, it had been strung up from a nearby tree, and there were even monster bones arranged in a bizarre humanoid shape stuffed inside. Thanks to that, it looked like the bleached skeleton of a pitiful warrior. Even the hero couldn't help but be aghast at the tastelessness of it all.

He kept his three eyes peeled as he looked around, fixing his single-eyed servant with a glare.

The armiger shriveled out of guilt, but it didn't take long for him to resign himself and point behind him. "That is, well... The goblin Fortissimos said it was necessary..."

The armiger pointed toward a pair of giant children and a pair of goblins running around their feet: Ernie and Addy. As soon as the giant hero caught sight of them, he bellowed, "Goblins! What is the meaning of this harassment?!"

"Oh, right now I'm calculating the space needed to secure mobility. With that, I know roughly how much muscle mass I'll need. I don't know if I'll be able to get enough though, so I'm trying to minimize the amount as much as possible, but..."

Ernie seemed to understand he was being spoken to, but the conversation wasn't meshing at all. The giant hero could only clutch at his head. "Lamina! Nav! What have the two of you—"

"Yeah, uh... Ernie said he didn't just want to do beast matching, but make something new! So we formed a knight order!" Nav answered, interrupting him.

Nav's explanation didn't help at all. The hero looked helplessly to Lamina, who surreptitiously averted her gaze.

"O Argos, guide me... Well, fine, I'll leave this be for now. More importantly..." The hero decided to give up on this angle for the moment as he plopped down. "The sage's query has given us an answer. As Argos wills, we will once again question Genos De Rubel."

"Ohhh!" exclaimed the armiger, falling to his knees and bringing his hands together. His eye was full of excitement for the battle to come.

"Finally!" said Nav excitedly. The children's eyes were also

sparkling.

“I cannot thank you enough for your help in defeating the kratovastias, goblin Fortissimos,” continued the hero. “Normally I would be rewarding you more, but…”

“Oh no, this is plenty. But this really will turn into a battle, won’t it?” Ernie sat with a strained smile. Things had gone exactly as the hero had predicted before he left.

The three-eyed hero nodded. “It will. We will all be setting out to question Genos De Rubel. However, there is still some time left. If you need anything, I will assist you. That is…as long as it is not used for harassment like that.”

He was doing his best to keep the corpse-like object out of his sight.

Ernie crossed his arms and started to ponder with an appreciative grunt. What did he absolutely need to accomplish in the time that was left? He had an answer.

“Then there is something I would like your help with before the battle starts.”

“Oh? What would that be?”

Ernie stood and pointed in a westerly direction, toward his homeland. “My treasure… I’d like to retrieve my silhouette knight that those kratovastias destroyed. But it is too heavy for me. I need your help to carry it.”

“Transporting an object? Very well, that is easily done. My armiger and I will assist you.”

To giants, who sported size and strength in spades, carrying things was easy.

“We’ll help too!” Nav jumped in.

“There are things you should be learning instead, no?” the hero asked.

The hero’s glare got Nav to back down. It seemed studying was a constant task for children everywhere. In short, Nav and Lamina had joined their knight order to get out of studying.

“There’s more than one, so we may need to make multiple trips. The place is near where you discovered the kratovastia corpses,” said Ernie.

“Really now? Then I know the way. Very well. Armiger, bring a basket.”

“Understood.” The one-eyed servant brought out a giant basket

woven with hardy vines.

“Isn’t this an important time for you? Are you sure you have the time to help me personally?” Ernie asked.

“Because our people started preparing for this ahead of time, I do have some leeway. This is an expression of my gratitude, goblin Fortissimos. You have no need to hold back,” the hero said, thumping his chest.

And that was how the giant hero departed along with his armiger, Ernie, and Addy to where the kratovastias and silhouette knight wrecks lay.

◆

The territory of the Great Bocuse Forest ran rampant with powerful monsters both on land and in the sky. Surviving here required being as large and powerful as the giants, or having powerful weapons like silhouette knights. The small and weak had no choice but to hide and sneak around, living in terrified secrecy.

A great shadow haughtily traveled through the sky above this forest.

It looked like a bug, flying with spread wings that shed rainbow-colored light. It let out a low cry, and all manner of monsters scattered and ran before it, whether they be giant birds or flyers of the more monstrous persuasion.

It stood at the peak of all monsters. This individual specimen, with its faded red coloring, raised an unpleasant, insectoid cry.

It swept its gaze, composed of cold, emotionless eyes, over a part of the forest. It dropped altitude, flying toward a small village in a clearing...

◆

“So Ernie and Addy left with the Fortissimos. Ugh, I wanted to go with them,” complained Nav.

“We’ve been playing with them all the time recently. I believe this is a good chance to do something else,” said Lamina.

After Ernie and the rest left, Nav and Lamina could only laze around, having been left behind. Nav looked disappointed; he’d likely planned to spend today playing with the goblins again. To

him, the knight order was basically a group formed around playing.

“Right then, I’m going to go practice hunting!” he announced. “Wanna come with me, Lamina?”

“No, I will practice magia.” Lamina shook her head in reply.

Nav tilted his head. “Hmm? I thought you weren’t that interested in magia practice. What happened all of a sudden?”

Giants prized physical strength. That was why most of them trained to hunt and fight, but the four-eyed Lamina had something else to study.

Oculus titles referred to the number of eyes a giant had. This was a common practice across the entire race. The reason was simple: More eyes generally meant stronger abilities.

“Because the reason Ernie and Addy are strong enough to fight Fortissimoses is thanks to their skill with magia,” answered Lamina.

“Oho! I thought those goblins were Fortissimoses, but they were Margas? I see, and you need to inherit the Marga title since you’re a Quartus Oculus too.”

At four eyes or more, giants started to possess powerful magia —or magic, in human terms. That was why many of them wanted to be Margas and trained to be such.

“Mmhmm…” Though Nav’s statement was innocent and carefree, Lamina’s reply held some hesitation and indecision. Her four eyes swam around before settling on her own hands.

Nav questioningly peered at her side profile for a moment. “Right, I’ve decided! I’m a Tertius Oculus, so I’ll eventually become a Fortissimos!” He suddenly raised his fist high as he declared his intent. “That way, you’ll be a Marga, and I’ll be a Fortissimos. The two of us will make Genos De Caelleus even stronger, and then there’s no doubt we’ll catch Argos’s attention!”

Lamina froze with her eyes wide open. It took a moment for her to let out a quiet laugh. “That would be nice, wouldn’t it?”

The boy and girl laughed together before taking action to make this promise come true.

These youngsters carried the future of the Caelleus on their backs. Their meeting with the tiny traveler Ernesti had certainly influenced them.

◆

The day had been peaceful—up until now, that is.

“What…is that?” A single giant with luggage on his back pointed up quizzically to the distant sky. He strained his two eyes to try to identify the source of his premonition.

The clouds in the overcast sky were thin, and he could see a black point like a stain boring through the flowing masses of white. This unnatural black point slowly multiplied before eventually taking shape as a shadow.

“It’s getting closer… That’s—!”

The shadows grew bigger, causing the color of the sky to change unpleasantly. Gradually, the shadows’ outlines grew clearer, until the giants could recognize them—monsters that could fly without fear in this forest and longtime enemies of the giants.

“A kratovastia swarm?!”

“Could it be? Has Genos De Rubel made their move?!”

That shout was almost like a scream as the Caelleus giants ran back to their village, all their eyes fixed on the sky.

Meanwhile, the black dots were growing steadily bigger, their forms resolving until they were close enough that there was no mistaking them. The swarm of kratovastias was definitely approaching the village of Genos De Caelleus.

“They’re coming this way…to our village!”

“Gah! How do we intercept them?! Those are kratovastias!”

The giants immediately fell into a state of confusion. This attack had come completely out of nowhere. Weren’t they the ones that had been preparing for the sage’s query? At the same time, they knew painfully well the power of these monsters. Giants as a race had been fighting them for a long time. If a giant were to fight a kratovastia one-on-one, the giant would die, and if the kratovastias were to form a swarm, they could even wipe out an entire clan.

“Our Fortissimos is not present. What bad timing!”

Furthermore, their greatest fighting strength was otherwise engaged. Whether it was a coincidence or planned, this situation was terrible for the Caelleus.

“SILENCE! The eyes of Argos are upon us!!!” A loud shout blew away their confusion.

The giants all turned around at once to see their Marga walking toward them at a leisurely pace.

The old woman's wrinkled eyes opened as she glared at the incoming threat. "Listen, all of you. That is the folly of Genos De Rubel. They must have done this because they've seen that we have formed a Varies Genos."

The giants gathered around their elder, waiting for her sage advice.

"They must think that this alliance will crumble should its central pillar—our genos—fall. The Rubels will simply continue to bring destruction so long as they do not admit their own error, just as during the True Eye Revolt. They've turned into a disaster unto themselves."

Rage appeared on the giants' faces. The disgraceful behavior of Genos De Rubel, the largest genos, had heavily wounded their pride.

"Such a thing cannot be allowed within Argos's sight. The correct way to divine his will is through a sage's query. Genos De Rubel has forgotten reason, and we should pity them." The elder shook her head sadly. "We must gather as a Varies Genos. If Genos De Rubel continues in their folly, wielding this tainted power...Argos will close his eyes to us."

With that, the giants of Caelleus solidified their resolve to fight.

"But, Marga, what should we do? How do we fight here?"

"They're blotting out the sky. Have they gathered everything they had?"

The elder swept her gaze across the faces of the crowd in front of her, stopping on two that seemed as depressed as a large valley. "Lamina, Nav... You two should make your way to the Fortissimos immediately."

Just as the children were about to put their all into preparing for the battle to come, their elder's unexpected words had their pupils turning to pinpricks.

"Wha—?! We may be small, but we are also warriors of Caelleus! We'll fight with you!" Lamina argued desperately.

But their elder shook her head. "Lamina... My apologies, but you should simply observe until you're grown. Unfortunately, this is another trial given to us by Argos."

The elder spoke slowly while steadily meeting Lamina's gaze.

Lamina's large eyes started to tear up.

"You may now name yourself Parva Marga. Parva Marga De Quartus Oculus. Go to the side of our Fortissimos, and alert the rest of the Varies Genos of this outrage. That is our duty." The elder then turned to the young boy next to Lamina. He also couldn't hide his frustration, and he was grinding his teeth with all his might. "Nav, you also have an important duty. You must protect our next Marga."

Nav looked back at the old Marga with an intense expression, keeping silent for the moment.

"Go with her to our Fortissimos. As long as you two survive... Even if we perish here, Genos De Caelleus can be restored," said the elder.

Nav was silent for a moment more. "I understand. I will make sure this happens! I swear upon my eyes!"

The old woman had already resolved herself. Nav realized this, which was why he had replied so forcefully. He couldn't betray her expectations—that would impugn his dignity as a giant, even if he was young.

The children left alongside an escort. The village's Marga De Quartus Oculus saw them off, watching their receding backs for a while before turning around and glaring at the sky.

"The sky is drowned in filth. Are you all prepared?"

Before long, the monsters would descend upon the village. It was a hopeless fight, but there was no sign of faltering among the giants of Caellus.

"How contemptible you are, Genos De Rubel!"

"We can't have you underestimate us!"

"We'll show you the strength of Caelleus!"

"Open their eyes!"

Everyone cooperated to gather all the weapons and armor they had available. Their only saving grace was how far along in their preparations they were, given that they were on the eve of convening the Varies Genos.

"It seems the eyes of Argos will be upon us a little early, despite our plans for a query soon."

"Though a fight like this might not be worthy of his sight!"

The giants exchanged some light banter, their eyes burning with the will to fight. Each wore their own armor, and there was a

line of spears sticking out of the ground in front of them. They each grabbed one and looked up to the sky.

“They’re coming!”

The kratovastias were close enough that the unpleasant sound they made was clearly audible. Just a little more, and they would be in range to spread their lethal corruption. Before that, though, they entered the giants’ range.

“Witness my throw, Argos!” shouted a two-eyed warrior. The giant’s muscles flexed to their limit, matching the strength of a silhouette knight as he turned himself into a weapon. Then, he used all that explosive strength to launch the spear.

This was no normal spear throw. The giant’s skill at transferring all his might into the weapon had it boring through the atmosphere and splitting the air.

The kratovastias seemed alarmed, as the spear flew faster than any spellfire or even the monsters themselves. If it hit, the attack would likely kill one of them.

Even so, it didn’t reach the kratovastias, who had the mobility to conduct aerial combat. Though the attack was powerful, it was easy to dodge a spear thrown from the surface.

With the buzzing of wings, the monsters maneuvered through the sky, effortlessly dodging the spears while still making their final approach, as if to mock all the giants’ efforts. The kratovastias shot out their fluid, which quickly aerosolized into pockets of death.

The giants of Caelleus were brave. They were bold. And they were strong.

However, just like their ancestors, they could only fall in disgrace before the kratovastias.

After ten, then twenty spears, the giants finally managed to put down a few of their foe. The village had been totally inundated with lethal contamination. Nothing bound to the surface could resist the might of a kratovastia.

◆

Lamina and Nav ran, leaving their village on the verge of collapse behind them. The moans and bellows they could hear coming from behind them told them of the fate of their home.

However, they never once looked back. They just kept running.

“This way, hurry—?!” The expression of the giant who had come to protect them froze. He’d heard the unpleasant sound of wings coming from behind.

“I won’t let you!” Instantly and without hesitation, he resolved himself and picked up the children.

Lamina, surprised, looked up. She saw the kratovastia behind them and let out a small yelp.

“Keep running!” shouted their escort. “Argos will…likely be seeing me first.”

Kratovastias had no concept of mercy. It bent its legs, about to unleash its fluid.

The next moment, the two-eyed warrior threw the two of them as hard as he could. He watched as the children flew through the air, blank looks on their faces, and smiled in satisfaction.

“I am…a warrior of Caellus! Fortissimos, Marga, I leave the rest to…”

The children didn’t hear the rest as their escort disappeared, enveloped in deadly mist.

In midair, Lamina stretched out her arm. She didn’t try to stick any sort of landing, and the both of them tumbled wildly across the ground. While enduring the pain, they turned back and noticed they could no longer see the giant that had been escorting them.



“No… Where is everyone?” The girl, trembling, stretched out her hand.

She could see the village contaminated by white, as if it had been covered in a fog. All that awaited inside was death. A world of death caused by corruption. This disaster had fallen upon many giants before, and it now visited them.

Dazed, she took a step forward, but an arm firmly grabbed her. She turned to see Nav glaring at her. Actually, he wasn’t glaring. He was also desperate—desperately trying to keep a lid on the tears that were welling up within his three eyes.

“We’re going,” he said.

“But! Everyone else—” Lamina tried to get out.

But Nav pulled her along forcefully, trying to get as far away as possible. “They were all brave! They wouldn’t bring shame upon Argos! So we must also become Fortissimoses ourselves!” he shouted.

Tears started falling from his eyes—he could no longer hold them back. Seeing Nav like that, Lamina started walking on her own.

“I… If I’m a true Marga, I should be able to save everyone…” she muttered.

“Maybe not. Marga…has likely been welcomed by Argos already.”

The giant children supported each other as they walked, now alone. They escaped from the death behind them to fulfill the last wishes of their brethren.

“Let’s find our Fortissimos. It is too early for us to go to Argos.”

◆

The swirling, deadly filth ate into the Caelleus village. The warriors, dauntless as they were, fell one by one when exposed. At this point, they no longer had the power to resist their enemy.

“My comrades, you are all true Fortissimoses. Even if we fall, we will certainly be captured within the eyes of Argos.” Marga De Quartus Oculus looked up to the sky, her powerlessness burning a hole in her chest. She prided herself on her great prowess with magic in the past, but she couldn’t beat the ravages of time. As she was now, she couldn’t even outdo the spears her warriors

could throw. “I will carry our final act of spite along with my eyes.”

She watched the oncoming wave of death with calm. Everything around her was enveloped in the filth with no avenue of escape, and now that the battle was over, there was nothing else to do.

However, the cloud of death didn’t swallow the old woman right away.

“What…is this?”

Her wrinkles twisted in confusion before she realized something was there before her. It was clearly not shaped like a kratovastia. Whatever it was, it parted the death cloud, clearing a path for the old woman. Her eyes widened in surprise as a giant calmly walked toward her.

“You are Genos De Rubel’s Fictus Rex! What are you doing here?!”

“Oh? You call me a false king? As rude as always, you decrepit Caelleus hag.” The giant’s five eyes glared at the old woman. He was the perpetrator behind this catastrophe, and the leader of the Rubels: their Fictus Rex.

“You falsified the king’s selection. You’re nothing but a fool in king’s clothes. No one lacking the eyes has the qualifications to be king,” said the elder.

“Qualifications to be king, eh?”

The edges of the false king’s mouth twisted slightly into a smile, and the Caelleus elder stopped talking. Though she had no end to the insults and scoldings she could throw his way, now wasn’t the time for that. What reason could there be for his completely unexpected visit? She wrung her aged mind as strongly as she could to think of the answer. “You could have just sent your kratovastias to destroy us. Why have you come?”

The false king didn’t reply right away. He simply looked around, the smile still on his face. He had the height and build befitting a giant with five eyes. His pose was bold, betraying no shame, and yet seemed twisted and sinister all the same. Then, the faint smile still on his face, he turned once again to the old woman. “It seems you’ve formed a Varies Genos. You sure do love your useless struggling.”

So that really was the reason, the elder thought bitterly. At the same time, a new question arose within her mind. “That was rather observant… No, it was still far too fast. So you had someone

within your eyes."

"Exactly," he answered. "You all are too simple and single-minded. If someone were to think you an eyesore, well… As you can see."

When she saw the false king's smile deepen, the old woman's doubts started to show on her face.

"Genos De Caelleus will be destroyed, so I may as well send you off personally. Wouldn't you agree?" The false king spread his arms wide, and a monster descended behind him. It was a localized disaster that spread nothing but death in the forest. It was an enemy to all giants. It was a kratovastia. But these things that did nothing but eat and destroy were now under the control of the false king.

"What you see is the truth, so open your eyes wide. Our ancestors' great enemy has fallen under my gaze," he said.

The Rubels had always been the largest clan of giants. With kratovastias added to their ranks, none could oppose them. It wouldn't be going too far to say that everything had fallen into their grasp.

"*I* have brought peace to all astragali. None of our ancestors' achievements can compare!" the false king exclaimed with full confidence. "Have you not witnessed the glory of *my* Genos De Rubel? Of our capital, Metropolitan?! It is truly watched over by Argos, where one can receive power of every kind."

"What arrogance…" the elder spat out, her wrinkled face further distorting.

"No, this is confidence, Caelleus. I am the one who discovered this power, after all. Everything I've done, I've done for the glory of the astragali. Eventually, we will conquer the entire forest, and that is why I am king! It is only natural for all genoses to fall under my control as well. Yes, it is only right." Despite her words, the false king didn't waver.

The old woman responded with silence. They were planning to dominate the entire forest, backed by overwhelming power. If their plans came to fruition, there was no doubt the giants would obtain much greater glory. If they could truly control kratovastias, they would prove to be powerful weapons. She knew that well.

The silence continued for a short while, with the false king watching the old woman breathe. His gaze was filled with pity

rather than anger.

“You dare spout that forcing all of us to obey you using kratovastias will lead to the glory of all astragali? You are thoroughly corrupted; could you say the same in front of Argos?!” the old woman spat back.

The false king’s smile disappeared. “You still refuse to open your eyes after hearing all this? My power will destroy all obstacles; resistance is meaningless. O Caelleus, this is your last chance. Tell the Varies Genos of your submission, and I would be willing to leave your remnants alive.”

Finally, the elder started to laugh. “You fool. There is no saving you, false ruler of Rubel. You were unable to properly enter Argos’s sight; anything you accomplish using such tainted power has no value. In the end, all you can do is use force to have your way. You were unable to obtain a favorable answer from the query, and you were unable to open any of our eyes. In the end, you are nothing but a counterfeit!”

The false king glared at her angrily. The overwhelming pressure of his five eyes combined with the cold gaze of the kratovastias behind him, yet the old giant took everything in without flinching.

“How unfortunate, Marga of Caelleus. I thought you would have the eyes to see the truth, but it seems I was mistaken. I was showing mercy by allowing you to come to my side, and yet you have closed your eyes to me.”

The false king sighed and made a signal. At his order, the kratovastias slowly started to move once again. Facing them was only one opponent: the Marga De Quartus Oculus. In the face of inevitable destruction, she smiled calmly.

“I am old, and I cannot keep my eyes open much longer. There is nothing for me to regret, so I will witness the truth until the end and carry it all to Argos. Your follies, your arrogance… He will judge it all.”

“If you say Argos will judge me, I will accept that. If he can, that is!”

Before the false king could give the final order, the Marga made her move. She concentrated all the strength left to her to create a single bolt. “O flame, strike down this fool! Inardesko!”

A bright ball of fire appeared from in the elder’s outstretched hand. It grew bigger and burned hotter, coming to contain more

power within it than the standard silhouette knight's overspell.

"Is that all, Caelleus?! You lack the shine you once had!" But the false king wasn't moved. He mirrored her movement and also created a ball of fire. The four-eyed elder had moved first, but the false king was the first to launch his spell.

The fireballs clashed in midair, each trying to devour the other. For an instant, the clash looked to be a stalemate. It didn't take long for one side to get an advantage, though, as the false king's spell pushed through without losing momentum and threw the old Marga's fireball aside.

At her age, she couldn't dodge the fireball. She didn't have the remaining strength to do so, anyway. The spell directly found its mark, burning her.

"It seems the time has come for you to go to Argos. Your body will serve as a message from me," the false king said. He watched as the old woman powerlessly fell to the ground and rapidly lost interest.

One of the large bugs behind him moved. It had a dark red body, and it was a size bigger than the rest. Parts of its body held a strange metallic sheen.

"Destroy it all, Oberon," the false king ordered quietly.

The red monster raised its chittering voice, and the others responded with movement. The kratovastias unleashed their fluids, further covering the village in death. No spot was left untouched, and no place remained to escape. Fire and miasma swirled together, creating a scene of pure ruin.

After falling to the fire, the old Marga watched the ruins of her village with blurry eyes. "My eyes have grown too old. I would not hesitate to head to Argos's side..."

She could no longer stand. She didn't even feel pain anymore—she was just waiting for the last embers of her life to burn out.

Just before even the feeling of powerlessness that had permeated her entire body disappeared, the old Marga's eyes snapped open.

Despite the swirling miasma obstructing her sight, she had an unobstructed view of the clear sky above. Her gaze went to the ends of those blue heights, reaching the darkness that lay beyond.

There, she found an eye. Rather, she found so many eyes that trying to count them all would have been a wasted effort. The

Marga could clearly feel all those gazes concentrating on her.

Immediately after, she felt something being severed, and then her consciousness started floating, and she was absorbed into the void and the eyes that waited for her.

“Ohhh, Argos… Pay witness to my final moments, and the truth I have seen…” The Marga’s eyes reflected the truth as she became one with the great will—she felt so clearly in her dying moments.

◆

“Who is it? Did someone just say something?” The first one to notice was the three-eyed hero.

He had suddenly stopped and started looking around as the party was making their way through the forest. His senses, sharpened by his experience as a warrior, had caught onto something. Whether it was a noise or just a simple tremor, the giant himself didn’t know. Still, he was certain of what he felt.

Ernie, Addy, and the armiger exchanged hesitating looks.

“No, wait, everyone. What is that?” Ernie pointed to the sky.

The rest of the party looked up all at once and saw a clear abnormality. A black trail of smoke stretched to the sky from the ground, and some shadows flitted about above. Furthermore, the surroundings seemed to be covered in mist.

This sight was familiar to the hero. He knew what could accomplish such a thing, which was why he widened his eyes and shouted, “Kratovastias! No… Why?! Why here?!”

“Fortissimos! That…is that…our…?!” the armiger yelled in a panic.

The direction the smoke and kratovastias were coming from was the same direction they were heading. It was obvious what lay below. Before anyone could respond, the hero ran off, his armiger following shortly after.

“We’re following them, Addy!” Ernie exclaimed.

“Yeah!”

The two humans chased after the explosive sprints of the two giants.

They were coming back from the same direction they’d left, and the closer they got, the more clearly they could see what the sky above the village looked like. It had turned into a speckled gray,

dotted with smoke coming from the village and the poison that had been spread all over it. It was anyone's guess what the scene was like below, but there was no way it was good.

Suddenly, the hero, who'd been running in front, slowed down. He'd noticed something coming their way from ahead—probably not something friendly. The hero stood firm, warily drawing his weapon. His armiger came to stand next to him, prepared for whatever it was to show itself.

"Wait, Fortissimos! That's our—" Ernie issued a warning from his vantage point above the trees. The hero had been about to leap forward, but he slowed down after hearing that.

"Ah, Fortissimos..." What appeared before them were giants of Caelleus.

"So you were safe! What happened to the village...?" The hero's voice regained its power after seeing the familiar eyes, but that only lasted for a moment. After all, the giants who appeared clearly numbered less than the total population of their village. What's more, they had many wounds, as well as obvious sores from where they'd been hit by the acid.

"How could this be... What happened to the rest?!" the hero couldn't help but yell as he rushed toward the other giants.

The one he asked hesitated to reply for a second before properly returning his gaze. "They appeared from the sky with no warning. We gathered together to resist at our Marga's instruction, but... In the end..."

The hero's expression was crushed. Right away, he started searching for the old woman among the faces of the crowd. "Wh-Where's the Marga?!"

"Our Marga led everyone until the end, fighting against the kratovastias! But, most likely, she's already gone to meet Argos..."

The moment the hero heard the reply, spoken like it was being squeezed out of his throat with a moan, he fell to his knees and slammed his fist on the ground, gouging out a divot.

After a long, grieving silence, he exclaimed, "I will never forgive them!!!" The hero then raised his head, his eyes bloodshot, and screamed to the heavens. He was about to run off, but Ernie jumped in front of him.

"You cannot go, Fortissimos!"

"Do not stop me, goblin! This is a matter of our genos!!!" His

words were spoken at such a volume that they were basically a roar.

Ernie was bathed in his fierce killing intent, but he still resisted without flinching. “If you go, who will protect all of these wounded?!”

The hero made one heavy footstep, but he resisted the urge in the end. He gritted his teeth so hard he foamed at the mouth. His extreme rage was causing a heat shimmer around him, like he would unleash fire at any moment.

Ernie delivered one more quiet line to the hero who was in the midst of turning into a raging beast. “Also, from what he said, the village is…probably covered in…”

“I know that already! I… I am a Fortissimos! If I don’t make a stand now, when will I?!” The hero stood once more, but he stopped when two more giants appeared. “Lamina… Nav.”

The boy and girl were supporting each other.

“Fortissimos… It’s as Ernie said. The village, it’s already… Everyone fought so bravely…” Lamina’s eyes overflowed with tears.

The hero realized what the kratovastias did to the village. He clenched his fists, trembling, before suddenly slamming his head into the ground. “Damn those kratovastias! Damn you, Genos De Rubel! How could you do this?! In full view of Argos! I will never forgive you… Never!”

Lamina came to stand in front of the hero, who was being crushed by his feelings of mortification. “Fortissimos. I… I have inherited the title of Marga.”

The hero slowly lifted his head to look at the four-eyed girl. Though he could see fear, shame, and anger, her young eyes still shone with a strong will.

“My title is now Parva Marga,” Lamina continued. “It was given to me by my predecessor. It is also proof of the folly committed by Genos De Rubel, who sent the kratovastias after us. This folly must be corrected, which is why we have escaped.”

The hero let out an otherworldly snarl. He surely would have preferred to let his anger speak as he took revenge on the perpetrators. However, as the village’s strongest warrior and the Marga’s bodyguard, he had a duty to fulfill. This didn’t change, even with a Marga as young and immature as Lamina.

The hero continued to tremble for a while, but he eventually

knelt and crossed his arms, closing two eyes while leaving his forehead's eye open and looking at Lamina.

"I swear to you here and now, new Marga. I will protect you from any and all calamities. And...I will surely correct the folly of Genos De Rubel and send them to be judged by Argos."

"O Fortissimos, I have not inherited many eyes from my predecessor. But I *will* overcome this trial. Until then, I will be relying on your protection." She might have had a large and tough body, but Lamina was still a child—though she was also a Parva Marga now. She was nervous in the face of a Fortissimos that was trembling with the effort of containing his rage, but she still replied firmly.

The surviving Caelleus giants followed their hero's example and knelt with closed eyes. They were in dire straits, the lifeline of their clan about to be cut, but the survivors came together and set off as one.

◆

"Thank goodness. It looks like everything is settled, and the Fortissimos isn't going to go charging off," Ernie remarked.

It wasn't just giants whose fates were dictated by the well-being of the Caelleus.

Ernie and Addy were watching the giants converse from a little ways away on top of a tree. They'd decided not to interfere too heavily with clan matters.

Nav, the giant boy with three eyes, soon approached them. "Ernie, Addy... The village was corrupted."

Before, his eyes had been filled with boyish liveliness, but now that was hidden. He looked down at his empty hands and lamented his lack of power.

"I couldn't even fight. Even though I said I would aim to be a Fortissimos." He turned around to look at the four-eyed girl who was at the center of the crowd of giants. However, the humans still couldn't feel his previous vigor and forcefulness.

Ernie and Addy got down from the tree.

"But didn't you manage to protect her, in the end?" Ernie asked.

"That's just...!" Nav started, but he changed tacks. "Lamina is here, but that's all. In the end, my eyes aren't fully open."

The sight of his fellow villagers fighting bravely and falling was burned into Nav's eyes. So many warriors, as well as their Marga, had disappeared in the deadly mist.

"Nav, a knight's duty is to protect their comrades and countrymen from danger. You did well, as part of the Order of the Silver Phoenix." Ernie gave the giant boy an earnest look. "Defeating the enemy is nothing more than a means to an end."

Nav took a moment to think that over. "I don't really get it. But I *did* manage to protect Lamina."

Ernie nodded. Seeing that, Nav's expression loosened somewhat. What he had accomplished didn't go away just because there was something he hadn't been able to do. His fierce struggle had saved at least one life.

"You both did your best! Our giant company is amazing!" Addy added in support.

"Yes. But I see this is the consequence of the Rubels controlling the kratovastias..."

Addy found it strange that Ernie didn't finish his sentence, so she looked his way. Ernie's gaze was directed far off into the distance, toward the plume of white smoke that was still hanging around the village.

"Hey, Addy," he continued. "If the village was attacked by kratovastias, that means..."

That made Addy remember what Ernie had been doing in the village, and what the attack meant.

"What do you think happened to the monster materials we were using for research?"

"Urgh..." Addy couldn't help but back up a few steps. She saw that Ernie was smiling—a smile filled with incandescent rage that would make the world itself burn.

"It was slowly taking shape thanks to everyone's efforts too. The armor, the bones... Everything is wasted. Heh heh heh... So you've gotten in my way again, you damn bugs."

Ernie and Addy had come this far purely acting toward their own goals. Everything would work out as long as they could safely escape the forest and return home to Fremmevilla.

However, their silhouette knights (including one that was only halfway done) had been destroyed twice, even if by pure coincidence. There was no way Ernie would take this lying down.

“Addy. I am now going to decide on the Order of the Silver Phoenix’s direction.”

“O-Okay.”

“We will continue to support the Fourth Company of giants, aiming to fill out our combat capability. And finally…” Ernie looked around at Addy, Nav, and the rest of the survivors. Then, he clearly declared, “…we will settle the score with the Rubels. The cost of destroying my robots and pointing your sword at my knight order is high!”

This was the moment the giant clan, Genos De Rubel, made a firm enemy of Ernesti Echevalier: the Kingdom of Fremmevilla’s most atrocious problem child and the knight captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix.

Part 14: Country of the Small Ones Arc

Chapter 60: The Long-Awaited Reunion

The Great Bocuse Forest spread endlessly across the land. But in its depths, an impact quietly rippled forth.

“Genos De Caelleus was what?!”

“Damn those Rubels. So they still had kratovastias left.”

“This is the same as the True Eye Revolt. As things stand, our victory is no longer assured…”

The tainted source of death unleashed by Genos De Rubel, kratovastias, had fallen upon Genos De Caelleus. They were destroyed, and the news spread quickly.

Meanwhile, the Exactus De Varies Genos that was assembling had the wind taken out of their sails.

Also, the kratovastia attack held another important meaning.

If another clan were to take the center of the Varies Genos to lead, they would also be attacked. That was terrifying, even to the hot-blooded giants.

The trend toward rebellion that had taken over the forest suddenly dispersed.

◆

While the other clans had fallen into despondence, the Caelleus survivors were in hiding.

The prevailing mood was dark. After all, their enemies were kratovastias. Who knew when they would show up in the sky? Because of that, they had no choice but to hide themselves deep within the tree cover.

This deep in the forest, it was harder for giants to do what they needed with their huge bodies. They were unable to hunt enough, but still they were able to hold out because there were so few of them. Nav didn’t stand out as much, and he was doing the best he could, but that wasn’t quite enough. They continued this meager lifestyle of careful hunting and sharing their catches for a while.

“I refuse to keep living like this, like a tree of the forest,” the Fortissimos De Tertius Oculus said suddenly during a meeting to

discuss future plans. The Parva Marga and Nav looked up at him worriedly. He continued, “Those damned Rubels will see their comeuppance. I will avenge our Marga… I will avenge everyone.”

The giants were sitting in a circle, and they all nodded. They all felt the same.

“But we are not strong enough. There are…almost none of us left,” said the hero.

“What happened to the Exactus De Varies Genos, Fortissimos? Haven’t they started the query? If so, taking action would be…”

The hero narrowed his three eyes and shook his head. “I do not know; we were attacked by kratovastias. There’s no way to tell how they acted after witnessing that.”

The giants all groaned. There wouldn’t be many still willing to act after knowing that there were still kratovastias, and that they’d destroyed the Caelleus. And without the full cooperation of the other giants, no one would be able to resist Rubel.

“Kratovastias and the Rubels are no longer divisible. We must defeat both at once,” said the hero.

“Is such a thing truly possible? O Argos, please show us the way…”

The giants wavered in their indecision, and the small Marga-in-training looked at them with a worried expression.

Though none could beat their ardor, turning such feelings into real results would be supremely difficult. The more they thought, the more they realized the overwhelming size of the wall that stood before them.

In the midst of their thick despair, only their hero stood brave. “I do not know what we should do either. Our enemy is far too powerful. However, we cannot simply tuck our tails and give up. We will all go to Argos’s side eventually, and what will we tell our Marga then?”

The hero knew this was just bluster, but he was their strongest warrior as well as their guardian.

Their new Marga and leader was still young. In order for the wounded Caelleus to move forward once more, they needed a greater goal, even if said goal was difficult in the extreme. He knew he was speaking the impossible, but heroes needed to make a stand first, before anyone else.

And in this serious atmosphere, a voice like a bell rang out. “I

see. I understand the situation. This is difficult, isn't it?"

The gazes of the giants automatically gathered to their Parva Marga. The giant girl shook her head in a panic, looking beside her. Their gazes then gathered to Nav, who also directed them farther to the side. Finally, they arrived at the source.

They looked at Ernesti, his tiny form sitting on the ground. The hero's expression softened. "My apologies, goblin Fortissimos, for getting you involved."

"No need to apologize. This was an act of challenge toward our entire knight order, and I was accepted as part of the Caelleus too. I'll help as much as I can."

"Have you seen some sort of idea?"

The hero seemed doubtful, but Ernie confidently stuck out his hand with two fingers up. Ernie was so small to the giants, though, that they couldn't clearly see what he was doing.

"I have! First, we have two options. Either make a lot of allies, or take action by ourselves."

"As I said, the Exactus De Varies Genos cannot move as they please. Also, it would be reckless to question Genos De Rubel by ourselves." The hero ground his teeth, thinking, *If only we could get the Exactus De Varies Genos to take action.*

Even if they could try to convene the Varies Genos once again, who knew how many would heed the call of a ruined genos? Accomplishing their goal would be harder than anything they'd done before.

However, the goblin hero's thoughts were slightly different. "You're right. So why don't we start by getting close?"

"Close? Close to where?" the hero asked dubiously.

"Close to the Rubels' village, of course," Ernie replied with a smile.

"Wha— You mean to head to Metropolitan?!"

Everyone's eyes widened, not just the hero's. Suggesting that they make for the base of their enemy with such small numbers didn't seem like the words of the sane.

But Ernie simply nodded with a smile. "Hmm, Metropolitan, you say? Either way, the kratovastias will likely continue to search for survivors, meaning they'll be looking over this forest. The closer we get, the closer we'll be to their blind spot. It's always harder to see what's under one's nose, after all."

The giants of Caelleus exchanged bewildered looks. No one had thought of this, so they were lost as to how to reply. That was when the hero sat with a heavy thud.

"Such a thing is easier to say than do. How can we get so close by ourselves?"

"The larger a group we move in, the easier we'll be to spot," replied Ernie. "This will be easier *because* we're going by ourselves. Our numbers will work in our favor."

The giant hero crossed his arms and stared steadily at Ernie, a hero who could fight evenly with him despite being smaller than the giant children beside him.

Ernie was definitely looking at something different from the giants. Whether it was because of a racial difference or a difference in experience, he couldn't tell. Either way, the goblin was hard to pin down.

"Supposing we do head to Metropolitan," said the hero after some consideration. "What then? It doesn't change the fact that we cannot fight them alone."

"I know. First, we gather information. Why have the kratovastias suddenly started obeying the Rubels?"

"That's... Hmm, certainly, that is unknown to us."

Even to the hero, the answer had been unknown since the True Eye Revolt. So much time had passed, though, that the fact had simply become accepted. Now, there were no giants that thought to question the reason.

"There should be some sort of trick to it. If we can find the answer..." Ernie said.

"Are you saying we would be able to eliminate the kratovastias?"

"Well, at the very least, we may be able to return them to being enemies to all giants. It would be best to eliminate as many of their allies as possible, after all."

The hero crossed his arms and thought in silence. In the past, kratovastias had indeed been enemies to all giants. They were such a threat that the title of Fortissimos had been created. This situation, where only one clan had control over them, was abnormal.

"Even if separating them from the kratovastias proves too difficult, there are other things we should research anyway." Ernie started to count down a list while the hero pondered. "The Rubels

are certainly a large genos. So are they really of one mind? There might be those among them who want to do things properly, under the sight of Argos. We might not need to make an enemy of all of them, just drive a wedge in between their factions. Depending on the numbers, we may not even need to fight them head-on. We could confuse and separate them to eliminate the enemy one by one…or if things go well, have them eliminate each other."

Ernie said this all with a smile—a smile full of motivation, focusing on the future.

"Looks like Ernie's pretty serious about fighting…" Addy muttered, putting some distance between them as she quietly retreated onto the shoulder of the giant girl. Ernie, having had his silhouette knights destroyed twice (including one in progress), was the angriest he'd ever been. A small but fierce catastrophe was steadily creeping upon the Rubels, its fangs bared.

"Impossible… A genos would never split," said the hero.

"I'm just saying that having them fight each other would be a good thing."

"But we do not even know if such a thing is possible. Shouldn't we try to eliminate the kratovastias first?"

The giants exchanged looks. Ernie's suggestion was unthinkable to those familiar with giant culture, as giants always took action in clans. That was especially true for smaller ones like the Caelleus. That was why they would never think to split up a clan. Of course, such considerations didn't matter to Ernie.

The giant hero took a look around before settling his gaze on the small hero before him. He was definitely hesitant. Ernie's suggestion was a light of hope to them—one of the few possible ways for them to fight. But at the same time, he felt a strong sense of resistance toward putting the suggestion to practice. In other words…

"Would Argos approve of such a method?" The hero's three eyes held pain. Their wars—sage's queries—had always been fought head-on. Being better than your opponent was always the right answer. Ernie's suggestion was unorthodox at best.

"Then would Argos prefer the Caelleus admit defeat? Would that mean your question was answered?" Ernie asked.

This caused the giant hero to gum up.

To giants, arriving at an answer to a query was the same as divining the will of Argos. Once an answer was obtained, it could never be opposed. That was why they couldn't approve of this current situation.

That was when a small but clear voice said to the hero, "Fortissimos, I... *We* should accept Ernie's suggestion."

"Parva Marga," said the hero.

Surprisingly, the voice had come from their new Marga. She was still young, so her four eyes were big on her face, but she still faced the hero head-on.

"Without the kratovastias, the query will be settled purely between us. The answer that arises from that will be approved by Argos...I think," she said.

The giant hero stared hard.

Why were there so many feelings of resentment when the Rubels had come out on top of the True Eye Revolt? The answer was obvious: Because it wasn't an answer that had been arrived at between all the giants.

"At some point, the time to launch a proper query will come. We must first prepare for that time," said Ernie.

"Ernie's right, Fortissimos," agreed Lamina. "Let us correct this mistake. In order to do so, we must eliminate those *things*."

The hero looked at Ernesti before shifting his gaze to their Parva Marga. Despite their dire straits, they were both filled with a powerful will. Their light was certainly not afraid of the largest clan, nor the beasts under their control.

"It seems my eyes were not fully open..." The hero let out a wry chuckle. He'd realized that the genos's strongest warrior had grown timid from their loss. And *that* was what truly couldn't be shown to Argos.

Of course such bravery would spur him to action. He was a Fortissimos, a giant, a proud warrior.

"It's standard practice to bring down a large beast by hurting it blow by blow. Genoses must be the same. Even if they've all stepped out of sight of Argos, we can only fight what we can see." The hero stood once again, all the hesitation and timidity gone from his eyes. "Genos De Rubel and those kratovastias have caused us a great deal of pain. Now it is our turn to put out their eyes!"

The other giants all agreed, raising their arms in a roar to vent their frustrations.

Even their Parva Marga stood with a smile, Addy still on her shoulder.

“Very well—then I will be thinking of a way to defeat the kratovastias when we encounter them,” said Ernie.

“You’re going to challenge them again, Ernie?”

“Personally, I’m much more interested in *eradicating* those things.”

Even if they succeeded in separating the Rubels from the kratovastias, they would still have to fight the bug monsters eventually.

“Then I’ll think with you!” Nav stuck out his fist, bumping it with Ernie’s. With that, the goal of the giant company was decided.

The hero nodded and turned to face Ernie. “I praise your bravery, goblin Fortissimos. We are no longer afraid, but more trials await us if we are going to try to fight them. We will need your strength from now on.”

“Leave it to me. Despite how I look, I *was* a knight captain.”

That didn’t mean anything to giants, but the hero still understood Ernie’s confidence.

“Knight orders must be powerful things…” Nav muttered, seemingly under some weird misunderstanding.

Thus, the Caelleus took action. First, they put the forest they were hiding in behind, heading east toward Metropolitan. They were wary of kratovastias, but they still made steady time.

◆

“The meat is so bland.” Adeltrude was pouting as they traveled, her mood sour.

“We left a lot of stuff back in the village that all got destroyed along with it, after all. Blankets, medicine, food…”

“What’s most important is our spices! Damn those bugs. No forgiveness!”

Ernie and Addy had been out during the attack and had brought some supplies with them on the Descendrad. Still, they’d only brought the bare minimum. Now, they barely had any left, and a lot of the joy in their meals had faded away.

“Even if we wanted to gather some more from the forest, it’s too tough to be on the road like this,” Ernie said. “We need to establish a more permanent base or we won’t be able to settle down.”

“Especially since we’re being chased. This is so hard.”

Though the giants were satisfied with just roasting their meat, the two humans were facing a serious problem. Actually, Addy was feeling it more keenly, since she was in charge of cooking.

Ernie sighed. “If only there was some village we could just steal from.”

“You’re so merciless, Ernie… It might be dangerous if we don’t make a silhouette knight soon.” Addy backed away from Ernie, who was being pretty serious in his disappointment. He was deteriorating as more time passed without a silhouette knight.

Nav and Lamina were walking behind the pair, listening in with interest.

Eventually, the group reached a clearing in the forest. A path wide enough for several giants to walk next to each other stretched off into the distance, stamped solid by the passage of creatures and giants over many years.

The hero pointed down the path. “Following this is the fastest way to get to Metropolitan.”

“But we really shouldn’t be approaching them out in the open,” said Ernie.

This was one of the few pathways that could be considered roads within the forest. They wouldn’t be the only ones on it, so they’d be trading safety for speed. The likelihood of encountering the enemy would shoot up.

“You’re the one who said to infiltrate them, no? They wouldn’t imagine we would approach them in such a way. In this case, speed would become our ally.”

“I see, you do have a point. Then let’s take this road—” Ernie turned around suddenly. “What’s that?”

Something was coming down the road from the west. It was a giant—a group of giants towing carts, at that.

Ernie’s question prompted the rest of the Caelleus giants to turn around as well. Both parties of giants recognized each other simultaneously.

“Genos…De Rubel! Why are you here?!” the hero bellowed.

“What?! Caelleus! So you’ve even failed to return to his great eyes!”

Lamina stiffened, and Nav moved to stand in front of her. Ernie and Addy stared at the incoming group of giants.

According to the hero, these giants were Rubels. They clearly looked different from the Caelleus giants. It wasn’t as if they were different races—the most striking difference was in their equipment. Specifically, in the armor they wore. They didn’t just use monster parts; some pieces were made with metal. Metal that had clearly been intentionally shaped.

“So they’re Rubels,” Ernie muttered. “Is that iron?! No, wait, before that…”

“They’re pulling carts…” Addy muttered as well. “Wait, Ernie! What’s that?!”

The Rubels were making a fuss over the Caellus giants, but there was something else that drew Ernie’s interest: their cargo.

The carts were being pulled by quadrapedic monsters that seemed to be duel-class. The Rubel giants were clearly in the middle of transporting something.

“Those are kratovastias! I see, so you won’t even let us have their corpses!” the hero howled once more.

The Rubels were hauling kratovastia corpses—the ones that Ernie and Ikaruga had once killed in exchange for Ikaruga’s destruction. While the giants were starting to roar at each other, Ernie’s gaze was drawn far off into the distance.

There was more after the carts containing kratovastia corpses. The thing bound on top of the following cart was very familiar.

“You… I can’t believe this,” he muttered.

It was a lump of metal that had been half melted by acid.

The lump of metal was huge and entangled with metal piping that seemed like entrails. The melted parts sparkled faintly with a crystalline shimmer.

There were several empty hollows where things were probably once connected. At the center was a space big enough for a human to enter.

Before anyone realized, Ernie started walking forward.

He poured mana into the Wire Anchor at his hip, and it started to spit out jets of air at a prodigious rate. He also had his Winchesters in both hands.

“That is…*my* Ikaruga.”

They were trying to cart off Ernesti Echevalier’s beloved partner and the flag unit of the Order of the Silver Phoenix: Ikaruga.

There was no way Ernie would ever fail to identify it, even if he were to be reborn several times over.

“Hey, wait! They even have my Sylly!” Addy shouted.

Indeed, the following cart had Addy’s Sylphianne on it. Because this one had retained its shape, it was even easier to identify.

“Hmm?” said Nav. “What is wrong, Ernie?! What do you see in their cargo?” The hero and the rest of the giants were having a glaring match with the Rubels. Nav was the first among them to notice something wrong with the humans, which was why he asked.

“That’s mine,” said Ernie.

“What?”

Ernie quickly jumped into the air, leaving behind a bewildered Nav. He landed on the hero’s shoulder and directed a sharp gaze toward the Rubel giants. “That is my silhouette knight. I won’t let you take it just because it’s broken.”

The Rubel giants gave the boy dubious looks from under their helmets. “A goblin?” said one. “Why is one with the half-returned Caelleus? Either way, you lot are more than a hundred eyes short to be ordering us around.”

“Oberon was the one who wanted this,” added another. “We only brought it because of our leader’s orders… How dare he make us haul trash!”

The giants bared their teeth threateningly. They quickly lost interest in the small goblin, preferring instead to focus on the giants they would likely be fighting.

“Trash…huh? I see.” All emotion left Ernie’s face. It was as still as the surface of a stagnant pond, but his eyes betrayed how deep that water went. “Fortissimos. We are going to eliminate them now, and I’m not letting a single one escape.”

“I have no objection, of course. But what is wrong, goblin Fortissimos? If you desire to fight, we…” The hero’s expression was full of doubt. He could tell that Ernie was incomparably angrier than when they’d fought before.

“Those are all *my* treasures. I will not allow them to just take my treasures,” said Ernie. “These bandits must meet their proper

end…so why don’t we do the honors?”

“Wait, goblin! Agh, they are *our* sworn enemies. Let us go as well!” The hero hurriedly chased after Ernie.

“You fools. Meeting you here has just saved us some trouble. Go to the side of Argos like the meek little things you are!” The Rubel giants all brandished their weapons, ready to make battle. The two sides clashed, one protecting the carts, and the other attacking.

Ahead of everyone else, a flash of silver streaked through. The sound of Ernie’s Aero Thrust was sharp, like a flying arrow.



A strange object appeared in the sights of the Rubel giants without warning, as they were wholly focused on the Caelleus giants.

Their shock robbed them of the ability to dodge. Shining red bullets stabbed into a large single-eyed giant, causing small explosions on his face.

“Grghhh! Gaaahgyyaaarrrggghhh!!!” The one-eyed giant screamed while covering his face, drawing the attention of his nearby friends.

That created an opening for a silver light to fly through the air toward its next prey. A Wire Anchor sprayed air as it went to wrap around the neighboring giant’s neck.

“What’s this?!” The giant felt this anomaly and reached out to fix it, but it was too late. The arrowhead tip of the Wire Anchor glowed with magic. The spell Sonic Blade was a blade of vacuum that possessed powerful cutting ability, and the arrowhead tip made a circle around the giant’s neck.

Ernie quickly retrieved his Wire Anchor and used the giant’s shoulder as a foothold to make another leap. A moment later, the giant’s neck fountained blood, and he fell.

“What?! What did you do, Caelleus?!”

“Something’s here! What’s going on?!”

Instantly, confusion befell the Rubel giants. Their comrades were dying one after the other without any warning.

Not only that, but they couldn’t even discern the cause. They weren’t able to see Ernie, who was small and fast.

The Caelleus giants leaped into the middle of the chaos. The grudge they held for the death of their brethren was deep, and they mercilessly swung their weapons.

“Eyes like yours aren’t worth returning to Argos! We’ll crush you here and now!”

“Agh, don’t get carried away!”

The Rubels were now on the back foot, but they managed to take their attackers’ blows on their armor, which was extremely tough thanks to them using both monster materials and iron. They forced the Caellus weapons back and returned to even footing.

“If you would only fall in line with the king, we wouldn’t have had to use the kratovastias!” roared a Rubel giant as he raised his

iron axe. “This is your fa—” Something alighted atop his raised axe—something small, glinting silver. The giant’s mind burned with intense suspicion.

“Wha? A goblin? What a— Gh?! Gyagh?!” Before he could finish his sentence, his axe arm was severed. Ernie’s Wire Anchor had gone through a gap in the armor.

“A mere goblin did this? To us?! Gaaah!” A giant that tried to step in and help fell back, holding his face.

A blade had cut the giant’s eye. Ernie wasn’t the only one in battle with the giants—Addy was also there, wielding dual blades.

“As expected! Caelleus, my brethren! This is proof that Argos has approved of our victory!” the hero bellowed.

The rest of the Caelleus giants roared, their morale flaring.

Both sides were even in number. The Rubels had the advantage in equipment, but Ernie and Addy’s presence tilted the scales as they pranced through the air and swung their blades.

“Don’t you *dare* touch my Ikaruga.” Ernie sliced open necks, severed arms, and crushed eyes. He was mercilessly destroying the scoundrels who’d tried to make off with his beloved partner.

Once the Rubels’ numbers started dwindling, it didn’t take long for them all to fall. It didn’t matter how tough their armor was—they weren’t invincible. They were pushed back by the Caelleus giants’ attacks before being picked off one by one.

When only the Caelleus survivors were left in the area, Ernie immediately jumped onto the carts while everyone else was basking in their victory. He then looked over every inch of the cargo.

The hero, Nav, and Lamina watched him with confused looks on their faces.

“So that’s Ernie’s treasure? It seems…really precious to him.” For some reason, Nav was speaking very hesitantly.

Beside the boy, the hero groaned with a mixed expression. He was looking at a giant corpse that had lost its head. One wrong step, and he could have ended up like that. Even though they’d won, a bead of cold sweat made its way down his back.

“It is,” Addy confirmed. “You remember how we left to retrieve something? This is it.”

“Ah, right. I remember. I see, so this was near those kratovastias,” said the hero.

After this exchange, Ernie finished his inspection, seemingly satisfied, and returned to the group. “This is the manifestation of what I love most in the world. It *is* a little broken at the moment, though.”

“I have no idea what it is, but if it’s broken, why don’t you fix it?” the hero asked.

“We are searching for a method to do so.”

The monsters that had been pulling the carts must not have been too intelligent, as they didn’t seem to care about what was going around them at all. They simply stood still. The Caelleus giants took their reins and tried to pull them along.

“Hrm… In any case, this must be the guidance of Argos,” said the hero. “Let us take this momentum and make for Metropolitan.”

The Caelleus survivors were in a much better mood after this minor victory.

Ernie’s gaze swept over the Rubels’ corpses. After some thought, he looked back up. “About that. How do you feel about deceiving the enemy, Fortissimos?”

“Hmm? Not favorably. Answers to queries must always be clear, or else Argos will not recognize them.” The hero answered the sudden question honestly.

“Then let’s do this: wear these giants’ armor to infiltrate the Rubels’ settlement.”

“What?! You want me to wear the armor of a loser?!” Naturally, the hero was angry. If this had been the result of a monster hunt, he wouldn’t have had any qualms about it, but these were Rubels, and ones who had lost to them at that. Resorting to this was an action hard to fathom in giant culture.

“No. These are simply the spoils of victory,” answered Ernie. “It’s only natural to wear your spoils. It’s just a coincidence that these happen to belong to Rubels, and that wearing them may trick them.”

“Pure drivel! Argos will quickly see through such an obvious ploy!”

Despite the hero’s response, Ernie never stopped smiling. “But we are facing Genos De Rubel, not Argos. Their king doesn’t even have enough eyes, right? If they don’t notice, we may obtain some valuable secrets.”

“But such a thing would be…!”

“You must fix your eyes upon the truth. In order to do so, you need to get close and think hard, but that isn’t possible as things stand, right? If you just endure this, we may grasp a chance at victory.”

“Grk… But…”

“With our lack of numbers, the methods available to us are similarly limited. Won’t you make the most use of this victory we’ve won?”

The hero, silent, thought long and hard. He made history’s most sullen face, and comparing his expression to Ernie’s airy smile made Addy shrug. “Eurgh. Ernie’s trying to be crafty again.”

“Is this how Ernie’s so-called knight order fights?” Nav asked.

“Hmm…” Addy groaned, her feelings mixed. “I’m not sure how to answer that. There’s not really a definitive yes or no answer.”

The Parva Marga sitting beside them watched them with a puzzled look.

Now that he was without silhouette knights, Ernie was racking his brains for a plan—or maybe not? It seemed his thoughts were bending pretty strongly in a vicious, brutal direction.

In the end, the hero couldn’t produce a better idea than Ernie’s, and he was forced to capitulate.

◆

Addy sat on the edge of the cart, blankly watching the clouds go by. Her Descendrad was on its knees over in the corner.

“Ernie’s not moving anymore…”

Now that the contingent of Rubels had been annihilated, the cargo they were hauling changed hands to the Caelleus.

They were traveling at an easygoing pace, pulled along by the quadruped monsters. And now that Ernie had reclaimed Ikaruga’s remains…

“Erniiieee… You know Ikaruga won’t get fixed even if you stick to it, right?”

“I don’t mind. It… It gives me power.”

“Agh, he’s a lost cause.”

He was clinging onto Ikaruga as if it were only natural, refusing to be separated from it. Addy sighed as she watched him really start to break down into a useless mess. There was nothing to be

done other than carry him along with the cargo.

So, as Addy was spacing out, a voice came down to them from above.

“This is not the time to sleep, goblin Fortissimos,” the Fortissimos De Tertius Oculus said while walking next to the cart. “We will eventually arrive at Metropolitan if we continue along this path. We cannot keep pulling these.”

They were heading for Metropolitan in order to fight the Rubels, and carts with corpses on them wouldn’t help. Even with Ernie and Addy, it would be too hard for them to protect the carts.

“We will need to leave these somewhere…” the Fortissimos started.

Of course, Ernie was *extremely* reluctant. “I’m not leaving Ikaruga, even if it’s broken! I won’t let them steal it again!”

Addy watched him stubbornly cling onto the wreck and shook her head. “It’s no use. Now that he’s like that, you’ll need to be prepared to fight him to peel him away.”

“He would go that far?” Not even the hero wanted to fight Ernie for such a ridiculous reason. Especially since it seemed like the boy would seriously resist. “Hmm… But it will only make us less maneuverable if we were to continue taking these with us.”

The obvious answer was to just leave the carts along with Ernie, but that choice had its own problems. Their plan was to make use of their small numbers to infiltrate the enemy. He was the one who’d thought of this plan, and they still needed his advice.

“Which means you just need a reason not to throw this away, right?” Ernie said.

“Is it really that easy?” Addy seemed doubtful.

But Ernie already looked full of motivation. “Let’s see. First, the Rubel soldiers were the ones pulling these carts. That means it would be better to keep them if we want to pretend to be Rubels. Also, there are kratovastia materials here. They’ll likely be important; don’t you think it would be a waste to just throw them away?”

“Agh, all right! I understand. We will not leave these behind. Still, we cannot keep going as-is either.”

When it came to humanoid weapons, Ernie was eloquent in the extreme. It was impossible for the hero, who focused on martial might, to argue him down. He realized this quickly and

capitulated.

"Right. Then I'd like to find someplace safe to hide these and create a base."

Ernie looked around, but he was only able to see bare ground and thick forest. Stashing these in the forest with no landmarks or other markers was the same as throwing the cargo away. If they were to try to hide their spoils, they would need something to mark their location.

"Fair enough. Let us continue for now, then," said the hero.

The giants took the quadruped monsters and continued walking.

Eventually, the road started to widen and become more proper. That went to show how many giants used it, and the hero only grew more wary and tense.

"We are about to come into sight of Metropolitan. Keep your eyes peeled."

The Caelleus giants all nodded. They were already deep in the midst of enemy territory, so they could run into other Rubel giants at any time.

Though they'd stolen the Rubels' helmets and armor to disguise themselves, it was still a gamble as to how well they could trick their enemy. If a battle were to break out, they would easily be crushed by numbers.

"If this turns into a fight, we will be unable to protect our cargo, goblin Fortissimos."

"That's okay. I'll destroy anyone who touches this without my permission." It wasn't exactly clear *what* was okay, but for now, it seemed that Ernie was satisfied.

◆

Then, the time finally came.

Giant shadows appeared in the distance—large figures that glinted metallically in the light. The closer they got, the more clear the figures became. They were armed Rubel giants.

"We could ignore them, but if possible I'd like to extract some sort of information from them," said Ernie.

"So you would seek an answer with words. I am not suited for that." The hero's expression was bitter under his helmet. He didn't

feel like he could calmly exchange words with the Rubels he so hated. That was when his Armiger De Prima Oculus, who had been focusing on carrying his share of the baggage, came forward.

“Leave this to me, Fortissimos.” With that, he took the lead. Before long, they closed the distance and were close enough to exchange words. Ernie and Addy hid in the shadow of the wrecks. They didn’t know if they could allow themselves to be seen, even if everyone thought they were goblins.

“Stop. I see you are couriers? What is your cargo?” said the Rubel in front.

The single-eyed armiger from Caelleus responded, “We are indeed. Our carts are loaded with kratovastia and phantom beast corpses, as you can see.”

The armiger pointed, and the Rubels let out a low laugh after a once over. “Hmph. Feed for the goblins, eh? Right, hurry on then.”

Ernie and Addy exchanged looks from the shadows of the wrecks. Several parts of the giant’s wording didn’t feel quite right.

The Rubels were unaware they were being overheard, though, as the armiger responded with a question. “Understood. Where should we bring these?”

“The usual place, no? The goblin quarter.” The Rubel giant’s response sounded exasperated at having to explain such an obvious thing. As soon as he spoke, he quickly lost interest and made to leave.

“I remember now. But where is the goblin quarter?”

But he was forced to stop by the armiger’s follow-up question. The Rubel giants slowly turned back around, and a slight sense of tension filled the air. It seemed the armiger had asked too many questions, and now they were suspicious. The hero was hidden, but ready to draw his weapon and fight at any time.

However, while the Rubel giants seemed rather confused, after a loud sigh, the leader replied in a tone that made it clear he felt he was talking to an idiot. “Hmm? Do you somehow have even less brains than the usual Prima Oculus? It’s over that way, obviously. Open your eye properly.”

The giant snorted and pointed to a branching path.

“Ah, yes. Thank you. We will return to our duties.”

With that, the Caelleus giants carted the corpses off. They could faintly hear laughter coming from behind them, though they

couldn’t hear exactly what the Rubels were saying.

After putting that group of giants behind them, the hero came up beside his armiger. He’d done his best to keep quiet so as to help the effort, but the expression he had on under his helmet was vicious in the extreme.

“My apologies. Closing my eyes to Genos De Rubel is…” He was gripping his axe so tightly that the handle creaked.

The armiger shook his head. “I am your armiger, your servant. Fortissimos, your duty is to fight—so all other duties are mine. There is no need to mind something like this.”

“You can rely on me,” the hero replied after a moment. “When the time comes to truly make a query to Argos, I will fight with my life on the line.” And so, the hero affirmed his resolve. He had to respond to the expectations of his people.

“Hey, Ernie, it sounds like we’re going to where the goblins are,” said Addy.

“Seems like it. He saw the wrecks and immediately pointed to the goblin quarter. In a sense, this is exactly what we wanted, but there must be more to this.”

The two humans thought about what lay ahead of them as the cart shook.

Incidentally…

The Caelleus survivors, who weren’t familiar with this area, simply continued in the direction that the Rubel had pointed. Even when they came upon more branching paths, they simply chose the branch that went in generally the same direction. Naturally, they ended up at the wrong destination.

“I see it now. Oho, so that is the goblin quarter,” the hero said.

The tree cover became less dense, and before long they reached a clearing. There, they found a series of buildings that were clearly too small for giants. Faint trails of smoke rose from several of them, indicating life.

“Well then. We’ve found them. What now?” the hero asked.

“Hmm… I don’t actually want to hand these over to them.” The cargo included Ernie’s precious treasure. There was no way they could hand it over. Suddenly, though, he looked up, his nose twitching. “This is…the smell of a smithy…”

“Ernie’s caught whiff of something weird again…” Addy muttered exasperatedly.

Ernie ignored her, though, as his mind was filled with thoughts of the village ahead. This was on top of thoughts on the existence of goblins, the cargo they were carrying, and this new evidence of smithing skills.

“We were asked to bring the materials here,” said Ernie. “That means that most likely, the goblins deal with crafting work. We might be able to have them help us.”

The answer was clear. His expression shifted to an (evil) grin.

“The goblins?” the hero asked. “But we cannot yet be sure.”

“You’re right,” Ernie agreed. “That is why we should simply take control of them. It seems there aren’t many goblins, so we should have enough forces to do so.”

“Are they not your brethren?”

Ernie was so motivated that the giants were a little put off.

◆

That day, a huge disturbance descended upon the goblin village.

It happened in the middle of the day, as the villagers were working hard. Heavy footsteps audibly made their way down the only road to the village, as if to chase away their wondrous peace.

“That’s… Wha?! Astragali?!”

“It isn’t time to pay our dues… What could they want with a village like ours?”

“I don’t know… Hurry and call the chief!”

The goblins were greatly confused when they saw the group of armored giants approaching. It was unthinkable for giants to be so far out in the sticks like this.

All men, women, and children hurriedly retreated into their homes and locked their doors. No one knew whether the walls would be of any help against a giant, but they knew of nowhere else to run.

The village was enveloped in silence, as if it were holding its breath and waiting for the giants to pass it by.

◆

“As expected of a goblin settlement. It is tiny.” The hero took a

breath as he looked around at the entrance of the village.

The size of this village wasn't much different from the one that formerly belonged to the Caelleus, who were among the smaller of the giant clans. And because the buildings were sized for goblins, the shabbiness of it all stood out even more.

"Oho, so this place houses multitudes of beings like Ernie?" the hero wondered.

"It would be too dangerous if there were many Ernies and Addys," said Lamina.

"What does that even mean?" Nav asked.

The children were observing the village with keen interest. Unfortunately, they couldn't see anyone and were lost as to what to do next.

As they stood at the entrance of the village, several goblins came tottering up to them. They were obviously very old and walked slowly.

"So those are goblins... They really do look like normal humans." Ernie had been sneakily observing from the back with the children, and he groaned.

What the giants referred to as goblins he could only see as human villagers.

There was no visual difference between them and the people living in Fremmevilla or the Occidents. Only, the clothes they wore were old, worn into tatters. They seemed even more impoverished than the kingdom's farmers.

Under the concentrated gazes of the arrivals to their village, the elders reached the giants' feet. They knelt, touching their foreheads to the ground. They were already small, and now they nearly blended into the ground.

"A-Ahh... May I inquire what business has seen fit for esteemed astragali such as yourselves to come to our village? I believe there is still time to pay this year's dues..." The chief's voice fluttered as he spoke, and none of the goblins dared to look up.

A giant of over ten meters was right in front of them. If they spoiled this giant's mood in any way, they could instantly be squashed. However, it looked as if there was another reason for their excessive fear.

Though they'd come this far, the Caelleus giants did not actually have much of a reason to be here. Ernie was the one who actually

wanted to take control of them.

“We have brought materials.”

“M-M-My apologies, but if that is your purpose, then you should have gone to the overtown. This is the undertown, so…”

The giants exchanged looks. Of course, they hadn’t known there were multiple goblin settlements.

“I see. But carrying these all the way to the overtown would be inconvenient.” The giants looked uncomfortable. They had no idea what goblin society was like.

That was when a bell-like voice came from behind them. “Then would you allow us to rest here for a while?”

“Hmm…” The village chief hesitantly raised his head after hearing a voice that clearly didn’t belong to a giant. He was shocked by the two proud-looking figures riding on the young, slightly small giant’s soldiers.

There was one that clearly didn’t belong among this group of armored and intimidating giants. The figure was small and seemed like a child, but showed no fear over using a giant as footing.

The chief’s mouth hung open as he looked back and forth between the figure and the giants. Eventually, he noticed the difference in clothing. “Wh-What?! What is a…a noble from the overtown doing here?!”

The village chief groaned in dismay. Ernie seemed confused as to what was going on, but regardless, the villagers brought themselves even lower to the ground.

Meanwhile, the giants talked among themselves.

“What do we do, Fortissimos? Should we settle down here for now?”

“It is a bit cramped for us. But, well, needs must. The goblin Fortissimos will probably be satisfied if we leave the things here.”

The Caelleus giants cared nothing for the village itself.

“It seems other astragali do not visit this place, so there is no need to fear encountering Genos De Rubel.”

“Then we should start by hunting. We do not have enough food now, so we will need to take some time and prepare more.”

While the goblins conversed, the giants moved to take a break. The group arbitrarily started to settle down around the goblin village.

◆

The giants put down their things and started to hunt, heedless of whatever inconvenience they could be causing the villagers.

They didn't catch much, but it was enough. They first needed to worry about today's sustenance, so as soon as they butchered their kills, they roasted the meat on a fire. As always, a giant's meal was hearty.

"Here is your share."

"Thank you for doing this every time."

The giants cut off some random ends for Ernie and Addy, who prepared their own food. It amounted to barely a bite for a giant, but to a human it was a large portion of meat. Addy skillfully cut it up and used the aromatics she had on hand to cook.

It didn't take long for her expression to cloud. "Hrm... In the end, it's not enough flavor. Maybe I can barter for something here?"

They'd lost a lot in the attack on the Caelleus's village.

Since then, they'd been unable to resupply, and their meals had become rather disappointing affairs. Now that they were in a real settlement, there was a lot they'd want to stock up on.

With that in mind, Addy looked around. It didn't take long for her to lock gazes with a villager. Though to be fair, the villager was a small child.

The children had at some point come to watch the pair from afar, and they were staring holes into the meat Addy was preparing. It was as if nothing else in the world existed to them. Ernie and Addy exchanged glances.

"Hey... Do you want this?" Addy asked.

This took the children by surprise. They squeaked, and one hesitantly grunted. The children all backed up a few steps, but they didn't go far. Their gazes bounced restlessly between Addy and the lump of meat.

"What should we do? Trade some for ingredients?" Addy asked.

"That *is* an idea, but before that..." Ernie paused to think. "Hey, may I ask something? I'll give you some meat in exchange."

This shocked the children further, but after some hesitation, they eventually timidly stepped forward. They took the slices of meat offered to them and ate in a trance while the food was still

hot.

“Do you like meat?” Ernie asked.

“Yeah… Yeah! It’s good! Really, really tasty!”

The meat wasn’t seasoned enough; it had basically just been roasted. Still, the children reacted like it was a supreme feast.

Ernie’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t get a lot of meat to eat, do you?”

“Nope! We’re not allowed to hunt.”

“I see…”

His smile was gentle, but Addy could understand because of the many years she’d been by his side. He was plotting something.

“Ernie?” she ventured.

“I see that this will be a good chance for *business*.” With that, they spent their mealtime with the children.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” One adult villager scolded the children angrily. But after he noticed Ernie and Addy, his face paled. Every villager in the vicinity immediately dropped to the ground, grinding their faces into the dirt. “How can I apologize for discourtesy perpetrated against nobles such as yourselves?! But…please, they are just children! Please, be merciful!”

“The children tell me that hunting is prohibited in this village,” Ernie said, ignoring the kowtowing villagers. The villagers trembled in fright, but they felt they couldn’t afford to ignore him, so they fearfully raised their heads.

“We are the only ones here. If we carelessly go into the forest, we’ll only be food for the monsters. That is why the knights banned hunting.”

“I see. Monsters *are* dangerous, after all.” Addy seemed satisfied by the answer.

However, Ernie felt something was off. “I’ve been thinking this ever since we got here, but…something’s strange.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Why don’t these ‘goblins’ live *with* the giants?”

This village only had goblins in it, which made it a village of small beings *in the middle of the Great Bocuse Forest*.

“We have silhouette knights in order to beat back monsters, but these people don’t. That would make sense if the giants were protecting them; it would explain why they’re so in awe of them too. But they’re not here either.” Ernie asked the villagers to raise

their heads before standing up and surveying the area. “All they did was order these villagers to not enter the forest before leaving them here, *in the forest*, *alone*. It’s as if no one cares if these villagers die.”

“Now that you mention it, you may be right. But what about it?” Addy asked.

Ernie walked up in front of the villagers. They trembled in fear, wondering what he would say, when he adopted a gentle smile. “I would like to ask you something, villagers. Would you be willing to trade? We will offer meat and safety.”

He held a piece of roasted meat in front of him. The moment they saw it, the villagers’ bellies growled.

“In exchange, you will offer your smithing skills to us.”

Ah, so that’s his goal, Addy immediately thought.

◆

“Okay, form a neat line. It’s fine, there’s no need to rush. We have plenty. In fact, it’d normally be impossible to eat an entire duel-class monster.”

The next day, a duel-class monster the giants had hunted was left in the middle of the village. Addy took charge of the village’s women, and they butchered it.

“Right. Monster meat is tough, so we need to be careful now to save trouble later!” Addy had always been skilled at cooking, and now she’d also picked up the ability to take apart monsters during their stay with the giants. She instructed the unskilled villagers well.

The women’s gazes all shone with an abnormal glint. With knives in hand, and as many pots as they had behind them, it was basically a battle to gain as much meat as possible. This was a precious opportunity for them, and so it was not far from a real battle.

“Sorry for making you hunt more,” Ernie apologized.

“Pay it no heed. It is not much trouble to feed some mere goblins. Also, it is only natural to reward work,” the hero replied. He hadn’t done so out of simple goodwill. This was a contract—a deal.

In exchange for meat, the villagers would improve the Caelleus

giants' armor.

"These so-called spoils we obtained from the Rubels did not fit well, after all."

"Leave it to us! We regularly work with armor belonging to the great astragali!"

The men gathered around the giant, touting their own skills. It was more of a plea for more meat than a show of passion for their craft.

In the end, the large duel-class monster fed the villagers' appetites. That night, the village held a feast. They even brought out some cherished alcohol as they chowed down on the meat.

They had their own seasonings using local herbs and other aromatics. Addy had obtained some for herself and was satisfied. Everything was better with seasoning.

"Now then, with this I can prepare the outer skin..." Ernie's happy smile deepened while everyone else was caught up in the excitement.

◆

After that, some time passed.

"How is it, Sir Astragali?"

"Hmm, I approve. It does not get in the way of my movement. Your goblin skills are not to be underestimated."

"It helps that we've been able to eat meat recently. Everyone is extremely motivated."

The villagers were diligent. This village had always had an abnormal number of blacksmiths for their population. The main role of the village was as armorsmiths for the Rubels. That was why trade with them was viable.

This was also why they were plagued by a lack of meat—or an adequate amount of food in general. That instantly improved with the agreement, though, which helped with the physical demands of smithing. With more food, the smiths regained their color and looked much healthier. That led to them being able to work better.

The smiths weren't the only ones that were working more, however.

Ever since they'd started to be supplied with monster meat, the villagers started to make jerky. They planned to waste none of the

meat this trade had given them. They were more than a little obsessed with this task, but they shared this jerky with the Caelleus giants to further progress their preparations.

In the midst of this much more lively village, Ernie and Addy visited the village chief's residence.

"Ah, if it isn't the nobles," said the chief. "Thank you so much for all you've done. With the help of the great astragali, we have regained our vigor."

"Oh no, think nothing of it. This is a trade, after all. More importantly, I came here today to discuss something with you."

The old chief offered the pair some tea before nodding with a smile. "You may ask anything, though I can only answer with what I know."

"I am most likely not a noble as you know it," Ernie said.

This seemed to come out of nowhere, and the village chief blinked.

"In fact, we might not even be goblins," Ernie continued. "So I have something to ask you goblins, who look so much like us and can even speak the same language: What are you?" Ernie smiled airily as he sipped his tea.

Chapter 61: A Loud Incident in a Quiet Village

Ernie and Addy weren't nobles. In fact, they weren't even goblins. The village chief couldn't help but be surprised when Ernesti introduced himself as such.

"Then…what should I call you?" the chief asked.

"I'm not sure myself. I suppose you could say that we are merely travelers."

They all looked at each other, their confusion evident.

"Travelers…you say. A foreign concept to those of us who cannot leave this land," the village chief muttered sincerely. The world he knew was terribly small.

"Which is why I wanted to ask you: What are you people?" Ernie leaned forward.

The chief simply shook his head. "Your question is too difficult for us. We have always been called goblins, and we have lived in this village for generations."

The village chief's face was heavily wrinkled, but Ernie could see no rejection or doubt. The chief might have just been indifferent. To them, being here was only natural.

"This has been so even before my grandfather's time," he continued. "We have no idea when we started living here. That is the only answer I can give you."

"I…see. That reminds me, this village creates equipment for the astragali, right?"

"Yes. Though it is not just us. There are many villages that do the same."

Ernie let out an appreciative noise as he tilted his head. "Which means there are several villages similar to this one?"

"That is what I hear. We have never been anywhere else, after all. I have no details to share with you."

Once again, a sense that something was off swelled within Ernie. Not only were there multiple villages isolated in this forest, the people living in them knew nothing of the outside world—even with the Bocuse's lack of kindness toward humans, humans

weren't the only ones living here.

"From what I heard, the astragali are protecting you goblins. Am I wrong?" Ernie asked.

"The only ones who live with the astragali are the nobles from the overtown. Our village only rarely receives visitors, which was why we were so surprised," the elder explained.

Ernie asked a follow-up question. "Then why do these villages make armor for them if they're not protecting you?"

"Though we are not directly under their aegis, the fact that they live close by is enough to positively affect us." The chief's calm expression didn't change. All of this were facts of the world to him—there was no room to doubt any of it.

"Isn't this way of life dangerous? There are so many monsters in the forest."

"That is why the nobles have forbidden us from entering it."

"Then it would be hard to obtain the forest's bounty. Are you forced to grow all your food? You were already struggling to acquire meat before we arrived."

For the first time, the chief's calm expression wavered. It was only slightly, but his face definitely creased out of bitterness. "There's no other choice... We have no knights. The only ones allowed to live in the overtown with the giants are knight runners who belong to knight orders along with their attendants, and we cannot enter the forest by ourselves..." The words were followed by a long, deep sigh.

Ernie slowly raised his head. "Did you just say...knight runners?" He would never miss that term. It was rare for Ernie's expression to be so serious. "I'm familiar with the term, but the way you use it makes it sound quite different to what I know. What kind of people are these nobles and these knight runners?"

"The knight runners and their attendants are what we call nobles. They live in the overtown and are able to speak with the great astragali." Then, the chief, who had up until now only been answering Ernie's questions, changed his posture. "You claim to be a traveler from a different place."

"I do. A country far to the west." Ernie looked down, thinking of his home. He wondered if the flying ships he'd sacrificed his beloved machine—and himself—to save were safe. The question had come out of nowhere, and far later than it should have. "No

astragali exist there. It is a country only of us…of small people much like you goblins."

"A place without astragali…you say? That is hard to imagine," the chief muttered dazedly. Imagining such a thing was more than he was capable of.

"There are many monsters, just like here. But we have a power called silhouette knights. Giant knights that protect the land and its people."

The chief and his followers exchanged glances. The task of imagining what Ernie was describing was so difficult that it was giving them headaches. "So they're…guardians? We have no such thing."

"Then why not build them yourselves?"

The suggestion was surprising, and the chief couldn't help but look back up from the table.

"I am not familiar with the knights you speak of. However, I do have the knowledge to make something that can rival the astragali," Ernie said with a gentle smile. He laughed airily, heedless of how shaken the chief was. He was not a goblin, a villager, or a noble. In fact, he was morphing into something even more abnormal.

"What would you have us do?"

"I may have the knowledge, but I'm unable to wield it. I need limbs." The villagers tittered as Ernie stood. "Right. I think it'd be faster for you to just see."

With that, he left the chief's house. The villagers hesitated out of confusion, but they followed their chief out of the house and after Ernie.

He was leading them to the carts the giants had brought to the village.

"Are you plotting something again?" the Armiger De Prima Oculus groused as he followed them. He was starting to learn that getting involved with Ernie usually led to nothing good.

Finally, the villagers came to the large cart, still looking somewhat ill at ease. They had no idea what was awaiting them.

"So? Do you know what these are?" Ernie asked.

The armiger faithfully picked up what was on the cart at Ernie's request, though he did let out a sigh.

It was a wreck—a corpse of metal that only barely looked like

the upper half of a torso. It was the upper half of the destroyed Sylphianne.

The villagers clearly gasped. The chief's wrinkle-buried eyes widened, and his lips trembled. "Th-That's…a knight?!"

"I knew it. They're similar. Which means… No, I suppose it doesn't matter now." Ernie shook his head before sweeping his gaze across the crowd again. "This is a silhouette knight. Unfortunately, it broke on the way here. Our goal is to repair it."

The villagers once again exchanged looks after hearing Ernie's explanation. They didn't know what they should do, but eventually their gazes gathered to one person. The village chief stood for a while, his lips trembling, but then it seemed he made a decision and opened his mouth. "Ah… Even if that is a knight, we do not have the skills to help you."

"You can make armor for the astragali, which means you possess the skill to smith. You only need alchemy otherwise."

The village chief slowly shook his head. "We have no skill at alchemy. Only the nobles have such knowledge, I believe."

Ernie grunted appreciatively as he crossed his arms. "Without alchemy, we'll likely be lacking crystal tissue. I suppose there's no other choice but to search for a replacement. That reminds me, do you have material to make armor for giants here?"

"We do. It is stored in the village's storehouse. We can lead you there."

"Yes, please!"

The chief called someone to lead Ernie's group to the storehouse.

◆

After Ernie and the group left for the storehouse, the remaining villagers gathered at the side of their chief.

"Is it really okay to show them the storehouse? Everything inside belongs to the nobles, even if it is stored here. If they touch any of it and someone finds out during the next inspection…"

"Everyone is grateful for the food, but that doesn't mean…"

The chief listened to all their opinions, but he eventually looked up. "We will only starve to death if we continue living like this."

That was enough to shut everyone up.

“How much have the nobles helped us after all this time? It would be better to cling to the favor of the astragali that are here now.”

“That… Well, you might have a point.”

“If we can talk to the astragali even without knights…we may be able to ask a favor of Oberon and move to the overtown. Even if we can’t, something will change.” The chief made his point slowly, and everyone nodded.

“First, we must return the favor. We can think about what comes after later.”

◆

While the villagers were having their discussion, Ernie and Addy went to search the village’s storehouse, which was weirdly large given the size of the village itself. But once they got inside, the reason became evident.

“Wow! It’s full of monster materials!” Addy exclaimed.

“I see. Of course this would happen, since they make equipment for the giants.”

The materials couldn’t be piled up too high for the villagers’ ease of use. But also, since they were making things for giants, they needed a lot of area.

Ernie walked along the lines of shelves, looking at the materials. Addy tilted her head in confusion after seeing his lack of hesitation. “Are you looking for something specific, Ernie?”

“I am. I would have liked to find some silver, but there isn’t as much metal here as I’d like.”

“Silver, huh?”

“I’d at least be able to craft some silhouette arms with silver plate.”

“Ah, we did carve out the Emblem Graph for a Magius Jet Thruster once upon a time… That was really annoying. But even if we make something, we don’t have a machine to equip it to.”

Their silhouette knights were still wrecks. Even if they made silhouette arms, they wouldn’t be able to use the weapons themselves.

Still, Ernie shook his head. “I know that. But I was thinking of having the giants use them.”

“What?!” Addy froze in surprise.

“They’re nearly large enough to be duel-class, so they should have mana to spare. They’d just have to figure out how to use the weapons.”

“Whaaat?! You might be right, but what gave you this idea all of a sudden?”

“I just want to make what I can while we’re here. There won’t be any problem if we just equip our giant company, and it’s normal for me to make everyone’s weapons.”

“I see. We *do* need to properly equip our troops.”

Ernie continued to check every corner of the storehouse as they spoke, but he let out a sigh of disappointment. “Still, nothing can be done without materials. Let’s explore the area around the village next.”

With that, the pair left the storehouse to go see the giants.

“Fortissimos! We would like to explore the area,” Ernie called out.

“Hmm? What are you planning now, goblin Fortissimos?” The Fortissimos De Tertius Oculus narrowed his eyes as he looked down at Ernie. The wariness within his gaze was completely the fault of everything the boy had done up until now.

Regardless, Ernie smiled and said, “I want to make weapons for you.”

“Weapons, you say? Can we really use weapons made by a goblin?”

“Of course. Goblins made you that armor too, no?”

The hero crossed his arms and pondered. The small goblin in front of him always claimed to be able to do great things too big for his small body. But it was also true that having more weapons couldn’t hurt.

“Hrm… While I do not know what you are talking about, I believe no harm should come of making the weapons themselves. Armiger.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Ah, I’ll go too!” Nav chimed in. “There’s nothing to do around here, and I’m so bored!”

In the end, the one-eyed armiger was the one appointed to help, but Nav also volunteered because he was free.

Ernie happily thanked the two of them. “Well then, let’s go.”

“Ah, before that, let’s have lunch!” Addy was very excited for some reason, and she immediately began preparations. In the end, they didn’t set out that day.

The next day, though, Ernie, Addy, the armiger, and Nav were fully prepared and set off into the forest.

◆

The village was surrounded by nothing but green, dense forest. Every once in a while, they came upon a trifling monster.

Once the monsters noticed the small humans, they would try to eat them to fill their bellies, but they were instead killed with frightening speed to vent the party’s frustrations at not finding anything.

The group walked around until the sun was at its peak before leaning against the trees and taking a break.

“Haaah… There’s nothing here,” Ernie sighed.

“At least we’ve obtained today’s meal,” said the armiger.

The monsters they’d hunted would become their food, so their trip wasn’t completely meaningless. Still, this was only the bare minimum of good results.

“This seems like just a normal forest. Maybe I should just give up and carve scripts on these bones to make silhouette arms,” Ernie complained.

“Ernie’s only getting worse?! Ew, don’t do that…” Addy imagined a weapon made of combined monster bones and immediately seemed sick at the thought.

“Generally the mana conductivity of a monster corpse isn’t very high, so that would only be a last resort.”

“Of course that’s the problem you have with it.”

When it came to constructing a machine, Ernie wouldn’t be put off by a little bad taste, though even he had his limits. Still, it seemed he didn’t plan to resort to using bones just yet.

Ernie suddenly looked up in the middle of his complaining. For a while, he stared blankly at the tree they were resting on, but before long he shot up. He tapped on its surface, then checked the feel of the bark.

Then, he suddenly drew his Winchester and used it to peel off the tree’s bark. He took the piece and inspected it closely before

also touching the trunk underneath. He looked satisfied, as if he'd confirmed something—a smile spreading on his face.

Addy and the giants were surprised by the suddenness of this, but then Ernie happily brought the bark up to show them.

"What's up all of a sudden, Ernie?"

"It's this tree! This tree, Addy! Don't you recognize it?"

"Hmm?"

Addy didn't really understand, but she still took the piece of bark and looked at it. It was sort of white and felt smooth. She tried to think of a plant that had those properties and somehow succeeded in plumbing the depths of her memory.

"Hmm… Ah! That's right, we learned about it in class a long time ago. This is white mistoe, isn't it?"

"And what are its properties?" Ernie asked.

"Erm… Trees don't normally conduct magic well; metal does it better, with silver being the best. That's why silhouette knights use so much metal. But white mistoe is the exception and actually conducts magic very well…right?"

"Right!"

Excited, Ernie happily applauded and hugged Addy. The girl couldn't tell whether to be surprised or happy, so she reacted with a slovenly giggle and returned the hug.

"That's why this wood is used so often in making staves. My Winchester uses it too… What a great find!"

"Wait, Ernie… Don't tell me you're going to use this?"

The pair finally calmed down and looked in unison at the tree behind them. They could see trees of the same species dotting the area.

"Heh heh heh. We'll be able to secure more than enough. This will save us." Ernie quickly turned around to call out to the giants who were watching them in a daze. "Nav! Armiger! I'm counting on you!"

"Hmm?"

"What is it, goblin Fortissimos?" the armiger asked.

"Let's fell this tree and take it back."

The request was so surprising that the armiger's eye popped open wide as he stared at the tree. It was pretty large—even a giant wouldn't be able to carry it easily.

"Really, Ernie?" Nav's three eyes were also saucers. His

expression was stiff and twitching. “You…look serious.”

Ernie did not look like he was joking. They had to do it—it was their duty. Thinking of how long this would take to accomplish, the armiger let out a deep sigh.

“Now, Nav! Work hard! This is one of the jobs of a knight order!” Ernie shouted.

“I find that hard to believe!” Next to him, the giant boy energetically argued.

◆

“Seriously, what are you doing, goblin Fortissimos?” the hero asked.

They should have left to explore, but now they’d come back, desperately struggling to carry a tree large enough to leave the hero fully wide-eyed as well.

Naturally, the tree was heavy, and the giants were breathing hard as they left it and quickly returned to the forest. They needed to retrieve the monsters they’d hunted on the way.

The scene was painful to watch, and the hero could only see them off silently.

The small figure that stayed behind, totally heedless of the giants’ thoughts, was for some reason extremely excited. “For now, we’ll need to process this tree into planks to make it easier to use… Fortissimos! Help me, please!”

“I asked you, what are you trying to do?! You said you would make weapons… Are you asking us to bludgeon them with trees?!” The hero couldn’t make head or tail of Ernie’s plan. It was hard for him to even imagine what he was going to do with the tree.

“No. After we turn these into boards, I’m going to engrave Emblem Graphs into them. I will lend the overspells I know to the Caelleus.” Ernie didn’t flinch at all under the stern glare of the giant. In fact, his tone seemed oddly strong.

The giants were half in disbelief, but they decided to help Ernie for now.

This was all thanks to the trust he’d built thus far. They figured that if he were asking for something this strongly, it wouldn’t be a wasted effort. They were still dubious in the extreme, but their hopes barely won out.

Giants weren't especially dextrous, but they had their own ways of processing materials, as well as a lot of strength.

Because both the villagers and the giants came out in force to help, the trees were turned into boards in a short time.

The problem came after that. The whitish planks were arranged in a large array, and now Ernie had to engrave them.

He was the only one who had tactical-level spells memorized, after all. As for why he had them memorized... Well, it was because robots used them.

At any rate, he adopted the method of drawing out an example of the script before having everyone copy it.

The goblin villagers gathered together to carve the pattern onto one of the huge boards the giants had carried over. The villagers were desperate, trying to remember a script they'd never seen before and copy it down with exacting precision.

Though this process naturally took some time, their desperate efforts bore fruit, and eventually the engraving was complete.

Now, the giants had a new, strange weapon.

"What *is* this?" The hero looked at the product of their efforts and made his confusion clear.

The final thing was shaped like a box and nothing else. It was a wooden cube. There was no better way to describe it.

The inside of the box was packed tightly with script. The outside had catalyst crystals taken from monsters attached to it, so it would function as designed, at least.

It had handles for the wielder to hold. They were located in positions that would make handling it nothing but a dream, but it *was* possible to aim with effort.

At the very least, it was obvious it wasn't suited for striking things at all. It was brittle, sensitive, and not for melee combat.

In other words, this wouldn't be considered a weapon to the hero and the other giants. It was simply a mysterious object.

"Hold this, Fortissimos, and...let's see...point it at that tree," Ernie told him, pointing to a faraway tree. The hero hesitantly did as he was told. The sight of a giant holding up this mysterious box was...odd, to say the least.

"Now, pour your mana into it!"

There was an uncomfortable pause before the hero asked, "What's that?"

Ernie froze. He turned to look at the hero slowly, fixing him with a *smile*.

The hero returned a sullen look. “What does ‘pouring mana into it’ entail? I cannot divine what you are talking about.”

“How could this be…? Do astragali have no sense of mana?” Ernie was totally dumbfounded. But after he calmed down and thought a little, he realized he could have seen this coming.

Humans were small and weak, but they polished their intelligence and skill with magic to make up for that. Meanwhile, giants were duel-class by dint of their physical strength and size alone—they didn’t need anything else to carve out a niche in this forest. That was why they never improved their ability to handle magic and mana.

“That’s…troubling. Is there anyone among the giants with the knowledge…?” Ernie’s gaze wandered.

The hero, his armiger, and Nav were all shining examples of standard giants, believers in the cult of physical might. Did Argos give them nothing but eyes and muscles? This new, incredibly difficult problem was driving Ernie up the wall. Suddenly, though, one giant came forward.

“Lamina.”

“Ernie, I…” Lamina started. “No, I am already a Parva Marga. We no longer use our childhood names when we are given our titles.”

“Is that so? Then I will call you Parva Marga from now on.”

With that, Lamina—the Parva Marga stood in front of the hero and held out her hands. The hero hesitated for a little while, but eventually he handed the box over.

Because it was made for giants the size of the hero, it was too big for her. Still, she somehow managed to hold it ready. “Ernie, you are both a goblin Fortissimos and a Marga. You are likely unaware, but not many of us can use magia.”

“It seems like it, yes. I hadn’t really noticed.”

“I am also not fully matured, but I can at least let my mana flow. Like this, I believe… Kyah?!” The moment the Parva Marga let her mana flow, light flashed.

White mistoe conducted mana very well. There was not much resistance as the induced mana traveled along the carved pathways and formed magic. As soon as the energy reached the catalyst crystal at the tip, the spell formed.

The unique light quickly changed to an orange bullet of flame. The script was for the Culverin spell.

The spell followed its script and flew, trailing a faint light. The projectile hit the tree and quickly exploded, pulverizing the trunk with fire and force.

For a long moment, the Parva Marga stood shocked. “Wha?!” She froze with her four eyes and mouth opened wide.

The hero was also surprised, but it quickly turned to joy. “Ho! When did you learn such powerful magia, Parva Marga?! You will quickly rise to your full title like this.”

“No, that wasn’t…me. What…is this?” The giant girl looked fearfully at the box in her hands.

This was her first experience producing a magical phenomenon with something other than her own will and knowledge. It felt wrong, like something impossible had happened.

But more than that, she immediately realized the worth of this weapon.

With a sense of fear, she looked at the one who made it. But Ernie had his arms crossed and seemed displeased.

“Hrm… So it *is* usable as long as you pour mana into it, but they aren’t good at handling their mana. That’s unexpected. What to do…”

The Parva Marga stood dazed for a while, but eventually strength returned to her gaze. She realized what she had to do—what only she *could* do. “Ernie…I assume this means I should teach everyone how to handle mana?”

Ernie looked up at her. “It would be great if you could. We’ll be making more of these silhouette arms.”

“So if I teach them, they’ll all be able to use these…”

In a sense, it was a fearsome prospect for a Marga. It was like letting go of the knowledge that gave the title its advantage. But at the same time, she also realized her own immaturity.

“If everyone had this power… If they could all fight like a Marga… Then back then, maybe we could have…”

Behind her four closed eyes, she could see that scene of awful destruction. The giants couldn’t do much against those tainted masses of murderous intent. This new weapon could have done something about that.

It didn’t take long for her to make her decision. The Parva

Marga turned around to look at her brethren. “Fortissimos, everyone, open your eyes. This would mean anyone could use magia, even those who are not Margas. We need this weapon in our weakened state.”

She looked terribly young as she held the silhouette arms. However, the hero widened his eyes. She might have been small, but her bearing showed a glimpse of a full Marga—a leader of their people.

After a while, the hero nodded gravely. “I will believe in what you have seen, Parva Marga. We are small in number; we need as much strength as possible.”

The giants of Caelleus gathered together. They believed in the conviction of their Parva Marga and solidified their collective will.

After this, the giants started to train daily. This practice wasn’t all that advanced—they were just trying to sense their own mana. Once they learned how to direct their mana, the silhouette arms would take care of the rest.

They now had a powerful, long-ranged weapon that didn’t depend on the strength of the user. Up until now, Margas had been the only ones able to use magic among the giants, so this would be a revolutionary change in tactics.

◆

While the giants were feverishly training with the silhouette arms, the goblin villagers were busy making the weapons.

Given the situation, the giants were very cooperative, and the villagers’ food situation improved greatly. It was difficult to tell which side was coming out on top in the exchange.

“So, La…Parva Marga, what did you need?” Ernie asked while sitting in front of her. Though she was just a girl, she was three times Ernie’s height.

Ernie and Addy had been called out by Nav and the Parva Marga.

“Hrrrngh, your hair is so thick that this is exhausting! But it’s much cuter when it’s styled…” Meanwhile, Addy was marching to the beat of her own drum, sitting on the Parva Marga’s shoulder and trying to braid her hair. The giants’ hair was tough, given their size, so it put up a hard struggle against Addy’s efforts.

“It’s been a while since the giant company’s gathered together!” Addy gave up after a while and jumped off to sit down next to Ernie.

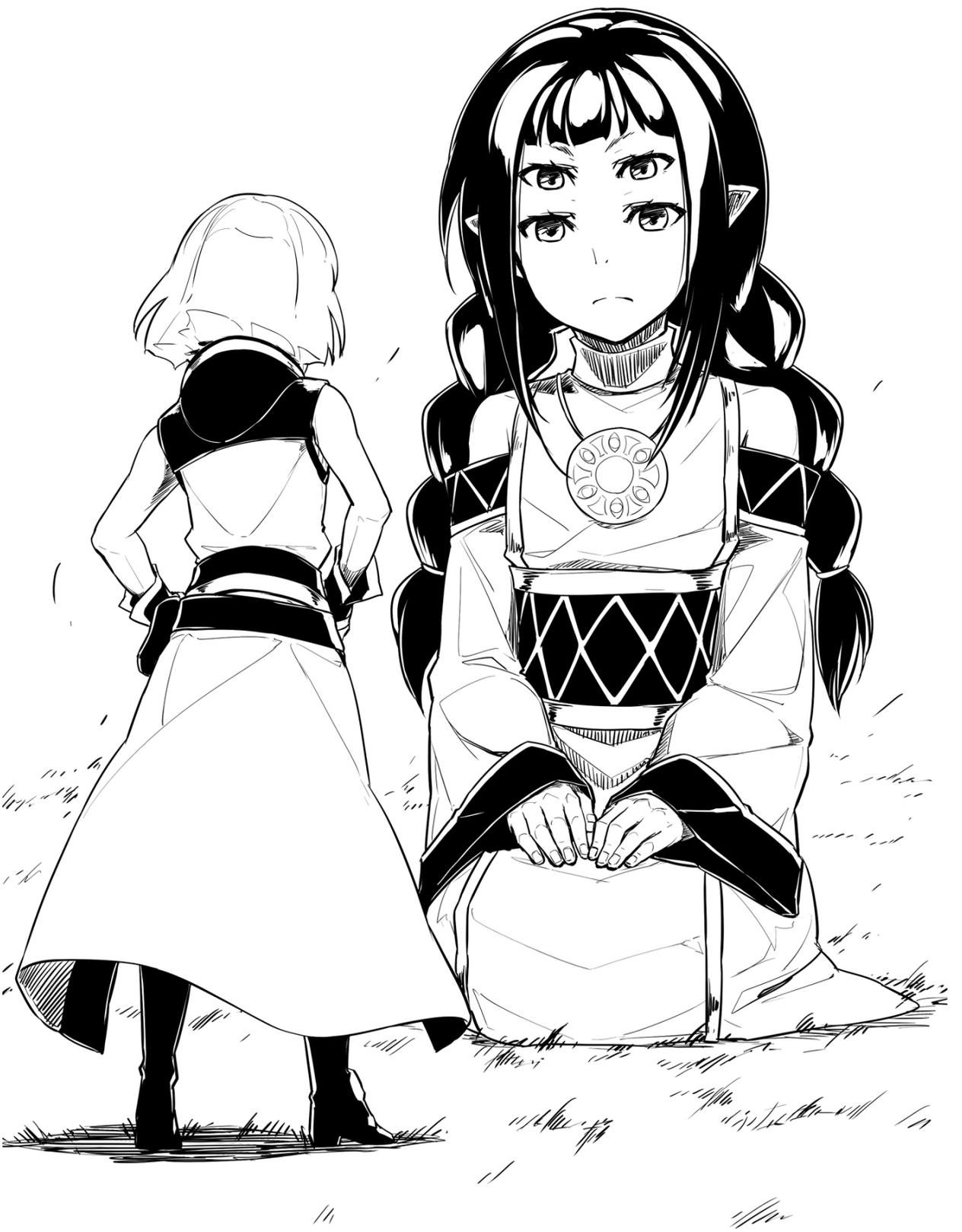
The Parva Marga seemed to hesitate for a while. Nav nodded to her, and she finally firmed up her will and spoke, “Ernie, Addy… Thank you for making the silhouette arms. But I’m surprised—you know so much.”

“If I couldn’t at least do this much, I wouldn’t be leading a knight order.”

That wasn’t true. The only place that required such a vast range of talents was the Order of the Silver Phoenix, no matter how wide the Occidents were.

The giant children didn’t know this, though, so they were honestly impressed. It seemed like they’d misunderstood how powerful the goblins to the west were.

“So…I have a request for the two of you.” She used her four eyes to fix them with an earnest gaze, and the pair of goblins straightened up.



“I…have not inherited much from my predecessors. I am still young, though that is just an excuse. I spent my time not looking at my responsibilities, and my predecessor was sent to Argos in the attack,” the Parva Marga said, looking down. Addy peered at her, but she only allowed herself to feel down for a moment. She regained herself and gazed steadily at Ernie. “Please teach me magia, Ernie. All the magia you know.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what kind of magia the astragali use.”

The magic he was familiar with had, of course, been created by humans. Giant magic was out of his wheelhouse.

But the Parva Marga didn’t hesitate. “I do not have enough strength as a Marga, and there is no one left to teach me. I am powerless.” She clenched a fist. Since the day the kratovastias attacked, they had been in danger, and she had no way to help. “I cannot keep going like this. Just knowing about the magia you used for that weapon would be a great help.”

Her earnestness got Ernie to nod. “Okay. A knight captain must help his subordinates, after all. I may not be able to do much, but I’ll teach you what I know.”

The Parva Marga smiled happily. Then, Addy suddenly jumped forward. “Then you should call us both ‘master’ from now on!”

“What? Addy? Is ‘knight captain’ not allowed anymore?” the giant child asked.

“Nope! A subordinate and an apprentice are two different things!”

Ernie—who had once taken the Alter twins under his wing—notwithstanding, this would be Addy’s first apprentice, and she was a girl too. Apparently she was excited.

“I understand. Magister Ernie, Magister Addy.”

“Mmm! Heh heh heh, it sounds so nice…” Addy muttered.

“Are you really okay with this, Addy?” Ernie asked.

“It’s cute, so yes!”

“Yeah, sometimes I really don’t get you, Addy.” Though he was somewhat exasperated, Ernie didn’t stop her. He tended not to do that. Now, though, Ernie had gained his first new apprentice since the twins. “What about you, Nav?”

The boy who was watching over his Parva Marga gave it some thought before shaking his head. “I don’t think knowing magia would help me. I need to get stronger first. I’ll try to learn how to

use those silhouette arms.”

The Parva Marga was enthusiastic and ready to start learning right away, so Ernie had to calm her down. “First, I would like to see what kind of magic the astragali use. It can be something simple—just jot down the script.”

The Parva Marga nodded and drew a pattern on the ground with a stick.

The form of magic was universal in this world; it was made of scripts. That went for both humans and giants.

“Hmm, it seems the fundamentals don’t change. Interesting. But it has high output, as I’d expect from the astragali. Still, there’s a lot of excess. I see efficiency wasn’t considered, since it’s possible to break through with pure power.” Ernie stared at the ground before suddenly picking up the stick. He fluidly changed the pattern on the ground into something more accurate and efficient. The meanings held by the shape condensed by several times.

Ernesti had been the one to compile the exacting scripts used by the many cutting-edge magical weapons employed by Fremmevilla. Though he hadn’t had much to do as a knight captain or knight runner these days, his skills still slept safe within him. Now, his nature as a programmer had been prodded awake.

“The core script also doesn’t finish properly. You don’t need this connecting script here, so let’s use this space for an amplifier. As things stand, the phenomenon will be loose and unable to exhibit any power…”

“M-Magister?”

The Parva Marga watched in a daze as he rewrote the script in front of her. Though she didn’t totally understand what Ernie was doing, she knew that he was doing something completely different from what the old Marga had taught her.

“While we’re at it, let’s make it more efficient too. It should be fine for astragali to have large spells. Since I’m doing this already, I might as well go all the way.” Ernie stood with a satisfied smile. A fearsome plan was now in motion in a place unknown to almost anyone.

◆

The new mage of the Caelleus—their Parva Marga—was at her

wit's end.

"So let's start with the fundamentals," Ernie said. "Please remember these foundational scripts, as well as these expansion scripts and connecting scripts."

"Do goblins really have this many scripts, Magister Ernie?"

Her teacher, Ernesti, was giving an enthusiastic lecture. His small frame was flitting around restlessly as he drew a script in front of her.

He'd ended up writing down a large amount of small script, and already the Parva Marga's will faltered. She hadn't been underestimating his knowledge, but this was still more than she'd expected.

"Fundamentally, magic is the same between humans and the astragali. Once you memorize this, we'll learn how to combine them. Actually, learning that is more important when using magic."

"Th-There's still more to memorize?" The Parva Marga was already desperately trying to memorize the scripts in front of her, and Ernie was already explaining how to connect them. He went from the efficient application of magic, to how to write script with great precision, to how to optimize spells.

The giants were fairly reliant on feel, so his methodologies were totally unknown to her. In the first place, his methodologies were peculiar even to normal humans, but there was no way for the Parva Marga to know that.

"This script should be a little finer. Also, connect it here to improve the output."

"R-Right."

She memorized and practiced drawing, and Ernie corrected her all the while.

Her days had been spent memorizing so many scripts that it gave her headaches before attempting to patch them together. The density of her lessons now couldn't be compared to when the old Marga had been teaching her.

Ernie's teaching style emphasized fundamentals quite heavily. His thinking was that all one had to learn was the simplest and most systematic parts, and the rest was simply applying those fundamentals in different situations. That was why he drove the basics into his pupils so thoroughly.

At this point, the Parva Marga was tearing up.

"Then let's expand the scope next," he continued. "An astragali's Magius Circuit has more capacity than ours, so you should be able to calculate more."

"R-Right..."

"Once you get used to this, let's work hard to make it so you can calculate multiple things at once."

"Eurk..."

Every day, when her lessons were over, the Parva Marga fell, exhausted.

As a teacher, Ernie was pretty merciless. After all, he lived to experiment, memorize, and mess around, and that went for both silhouette knights and magic. The amount of vigor he was working with was different from most.

Even so, the Parva Marga held on desperately, either out of pride as a Marga or for the sake of her clan. At this point, she herself didn't know.

"You'll never truly learn just by watching. Practice is just as important."

The Parva Marga gasped. "I understand. Witness this, magister!"

The time for practice came after lectures, and it saw the Parva Marga visibly perk up, since she no longer needed to pack knowledge into her brain.

Addy, who was both her elder disciple and another teacher, watched over her. "Now, Pary! Feel the mana twirling around your body and squeeze it all into your hand!"

"I understand, Magister Addy! Feel the twirling and squeeze it!" the Parva Marga replied energetically, closing her two upper eyes. Basically, the larger a living being was, the stronger its Magius Circuit. She quietly calculated the script she'd learned.

"When you're calculating the script, you should line it all up how you want it to go, like fwazoom! Then just shove it all together!" Addy exclaimed.

"I understand! Line it all up...shove it together..."

She still wasn't very fast, but she was able to build the script piece by piece. The scope of the spell gradually increased, creating an overspell that could rival any other giant's.

"Mix the script with your mana! Then just slam it out there all at

once!”

“All at once!”

A shining red projectile formed in the palm she was holding out—a basic spell of the explosion type. The fire flew as soon as the Parva Marga opened her eyes.

They were some ways away from the village, and her target was a boulder. Since they hesitated to blow up a tree every time for training, they’d looked for something a little sturdier. Already, the surface of the rock was cracked and burnt, and now another mark was about to be added.

The projectile hit the rock and immediately burst into a fiery explosion. Fire fountained up along with a shock wave that licked the surface of the boulder.

“One more! Make it a big one!” Addy shouted.

“Yes, one more!” The Parva Marga held up her hand, creating fire once more. It flew forth through the air, hitting the boulder again.

She was breathing hard, her arm still held up. Though she was a giant, she was still young. She didn’t have enough mana to be rapidly firing multiple overspells.

Even so, her skills were steadily improving, and her spells were getting deadlier. Her teachers were strict, but they were definitely making her stronger.

“Did you see that, magister?!”

“I did. I see you’re the same feelings-and-intuition type as Addy, Par. I suppose that’s only natural, since the astragali haven’t done much in terms of theory.” Ernie watched as the Parva Marga celebrated with Addy. He crossed his arms, pondering. “Either way, it’s clear to see the training is having results. If you keep putting in effort, you’ll definitely become a Marga that won’t shame your ancestors.”

The Parva Marga gasped. “Yes, magister! One day I will show my skills to my ancestors, with the permission of Argos.”

By the way, Ernie’s training had one extremely large problem. He wasn’t familiar with a giant’s magical capabilities.

So, he was judging them based on his knowledge of other large humanoids—in other words, of silhouette knights.

But, unaware that his standards were terribly abnormal for a giant, the Parva Marga continued to train passionately. In a

different sense, this spelled the end of her peaceful days.

◆

While the Parva Marga was concentrating on her training, the rest of the Caelleus survivors trained to be able to use silhouette arms. They were also doing this training removed from the village and aiming at boulders, but they had to share the weapons because there weren't enough for everyone yet.

"I had never considered whether we could use magia. A goblin's skills surely are not to be underestimated, for them to think of something like this," the three-eyed hero grumbled as he looked at the box in his hands.

"Indeed. It now makes sense why the Rubels have gained so much power, with the goblins under their thrall," said the armiger with a nod.

They were impressed, but they also felt that the standards set with Ernesti as precedent were dangerous. Unfortunately, though, they had no point of reference other than Ernie and Addy, and there was no one around to correct them.

There was one boy mixed in among the adult giants. Nav readied the silhouette arms that was slightly too big for him and shot it. One shot—then a second fired in quick succession—crumbled the rock he aimed at.

"Oh? You have good aim, Nav."

"How could this be? I am being forced to look at the back of a child. I am not worthy of my warrior's eyes!"

The nearby giants redoubled their efforts after seeing the boy try so hard.

Like that, the Caelleus giants and allied humans led an unthinkably relaxed life in the middle of a monstrous forest—one that was smack-dab in the middle of enemy territory at that.

As time passed, the Parva Marga's lectures gave way to live practice, and recently she'd spent most of her time being instructed by Addy. Nav, the hero, and the rest of the Caelleus giants enthusiastically trained in the use of silhouette arms with the help of the villagers.

Now with some free time, Ernie turned his attention back to silhouette knights.

He and Addy had been given an empty house in the village that served as both their living quarters and a workshop. It started out empty, but at some point a wealth of miscellaneous tools had been scattered about inside.

Ernie opened up a sheaf of parchment on the table. It had been made with the extra bark from the white mistoe that they'd used for weapons. He inked his favorite pen that had followed him all this way and started to write down his thoughts.

"We were able to salvage a fair amount of materials from Ikaruga's and Sylphianne's wrecks. Also, monster materials will be of some help."

The pen made scratching sounds as he drew a skeletal framework. It resembled both Ikaruga and Sylphianne. Of course, he'd memorized the details of both.

"However, even if we scraped up every last bit of crystal tissue available...it might not even amount to half of what we need."

Even if they only furnished the bare minimum of what was needed to move with crystal tissue, they would only be able to construct the upper half or lower half of a silhouette knight. They wouldn't be able to move properly, much less fight.

As things stood, at least.

"No, wait. Compromising a little...a lot...an *extreme* amount, as long as the Etheric Levitator works, there would be a way forward."

Etheric Levitators made objects float in the air regardless of their shape. As long as that worked, and if they could prepare Magius Jet Thrusters, they would at least be able to create a simple flying machine.

The new supply of white mistoe allowed them to make silhouette arms. That also meant Magius Jet Thrusters would be possible with some effort. However, that still left a fatal problem.

"This won't do. Making an Etheric Levitator is totally impossible. We'd need to repair the main device and source some etherite, and I have no idea how to do either." Ernie's hand stopped. He always ended up running into the same problems.

The device could be mass-produced in Fremmevilla, but that was because of all the talented smiths there, starting with the boss. Ernie had knowledge, but not the skill to go with it.

"We have more than enough ether here to go around too..." Finally, Ernie leaned back in his chair in frustration, staring blankly

into the middle distance.

“Right. Ether exists in the air. Can’t we just gather that and make something happen? Gather... Gather?!”

His eyes widened like saucers. He kicked off the chair and onto his feet before slowly looking down at the blueprints. With shaking fingers, he pointed at one spot on the parchment. “It’s gathered... Right here. There’s a large amount of high-purity ether right here!”

Why hadn’t he realized it sooner? Ernie shifted his finger slowly. He’d been pointing at the ether reactor that served as the silhouette knight’s heart.

“The mana pool!”

Silhouette knights filled their mana pools by sucking in air and transforming the ether within to mana. This mana was stored in the crystal tissue and would be consumed by the silhouette knight as fuel. That also meant...

“Mana is just transformed ether. Since that’s the case, if we could transform mana back into ether... It might be possible to use the silhouette knight as a giant ether filtration device!”

The idea crashed into him like a comet, running through his brain and all through his body before exiting out his fingertips. Ernie grabbed his pen and started drawing his idea, ink flying as he did.

“Now, what to do? What would be best? There are many ways to do this. I should just accomplish what I can.”

A new, strange shape was born. It lacked so many functions, but it reflected Ernie’s thoughts. “Just wait a little longer, my Ikaruga. You may be turned into a truly strange shape, but...it’s fine, as long as you can fight.”

Ernie picked up the parchment like it was a treasure map, a fearsomely excited smile on his face.

◆

As Addy was training the Parva Marga like usual, Ernie appeared. The Parva Marga thought he was coming to share some new bit of knowledge with her, but that wasn’t the case.

He asked the Parva Marga for permission before dragging Addy off. His aide seemed confused but followed him obediently. They headed to the cart where their wrecks still lay before Ernie turned

around.

“I have a request to make of you, Addy.”

“What’s with all the pageantry? You can ask me anything, Ernie!”

“Uh… I’m happy to hear that, but please listen to what it is first.”

“Okaaay!” Addy had already glommed onto Ernie, but he didn’t mind since this was par for the course.

“I want to disassemble your Descendrad, Addy.”

The request was surprising, despite already being braced for it. Addy blinked, looked down at the boy in her arms, and tilted her head. “Why? It’s not like we don’t need it anymore, right?”

“No, of course we still need it. It’s a powerful weapon for us, after all. If possible, I’d have liked to leave it alone, but…”

Her Descendrad had served them faithfully from when they were first stranded in the Great Bocuse Forest up until now as both a weapon and a dwelling. They’d gotten attached to it, and there was still a lot they could use it for. Naturally, Ernie wouldn’t toss it away for nothing.

“I’ve drawn up a new design. I want to teach these villagers our techniques in order to make it.” Ernie escaped from Addy’s clutches so he could face her properly. “The Descendrad is simple in design, but it’s a distillation of our silhouette knights.”

“I see. It would make things easier if they could see it directly…”

“I would prefer not to break if I didn’t have to, but this is a difficult problem to solve. We need to have them learn with their hands rather than their eyes.”

Addy cast her eyes down for a moment. It was a show of sentiment for her silhouette gear, as its owner. Before long though, she looked up with a smile. “Okay! We need to fix Ikaruga and Sylly, after all!”

“Thank you, Addy. I promise that I’ll definitely put it back together. It might not go back to its original form, but it’ll definitely move again.”

With that, Ernesti Echevalier jumped into action. A man-made beast befitting the forest of monsters now took its first steps.

Chapter 62: Almost to the Sky

The vegetation of the Great Bocuse Forest was thick.

Because there were many large monsters strutting around, the forest's animal trails tended to be just as large. When it came to monsters of duel-class or above, it would be easy to even fell trees in their path. That was why the surviving plant life evolved to grow tall with long trunks. That way, their leaves wouldn't be smashed or broken by monsters.

As time passed, the animal trails of the Bocuse became like tunnels covered by a ceiling of leaves.

A giant figure walked through one such natural tunnel. It had two legs and was shaped much like a human. But, while one might think it was an astragali, it was not.

Compared to the giants of Caelleus or Rubel, it was shaped strangely, like an imitation giant.

Its back was rounded, like a peasant hunched over with old age, and it had strangely long and thick arms that scraped the ground.

It had no clear neck. It was more like the end of its torso had been shaped to a point to form the head.

The small head moved, eliciting creaking sounds as multiple small eyes rolled around and searched the area.

It was covered in a shell, and no part of it seemed soft or vulnerable. It looked sort of like a certain creature with a shell, but also like a giant that was wearing a shell as armor. The figure was truly a mystery.

But actually, the figure wasn't alone. Five of them were advancing through the natural tunnel.

Eventually, the imitation giants came out the other side to reach an open plateau. Their small eyes blinked and swept across the sight, seeing a clearing in the forest. It was a village where goblins lived.

Before long, the imitation giants realized something. There were giant figures lurking among the trees and the village.

There were giants in a goblin village. They weren't imitations, but real astragali.

The imitation giants let out a muffled sound that could be taken as a cry. Then, they began to descend from the plateau toward the village.

Some uninvited guests were coming...

◆

"Ah, it's Ernie! Hey, hey, let's train Pary together today... What're you doing?" Addy was about to go attend to the Parva Marga's training for the day when she saw Ernie and called out to him.

Her usual energetic demeanor quickly gave way to a puzzled one. For some reason, Ernie was towing a large number of wooden boards on a cart.

"Oh, well, everyone prepared all these wooden boards for me, so I was about to go carve Emblem Graphs on them. The script requires quite a lot of space... Would you like to help, Addy?"

"Huh? Uh... Well, look, I gotta go train the Parva Marga!"

"Right. I have been leaving that entirely to you recently. I'm sorry."

Addy immediately decided to beat a hasty retreat when she saw that the pile of wooden boards was taller than Ernie. No matter how much she liked him, there was a limit to everything. Still, he didn't seem to mind. He just nodded.

Behind Addy, the Parva Marga puffed out her chest, her four eyes shining. "I do not mind, Magister Ernie. Magister Addy is a good teacher. You will soon see how much I've grown."

"I'm looking forward to that. As for my business, it looks like it'll still take some time," Ernie replied.

"You've been doing a lot recently, after all," Addy remarked as she looked at the cart behind him. It was normal for Ernie to not know how to stop once he started something, but this time what he'd started was very big indeed.

"Yes, I thought of a very interesting mechanism! You see—" Ernie started.

"E-Ernie! Look, you should save the reveal for later when it's finished, right?" Addy knew this would drag out, and she was used to avoiding stuff like this.

"Hrm, you have a point. Heh heh heh... Once you see the finished product, I'm sure you'll be surprised, Addy!"

“So you think *I’ll* be surprised too… Sounds like Ernie’s brakes have finally broken again.” Addy let out a dry laugh before leaving with the Parva Marga for the forest. The Caelleus giants had deforested the area quite a lot, so their practice area had to be moved farther and farther out from the village.

“Yeah, I can’t be left behind. Let’s get to it!” Now alone, Ernie excitedly cast Physical Boost on his limbs. He easily ran, pulling the cart to his workshop.

◆

The goblin village lay somewhere in the expanse of the Great Bocuse Forest.

Up until a little while ago, the residents had been living impoverished lives, and it wouldn’t have been surprising for them to die out at any time. Now, the mood of the entire village was more heated and lively than it had ever been.

The center of all this was a particular workshop deep in the village.

It was where armor for the astragali was made, which was why it was so uncommonly large for a goblin facility. Almost all the men of the village were craftsmen who worked in the workshop. In the past, they simply worked because they had to, processing metals and monster materials.

“What the heck is happening here? I need to memorize it…”

“What detailed work! And this is put together to make something that big?”

“Look closely at how it’s attached. We need to be of use to the knight or we have no future.”

Now, though, they’d all come out in force to inspect some large wrecks—the remains of the two silhouette knights that the Caelleus giants had brought in.

Beside them was a half-disassembled Descendrad. They were using it as something of a textbook, a working example of what they were meant to learn.

Depending on the results of this, their livelihoods could change greatly. They no longer wanted to return to their old lives, where they simply did as they were told, even while starving. They were desperate to avoid such a fate.

“Line up all the similar parts together.”

“Prioritize what you think can be salvaged! Put the useless stuff in the furnace!”

Beside the men, who were shouting as they labored, the women also moved feverishly. They sorted disassembled parts and gathered them together. Naturally, their goal wasn’t just to disassemble the silhouette gear.

“Ugh… So the lining of this armor is almost entirely the crystal plate thing we were told about.”

The villagers took chisels to large armored plates, peeling off the lining of Sylphianne’s armor. Ikaruga had been hit by the kratovastia’s miasma, so it had lost pretty much everything but its hearts.

The newest silhouette knights of Fremmevilla all had at least a part of their armor made of capacity frame, which was a combination of armor plating and crystal plates meant to improve the machine’s mana pool. These plates were easy to reuse, even for the villagers who lacked in alchemical knowledge. That was why these plates were the most carefully removed.

Then, once most of the parts had been disassembled…

“Ho, Sir Knight. What do we do now?”

The men remaining in the workshop lined up in front of the small “knight.” Around them, the workshop’s floor was buried in a mass of steel and monster materials—the results of everything they’d disassembled or otherwise gathered.

At the center of it all were clumps of metal tubes that looked like entrails. They were Ikaruga’s hearts.

“First, we’ll use the hearts as-is. Let’s reinforce the outer parts while fixing the intake system,” Ernie answered.

Giving shape to the heart was the core of all silhouette knight engineering, and reproducing one would be impossible. If these had been damaged, Ernie would probably not have survived. And now, he could only start over thanks to their existence.

The villagers followed Ernie’s orders, and the real struggle began.

“Bring the best monster bones over, please,” Ernie asked. They would start by assembling monster bones around the hearts.

What the area needed most was toughness. That was why they were using steel to make small brackets to reinforce the bones

and keep them in place.

They would normally give the area some flexibility in order to preserve the silhouette knight's mobility, but this time that wasn't even considered.

Furthermore, they wove white mistoe in between the gaps. The wood was an excellent mana conductor, so it would be used to replace the silver nerves. This would only be for parts that didn't move, because the material just had to conduct mana.

If any of the knightsmiths from home were to see this, they'd faint, but construction progressed nevertheless.

"How's progress on the arms?" Ernie asked.

"Right, Lord Knight. We're doing the best we can, but…"

After a torso like a mystery hotpot of materials was finished, they needed to attach a head and arms to it. These needed to move, so more thought was put into their construction.

Unlike the torso, which just had to be unbreakably tough, everything else would be difficult. After all, none of the craftsmen were very skilled. The design needed to be as simple as possible.

In the end, they would use monster bones as the skeleton to which they would attach strand crystal tissue, using the Descendrad as an example.

"Failing here would be dangerous, so go slow and be careful," Ernie advised.

When Ernie raised up an attached arm from inside the cockpit, cheers arose from the surroundings. The knight was steadily taking shape thanks to their efforts.

The villagers of the undertown had believed that there was nothing they could do, but now they were slowly gaining the ability to brave the forest, and they would never go back. Their morale rose even higher after their success.

"Let's try to add in a little more strength. At this rate, we're close to completion. Let's keep going until it's finished!" Ernie exclaimed.

A rousing shout of affirmatives reverberated through the workshop in response.

While the villagers were frantically putting together their creation, Ernie was putting everything he had into carving an Emblem Graph into white mistoe boards. "What's most important is powerful atmospheric control. Let's break down the Sonic Boom spell and borrow its basic parts."

He was compiling a wind spell using all the boards he'd lined up.

But no matter how powerful he made the spell, if he wanted to create thrust, then it would always be more efficient to add explosion magic to create a Magius Jet Thruster. Even so, he only concentrated on improving this wind spell to the extreme.

"Add in a whole bunch of amplifiers... Lots and lots...more, more, more more more more more more!" While muttering something that sounded like an unintelligible song, Ernie continued to single-mindedly carve away. The sight was so off-putting that not even Addy, let alone the villagers, had dared to get close for the past while.

At any rate...

As time passed, the wood boards took on an ominous form to some extent as they were filled with tight scrawls of script. In terms of pure output, the spell inscribed on the wood outdid Goldleo's Blast Howling. If he were to use it, any normal monster would be wiped away in an instant.

What was more fearsome was that this wasn't meant to be an attack.

"Now then, I wonder if this much thrust will make things go well?" Ernie was in his usual excited and happy state as he drew a line to the machine-in-construction. Ikaruga's hearts were alive and well, and could create mana right now if they had to.

Behemoth's Heart and Queen's Coronet sucked in air greedily after being awakened for the first time in a while before spitting out mass amounts of mana. The sheer noise they made shook the workshop and caused the villagers to faint, while only Ernie was happily looking at the wooden boards.

"Reconverting amassed mana... Emitting ether."

The shine of overflowing mana flowed into the inscribed boards. The faint light soon gave way to a rainbow-colored shine.

A rainbow-colored vortex was created, shining a light on Ernie's entranced expression while coloring his face in seven shades.

"Hee hee hee... It's exactly as I thought. Good, this is very good. Looks like this part works properly. You're next," Ernie muttered to himself.

The makeshift silhouette knight was a half-assed and lacking frame. Fearsome magic was added to that, and the beast he

wished for was gradually taking shape.

Then, he suddenly realized something and crossed his arms. “Ah! The shape is completely different from Ikaruga’s already. A new machine needs a new name. What should it be…?”

He tilted his head and hummed as he pondered the answer.

◆

“Okay. Today, let’s review the different types of magic!” Addy announced.

“Understood, Magister Addy,” the Parva Marga replied.

Their energetic voices echoed through the forest. Addy and the Parva Marga were training as usual.

They were quite a ways away from the goblin village because their training had continued to destroy the surroundings. There were many marks left on the rocks around them, showing how hard the Parva Marga had worked.

Addy climbed onto a nearby rock to get eye level with the Parva Marga before raising her gunlike staff. “If you’re looking for simple destructive power, then it’s gotta be the explosion type!”

“Mhm.”

Guns didn’t exist in this world, but gunstaves were still modeled after them. The tip of the one Addy held unleashed a firebolt that exploded into a fiery flower as soon as it reached its target.

“Wind-type spells are useful for defense or when you want to move quickly!” Addy cast Aero Thrust, using the recoil from the burst to launch herself into the air. She alighted atop the Parva Marga’s shoulder before nimbly going back on top of the boulder. “But I don’t think this will work well with how heavy all of you are.”

“Hmm. I tried, but the attempt cost too much mana,” the Parva Marga lamented. She was light for a giant because she was still a child, but the spell still wasn’t very useful to her.

“Then there’s lightning! They’re awful to calculate and have short range, but they’re nearly unavoidable.” Addy flipped over her gunstaff and took aim with it. Instantly, a thunderclap resounded from the clear blue sky. The loud noise was accompanied by a spear of light that stabbed into the target, destroying it.

Lightning spells were unmatched in their hit rate—they were basically undodgeable. However, the mana requirements for such

spells spiked massively the farther out one tried to send the lightning.

“As expected, magister! Just like a Marga, you know so much about magia!” It was clear the Parva Marga was impressed.

Addy puffed out her chest with great satisfaction. “You’ve learned a lot too, haven’t you, Pary?”

“Ugh, but not enough… It’s a wonder how you two know so much.” Out of nowhere, the Parva Marga slumped her shoulders.

Beings like Ernesti, who could memorize anything that had to do with silhouette knights, were exceptions. But Addy managed it as well through sheer effort in desperately trying to keep up with Ernie. In the end, she’d just trained longer.

“As long as you understand the basic building blocks, all you have to do is learn practical application. Ernie was real thorough about that when he taught me!” Addy boasted.

“Right, I shall try my hardest…” the Parva Marga muttered as she drew a script on the ground, trying to organize the information in her head.

No matter how much giants relied on feeling, she knew she needed to properly memorize this or there would be no progress. She could only work hard.

After a while of helping her practice, Addy suddenly stood up. Her expression was stern as she focused on her hearing. “Watch out, Pary. Something’s coming.”

Her senses had been sharpened through her training as a knight of Fremmevilla, and she knew they were being approached.

The Parva Marga stood quickly, on alert. “A beast?”

“Probably. A few beasts are pretty much nothing, but a whole group would be bad. I think we should withdraw—” Addy cut off her own sentence midway through and glared into the trees. A series of noises from something heavy could be heard. Before long, rustling sounds of trees being pushed aside were mixed in.

“Huh? Are those…monsters?” When the things came into full view, Addy reacted with clear shock. The Parva Marga also widened her eyes in surprise.

They were nearly human in shape, as if they were astragali. What set them apart from astragali, though, were the warped carapaces they wore. But if that was all, it would just be armor. Their heads also contained multiple small eyes, which told the pair

that this was just how they looked.

Neither had ever seen anything like it, and there were five of them.

“I do not know,” the Parva Marga replied. “But I do not believe we can see eye to eye.”

“They’re not cute either!”

These strange giants—or imitation giants—were clearly wary after noticing the pair. They bared the claws they had on the ends of their long arms.

At the same time, the bottom parts of their heads opened up. Those were probably mouths, and they let out a low growl. They repeated these strange noises several times before slowly advancing.

“Hmm… These things intend to fight.” The Parva Marga raised her hand toward them, but otherwise didn’t move.

While she now had training in magic, she was still young and inexperienced in battle. She was hesitating, unable to make a decision, when Addy jumped onto her shoulder and whispered into her ear. “Use fire magic, Pary.”

“There are too many of them, magister.” The Parva Marga didn’t have enough mana to attack so many enemies. She would run out too soon.

“I know. Just slow them down with magic and retreat. We’ll alert the others with the sound of fighting.”

“Right. Enemies such as these will be as nothing in the face of our genos’s might!” Power filled her four eyes and limbs. There was no need for her to face them alone. The rest of the Caelleus were nearby, and Ernie was in the village.

Addy continued to be on alert while atop the Parva Marga’s shoulder. She might have been fine alone, but she was with her fellow apprentice. Breaking through would be hard if they managed to get surrounded.

“What clouded eyes. They are no doubt beasts,” said the Parva Marga. “There is no need for mercy, then. O flame, come to me: Igniadre!”

The script manifested magic in her palm. She created a swirling ball of fire and threw it toward the imitation giants. It impacted right in the middle of the group, bursting into a gout of flame.

The attack was enough to blunt the advance of the imitation

giants.

They emitted low howls as they split left and right to avoid the fire.

The Parva Marga took advantage of the opportunity to turn around and run back toward the village.

“I don’t really get what’s going on, but running is the path to victory here!” Addy jumped after her.

◆

A small ways away from where the Parva Marga was training, the Fortissimos De Tertius Oculus swiveled his top eye around.

The eye stared at thin air for a while, puzzling his Armiger De Prima Oculus. “Is something wrong?”

“It’s the wind. I can see the wind of battle,” the hero replied.

“I can see no such thing. Where…?” The armiger widened his single eye and looked around.

The hero didn’t reply, instead keeping his three eyes peeled. Eventually, he gasped as he realized that there were presences in the direction the feeling was coming from. “That’s…where the Parva Marga is! Hurry, my brethren!”

“What?! Follow our Fortissimos!”

The rest of the Caelleus giants all ran after their hero, who had dashed off with no hesitation.

“Wait for me, Parva Marga!” Nav was right behind the hero. He was carrying the silhouette arms he’d been training with.

◆

The Parva Marga ran for the village. She took advantage of her small frame to slip between the trees, going in as straight a line as possible. However…

“Hm?! They’re fast!” she exclaimed.

Contrary to what their abnormal shapes would suggest, the imitation giants were faster than the Parva Marga. She had a good lead on them, but they closed the gap quickly. She couldn’t help but turn back as she heard their heavy footsteps closing in just in time to see a large set of claws filling her vision. The claws mercilessly descended toward her back.

“Come to me, wind! Vento!” She reacted quickly, swinging her fist and creating a lump of pressurized air.

The impact hit the imitation giant and diverted its attack. The Parva Marga used that opening to try to further widen the gap, but the others had gotten ahead of her, blocking her way.

The Parva Marga was breathing hard, and it took her some effort to say, “Th-This is nothing…”

She was still immature. Though the spells she cast were powerful enough, the amount of mana she could use wasn’t. What’s more, she didn’t know how to make a fighting retreat, so it didn’t take long for her to run out of breath and composure.

She held out her hands to keep the imitation giants—who were creeping ever closer—in check, though she had no idea how long this would last.

Then, Addy came down from up in the trees through which she’d been jumping. “Calm down, Pary! First catch your breath!”

“Magister…”

“Use your magic sparingly—when you need to push back or defeat the enemy. Aim for the most important moments!”

“I understand, magister. I will identify these moments, I’ll bet my four eyes on it!” The Parva Marga wasn’t alone. Having someone to guide her would make up for her inexperience. She calmed down and looked around with her four eyes.

Imitation giants were standing all around her; it wouldn’t be long until she was totally surrounded.

Before that, she made for one side of the encirclement. She faced the imitation giant that barred her way head-on, raising her hand at it and charging. The imitation giant whipped its long arm, claws spread wide, trying to stab the young giant.

“Too bad. She shouldn’t have been your target.”

A small figure leaped into its vision. It was Addy. She jumped onto the imitation giant’s head, and blasted its eyes with fiery projectiles with no hesitation.

Attacks from a single human might not do much damage. However, the fire obstructed its vision and disturbed it. It missed its attack, its claws piercing through thin air.

“Come to me, wind, sharp as a blade! Procirae!” The Parva Marga took advantage of this opportunity to get in close.

With the advice of her teacher, she slammed her palm at her

enemy's unprotected torso, blasting it with a simple lump of pressurized air, but one that had been stripped of all unnecessary mana expenditure to become simple in the extreme. The lump created a ferocious impact that sent the imitation giant flying.

The way was open, and there was no longer anything standing in the Parva Marga's way. So, she ran with all her might. The village was right in front of her.

"Magister! Fortissimos! Nav! We have enemies!" She came flying into the goblin village, shouting without giving herself time to calm down. She trusted that her allies were near.

However, they didn't respond. The goblin villagers turned to look at her in shock.

"Someone! Is anyone here?!" Disappointment bloomed in her heart.

"Pary! It's dangerous, get out of the way!" Addy shouted.

Her panicked tone caused the Parva Marga to turn around. Exactly at that moment, an imitation giant's fist caught her in the torso. Her pursuer followed through on the swing, sending her body into the air.

Her breath caught in her lungs, and she couldn't brace herself as she crashed into a building, breaking through walls and disappearing in a cloud of dust.

"E-Eeep! That's...!"

"R-Run!"

The villagers screamed and ran. There was nothing a goblin could do against something that could send a giant flying.

"How dare they do that to Pary! But what do I do? I don't have a silhouette knight." Addy gritted her teeth as she hid in the shadow of a building. She watched as the imitation giants entered the village in quick succession. They let out their unsettling noises as they swiveled their heads, alert.

The next instant, an explosion occurred deep in the village. It came from the building the Parva Marga had just crashed into—the workshop.

The explosion wasn't caused by one of the imitation giants' attacks. It had come from inside the building. The imitation giants warily eyed the dust cloud. A tense silence filled the village, and the goblin villagers gulped as they watched on.

An intense intake sound pierced through the tense

atmosphere. A light wavered indistinctly inside the dust cloud. Something was moving inside, and it sounded heavy.

Instantly, light started to spill out. A rainbow shine illuminated the area. Then, a loud explosion cleared the cloud, revealing *it*.

"Wh-What *is* that…?" The thing was so abnormal Addy couldn't help but groan.

It looked like the floating upper half of a human. It seemed half finished—or half dead—but it was floating boldly.

"That's Ernie's work…right? But it's not done yet, is it?"

Her doubts were wiped away the next instant, as the intake sounds grew louder. As it did, light was created inside the empty space in the machine's gut. The light shone a wavering rainbow, but it quickly rose in strength as *it* took clear shape.

—A ring.

It was a shining rainbow circle. It spread horizontally, with the upper half thing floating gracefully atop it. No one could understand what was going on, so they just watched in a state of shock.

Next, it stretched out its arms, gently picking up the unconscious Parva Marga. The armor that had been folded on its back moved, surrounding it like a mantle as if to protect both the machine and the Parva Marga.

The head—with a single horn coming out of the forehead—moved. The moment Addy saw its face, she instinctively screamed. It looked like a skeleton, with empty eye sockets that housed glowing eye crystals deep within.

"E-Ernie! Your tastes have gotten even worse!" Addy shouted.

In the face of this unexpected situation, the imitation giants froze.

The unsettling monstrosity raised its voice. "I do not know who you are, but I see you've attacked my apprentice, Par. That means you are my enemy. The price of this is helping me test-drive this. Prepare yourselves."

Ernesti Echevalier quietly made his anger known from inside the cockpit of the strange machine. He checked on the Parva Marga's condition through the holomonitor before reaching out to the control yokes. "Mana pool is half full."

He gripped the yokes and connected his will directly to the magius engine—his style of Full Control. All functions would move

as he wished.

“The ether ring generator is stable. The Magius Jet Thrusters also look to be doing well. Now, let’s do this…Kasasagi. Show your power here and now!”

The noise being spat out rose in volume as the unsettling monstrosity moved.

The shine of the rainbow ring grew stronger, and the thing floating on top of it was a monster not of this world.

Its skull-like face and form that was only a floating upper half exemplified the extremes of a silhouette knight. It was Ernie’s new prototype, Kasasagi.



Addy ran across this battlefield between gigantic opponents: a silhouette knight(?) and imitation giants.

“If Ernie’s taking action, the village is in danger,” she said to herself.

She didn’t know much about Kasasagi, but she knew what would happen to the village if it got caught up in a battle between combatants that were duel-class and over.

“I’ll leave Pary to you, Ernie! I’ll evacuate everyone,” she called out as she ran toward the evacuation point.

The battlefield was echoing with intake noise, so she didn’t believe Ernie heard her. Still, the strange floating silhouette knight’s intake noise seemed to get louder in response.

◆

Kasasagi sat still on the rainbow ring, turning its head at the imitation giants. “Now then, what are you? Monsters? Or giants? Or maybe something altogether different? The answer doesn’t matter, but…”

From the cockpit of the strange machine, Ernie inspected the Parva Marga. She’d lost consciousness, but it didn’t seem like her life was in danger. As expected of an astragali, she was tough.

“Well done, Par. I will avenge you, my disciple.”

Kasasagi shifted its main body as well as the Flexible Coat that covered the Parva Marga. The Magius Jet Thrusters placed in between spewed fire, and the machine slid up into the sky.

By the way, these Magius Jet Thrusters were hand-carved from wood.

In the face of this mysterious object floating with a rainbow ring that had suddenly appeared, the imitation giants hesitated. Their heads shifted to and fro restlessly as they looked around. They seemed panicked, and they appeared to be communicating.

But soon enough, they noticed Kasasagi coming for them and prepared to intercept. Kasasagi looked far too sinister for them to consider it a friendly.

“I’ll be taking the initiative.” Ernie lightly tapped at his keyboard, and the Flexible Coat moved, revealing the silhouette arms underneath. His machine’s eye crystals shifted, with the tips of the silhouette arms following in concert.

Spellfire unleashed with the telltale glow of magical phenomena. Most silhouette arms were set to fire overspells, which were very powerful, but these used a much weaker fire projectile. In exchange, they could be fired rapidly.

Like bullets from a machine gun, these bolts came pouring out and exploded on the ground, drawing a line toward the imitation giants.

The spellfire came down like heavy rain, and the imitation giants couldn't avoid it. Fiery blossoms bloomed on their shells, dealing great damage—or so it seemed.

The imitation giants moved like nothing was happening. Though their shells were charred, it didn't look like they were that hurt. In fact, it seemed like this had only meaninglessly provoked them, since it was clearly an attack.

"This seems bad. It's eating more of the output than expected..." Ernie changed Kasasagi's heading as he furrowed his brow. Kasasagi's main weapon was the rapid-fire "snider," which was extremely weak for a silhouette arms. It traded in power for its rapid-fire capabilities, but that meant it was far less effective against the many monsters—duel-class and over—that sported tough shells.

So why make such weak silhouette arms?

It wasn't as if the snider was the strongest weapon that could be made in the village. After all, the Caelleus giants were wielding much more powerful equipment already. Kasasagi just so happened to have a restriction on it...

The imitation giants threw rocks at Kasasagi, which was circling around above. They had no method to attack from afar, so throwing things was their only option. Still, the force a duel-class equivalent combatant could generate was formidable, and Ernie wouldn't be able to just shrug these off.

He used his thrusters to evade the rocks. He was taking things safe, showing real caution. He was also keeping the output of the thrusters low and slow.

Kasasagi's core—its hearts—had originally belonged to Ikaruga. The dual ether reactors Behemoth's Heart and Queen's Coronet were capable of putting out unrivaled amounts of power, but Kasasagi wasn't showing even a shadow of that.

"The ether ring generator is in fact working well, but...I guess it

was too unreasonable to try to solve everything with magic! This thing's eating up way too much mana!"

The reason Kasasagi was struggling with mana despite having such great generators was because of its newest and most important piece of equipment: the ether ring generator. This device worked by drawing on high-purity ether to create a Levitating Field and forcefully fixing that field in place through an atmospheric control spell. The ether was being sourced from the mana stored within the machine. Also, to fix the field in place, the device was constantly maintaining a large-scale spell. In other words, the device ate through the mana pool like it was starving.

"It might have been too reckless to start it up without having fully optimized the equipment and scripts! Not to mention the chassis itself is a rush job…" Ernie complained as he hurriedly commanded his machine.

Kasasagi had yet to be fully revived. It had a terribly fickle new piece of equipment on top of a makeshift body. Ernesti was forcing that all together with his skills as history's greatest knight runner. He was also busy optimizing things as he piloted.

"I suppose there's nothing else for it. Enemies don't wait, after all."

Meanwhile, the imitation giants' attacks rose in density. They'd realized how weak Kasasagi was and were steadily becoming less cautious as they watched it evade and flee.

Then, Kasasagi turned around and poured snider fire at them. If they were hit directly many times in quick succession, that would turn into unignorable damage, but a couple impacts weren't much. The imitation giants already knew they needn't be afraid of it.

After pouring on the fire for a while, Kasasagi passed over the imitation giants' heads. Then…

"Urgh… It hurts…"

The Parva Marga, who was still being held in Kasasagi's arms, woke up. Her consciousness was still hazy, but it was getting better. The first thing she felt after waking up was a strange floating sensation. Then, she realized she was being supported, or carried, by something—the first thing that came to mind was…

"You came, Fortissimos— Wha?!"

Right away, she remembered being attacked by the imitation

giants. In a panic, she tried to get up and opened her eyes. Her sight was filled by a sinister, skeletal face.

She then realized the owner of the face was carrying her and reflexively held up her hand. “O flame, come to me! Igniadre!” Following the script, magic manifested, creating wavering light.

It didn’t take long for the skull-face to realize what was happening, and a panicked voice came out of it. “Par! Wait, wait a second! Calm down! It’s me! I’m not an enemy! So please, stop!”

“That voice! Magister Ernie? But what… How?!” The Parva Marga stopped her spell right before it went off, screaming with a stiff face. Then, she got a good look at the skull-face’s whole body.

It had a sharp horn and a terrifying head, underneath which was an armored torso seemingly made of cobbled-together monster shells. There were also more large plates of armor made of shells around them, protecting them both.

“Magister, why do you look like that? You used to be much…smaller.”

“I now understand very well how you see me. For now, just know that I’m controlling this machine that’s holding you up.”

The Parva Marga took one more look at Kasasagi before earnestly muttering, “Still, though… This really isn’t cute.”

“You took after Addy in the weirdest of ways… Anyway, I’m glad you’re awake. Let’s fight together.”

“That’s right! We must repay them for what they’ve done!” With that, she started to search for her enemy, quickly realizing that she was in the air.

“YEEEeeeaaagghh?! Magister! We’re in the sky! The sky! We’re going to fall!”

“I’ll skip the explanations for now. Just know that this is one of Kasasagi’s abilities and that we’re fine.”

“What do you mean, *fine*?! Don’t skip the explanations, magister!”

“I don’t mind explaining, but we should defeat those first.”

The Parva Marga looked where the fearsome skull face indicated, finally finding their enemies. It had been one shock after the other since she’d awoken, but with enemies in front of her now, her concentration skyrocketed.

“Very well, magister. Let us finish this before the Fortissimos comes!”

“That’s the spirit. Due to some circumstances, Kasasagi doesn’t have the firepower necessary to beat them, so you’ll have to be in charge of our offense.”

“Me? As you wish, but I won’t be able to aim like this.” The Parva Marga looked troubled that Kasasagi was still carrying her. She was in the sky—something she’d never experienced—and unable to move freely. These conditions were too harsh for her to accurately strike at the enemy; she’d only started her training recently.

Ernie looked at the Parva Marga’s troubled face through the holomonitor before laughing fearlessly. “Don’t worry. I know how to make it easier to aim.” Ernie ordered Kasasagi to let go of the Parva Marga.

“Magister?! What are— Huh?” The Parva Marga was shocked for a moment and reflexively reached out, but she quickly realized that she wasn’t falling. The rainbow ring under Kasasagi was supporting her as well.

“Wh… What is this?!” She was floating without anything to support her. The feeling was unsettling, and the Parva Marga’s confusion was obvious.

Meanwhile, Kasasagi moved to cover the Parva Marga, deploying the sub-arms that had been folded flush with its body. They grabbed onto the Parva Marga firmly, fixing her in place.

“Yeeeeeek?! M-Magister! What is the meaning of this?!” she shrieked.

“I’m getting used to controlling this. Par, gather your strength in your belly.” Ernie mercilessly upped the output of his machine, ignoring the Parva Marga’s state.

The rainbow ring grew brighter, and the roar of the reactors grew louder. Ernie’s control abilities intervened throughout the script, gathering together spare power.

The Flexible Coat moved, placing itself to cover the Parva Marga.

For a small moment, Kasasagi became armor, or a robe, for the Parva Marga. Though the sinister skeletal head poking out from above created a fearsome sense of incongruity.

As for the Parva Marga, she was still confused and flailing. “Urggghhh! Magister! I can’t calm down!”

“You’re a good girl. Just bear with it please.”

The Parva Marga turned her gaze downward. Under her unreliable footing—as she was suspended in the air—she could see the ground flowing by at a fast clip. As far as she knew, there were nearly no other giants that had ever experienced flight. Though she was borrowing Kasasagi's power, she was still in an unknown space.

"I'll take care of movement and defense, Par," said Ernie. "You just attack those things as you please."

The Parva Marga sucked in a breath. "I...just have to attack, right?! I can't really keep up with a lot of this, but I know it's their fault! Please let me attack them."

Kasasagi circled around in the air, still carrying the young giantess, and headed back toward the imitation giants. She was more than a little desperate, but she still raised her will to fight the imitation giants.

They slid through the sky over their enemies' heads.

Kasasagi unleashed a barrage with its snider while the Parva Marga fired her own spells as well—ones that had been properly processed with more than enough power behind them. However, her attacks veered heavily off course to put a useless hole in the village.

The imitation giants became more wary after seeing much more powerful attacks come their way.

"Calm down and look at how they move, Par," said Ernie. "Then aim well. If you keep going like this, you'll just damage the village."

"It's impossible to be calm in this situation, magister!"

She had to aim and cast magic while experiencing the strange sensations of flight and being held by Kasasagi. There were too many hoops for her to jump through. Her desperation spiked until she was half in tears, causing Ernie to groan.

They circled around in the air, once again coming toward the imitation giants. Once they got close enough, they suddenly dropped speed.

"What are you doing, magister?!"

"It's fine, Par. We have the advantage being above them, so..."

She didn't have the time to listen to Ernie's explanation. Retaliatory stones came flying at the slowed Kasasagi. They would be hit if nothing was done.

The Parva Marga reflexively put up her arms to protect herself.

“Open your eyes, Par, and look well,” said Ernie. “This is our power.”

The Flexible Coat came up in front of her, deflecting the stones. Sparks flew from the armor’s surface, but the armor was otherwise unaffected.

“Kasasagi and I will block their attacks. There’s nothing to fear. You just take your time and aim. We just need to defeat them.” Ernie spoke as if instructing her.

The soothing, guiding tone gave the Parva Marga the wherewithal to open her four eyes. She took in the armor protecting her, the power keeping them in the air, the advice of her teacher behind her, and the role she had to play in this battle.

Once she firmed her resolve, she gathered strength in her belly and glared down at the enemy. “I understand, magister. I will show you the magia you’ve taught me!”

The light of fire appeared in her palm.

◆

The sound of destruction echoed through the monstrous forest. Explosions brought on by magical phenomena served as proof that a battle was raging.

“The Parva Marga must be moving.”

“I cannot see her. We can only rely on the sounds of magia.”

The Caelleus giants conversed as they ran. They were only a little ways away from the goblin village.

“Something is in the air. A beast?!”

One of the giants suddenly pointed up into the sky at something that flew across their sight at incredible speed. It also launched attacks toward the ground, followed by explosions.

“What?! Be safe, Parva Marga!”

They ran forward impatiently. Then, the Caelleus warriors reached the battlefield.

◆

Kasasagi’s Magius Jet Thrusters spat fire, and as the roar of the flames rose, so did the thrust that drove Kasasagi and the Parva Marga through the sky.

While circling around the goblin village, the Parva Marga gazed at her enemies who had taken up formation in the center.

“Come, O flame! Igniadre!” she called out.

Fire manifested in her palm. She held it up and aimed using all four of her eyes.

Despite not being totally finished, Kasasagi’s Magius Jet Thrusters were working well. If Ernie wanted, Kasasagi could reach incredible speeds.

“We’ll go in from the front. Hit them hard.”

“I understand, Magister Ernie!”

The reason he wasn’t was because of the Parva Marga, who wasn’t used to high-mobility battling. Ernesti was purposefully simplifying his movements to allow her to aim better.

Kasasagi accelerated toward the imitation giants. Its Flexible Coat opened, revealing the Parva Marga. She held up her hand and launched a fiery projectile.

The imitation giants jumped aside as soon as they noticed the attack, and the spellfire impacted at their feet. Concussive wind erupted, sending them tumbling. The attack was clearly much more powerful than before, which shook the imitation giants.

Kasasagi looked ominous, but it wasn’t much of a threat. However, the giant child was the exact opposite now that she’d awakened.

They threw stones at Kasasagi as it tried to cut above and across them. Ernie intercepted the makeshift projectiles with snider shots. The rapid-fire silhouette arms was too weak for monsters, but it was very adaptable because it didn’t consume much mana. A knight runner of Ernie’s skill could use it to shoot down ranged attacks.

After Kasasagi passed by, the imitation giants emitted a different cry from before. They knew that as things stood, the Parva Marga would start pushing them back. If that happened, they wouldn’t be able to achieve their goal. So, they needed to change tactics.

While Kasasagi once again turned around to begin another attack run, the imitation giants exhibited some totally new behaviors. The neck and head parts of the shells that covered their entire bodies opened up.

This revealed the dark recesses of what lay inside. These holes

seemed too strange to be mouths. Then, the imitation giants' backs opened up as well, revealing more hollows. They now seemed quite well ventilated.

Muffled bellows came from these hollows, the low vibrations caused by air passing through. The bellows became stronger and fiercer in an unnatural way, before finally becoming fierce roars that shook the forest.

The Parva Marga sucked in an alarmed breath. "What was that?!"

"It doesn't seem like they're trying to deafen us," came Ernie's reply.

Kasasagi's skull face looked around from behind the Parva Marga, who scrunched up her face in pain. The roars echoed, stirring the forest around them.

"That means it is some sort of signal. We should be careful of reinforcements."

They would be able to notice any quickly, since they were in the air.

Then, unnatural movements became visible in the forest. Trees snapped and crashed to the ground. The screams of wood gradually approached the goblin village, and it was clear whatever was causing them was at least duel-class or something equivalent.

"So they called in their friends," said the Parva Marga.

"No, Par, look. Are those really their friends?"

Kasasagi pointed, causing the Parva Marga to tilt her head in confusion.

It was a quadrupedal beast that seemed to have both hide and shell—a common duel-class monster. Of course, it was not one of the imitation giants.

"I suppose it heard the noise?" the Parva Marga proposed.

"I have a bad feeling about this. There's no way a duel-class monster would come alone," said Ernie.

As if to prove that, another monster appeared from a different direction. It was an agile quadruped with long, thin limbs. Following were even more monsters of different species. The pair watched as the village was overrun with monsters.

"We're changing how we fight, Par," said Ernie.

"What are you planning, magister?"

"How could they gather monsters here? The villagers will be in

danger.”

Kasasagi lowered its altitude, dropping level with the imitation giants and monsters and spreading its Flexible Coat in front of where the villagers had evacuated.

“We need to either drive all the monsters away or defeat them. We can no longer afford to run around—we’re going to fight them here and now,” said Ernie.

As he spoke, more and more monsters appeared. What’s more, the monsters didn’t try to attack the imitation giants, no matter their species or anything else. In fact, it looked like they were trying to *protect* the imitation giants.

And they clearly considered the only odd existence here—Kasasagi—an enemy.

“But, magister, these numbers!” the Parva Marga exclaimed.

“I know. I believe the rest of your genos will arrive shortly. We just need to hold out for a little while.”

As they talked, the monsters charged at Kasasagi. Leading the pack was the long-limbed one. It used its agility to try to quickly get in close.

“Hagh!” The Parva Marga shot a spell while there was still some space left. The fire flew toward the monster, but it dodged nimbly, sped up, and closed the distance to Kasasagi with a leap.

The Parva Marga couldn’t cast fast enough. Before that, Kasasagi used its snider.

Though it wasn’t very powerful, it was still attack magic. The great torrent of fiery projectiles made the monster falter, and Kasasagi swung its Flexible Coat at the monster. The sharpened tips, with added centrifugal force and the help of the monster’s own momentum, dealt a fatal blow by breaking the monster’s neck.

Kasasagi’s thrusters flared as it took some distance from the dead monster.

Once again, it opened its Flexible Coat, and the Parva Marga unleashed her spell. The projectile gouged out the ground, throwing up a cloud of dust and slowing down the following monsters slightly.

“We won’t last like this!” They’d already been fighting a while, and now there were so many new enemies. The Parva Marga’s mana reserves were screaming with strain. She still wasn’t very

experienced, so it was actually impressive she'd held out for so long.

"This does seem a bit tough to do with only Kasasagi. If only I had Ikaruga..." If Ernie's beloved partner were whole, a mere hundred or two hundred monsters would have been nothing. But that luxury wasn't something they had at the moment. They just had to accept their bitter feelings and do the best they could.

Kasasagi scattered fire with its snider, taking care not to let the monsters close.

One beast jumped out of the pack of monsters. It was a fierce and powerful quadruped covered in carapace. These types had excellent durability and were the most fearsome of duel-class monsters.

"This is so annoying! We're busy right now!" Ernie shouted.

"Magister, let me!" The Parva Marga didn't even have time to wipe the sweat from her eyes as she tried to calculate her magic script. Her concentration dropped, and her breathing was ragged. The script just wouldn't compile. It was taking more time than usual to cast.

Meanwhile, the monsters had gotten right in front of them. Ernie upped the output on the ether ring generator. If nothing changed, they wouldn't be able to destroy the monsters, putting the Parva Marga in danger.

"We'll be okay, but..." Ernie muttered.

If Kasasagi escaped to the sky, the monsters would probably just attack the villagers. Unlike Kasasagi, they had no way to resist. But still, Ernie felt his apprentice was more important.

Then, a third option presented itself.

A bolt of spellfire came flying from the forest, unerringly hitting a monster in the side of the head. The monster was sent tumbling away.

When the monster raised its angry face, its sight was filled with armor. The plates, benefiting from Magius Jet Thrusters going full blast, swung at the monster and reaped its life.

"What was that attack just now?!" the Parva Marga wondered aloud.

A shout came from the forest, and it wasn't made by the imitation giants.

"What are beasts doing here?"

“Are you safe, Parva Marga?!”

True giants had come. The Fortissimos of the Caelleus had a silhouette arms hoisted on his shoulder, his face full of confusion.

Nav was next to him, and his eyes turned to saucers when he saw the state the village was in.

The goblin village was ruined, not even a shade of what it once was. The fight between the imitation giants and Kasasagi had flooded it with monsters.

The three-eyed hero made his irritation apparent as he lifted his weapon and shouted orders. “Warriors of Caelleus! The Parva Marga should be here. Find h—?!”

The moment he turned, his three eyes widened in shock. He was looking at the Parva Marga he was searching for—as well as a mysterious thing behind her.

It was covering the Parva Marga with its armor. Its skull-like head turned to look at the hero. A hazy light shone from within its empty eye sockets. No one in this world would be able to understand what it was at first glance. In fact, it was doubtful anyone in any world could.

Of course, the hero was no exception. “Damn you… What are you?! No matter. I will have you return our Parva Marga!”

“What?”

Naturally, he assumed the Parva Marga had been abducted. Sadly, there was nothing around to prove him wrong.

Nav, the armiger, and the rest of the giants responded to the hero’s shout by pointing all their silhouette arms at Kasasagi. Thanks to their training, their aim had improved greatly. If only they weren’t aiming at an ally.

“I see. This is bad,” said Ernie.

The Parva Marga could only stare blankly at the incoming spellfire. Why would her clanmates do such a thing? Before she could figure out the answer, she felt a tug as Kasasagi’s thrusters ignited, and they evaded the spellfire.

The rainbow ring shone stronger and they took to the sky. The giants continued to fire, following their target’s movements.

“Fortissimos! Nav! Why are you aiming at us?!” the Parva Marga shouted.

“I’m pretty sure they’re aiming at me, not us,” said Ernie.

“At you, magister?! Why— Ah.” She hesitantly turned around to

look at the flying monstrosity supporting her. Its fearsomely aberrant form was unidentifiable, and not many would immediately consider it an ally. Even the Parva Marga had attempted to attack it at first. “Th-Then let’s talk to them? I’m sure we can open their eyes!”

“Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem like we’ll be able to approach them peacefully.”

Before long, the Caelleus giants gave up on attacking Kasasagi and turned their attention to the monsters on the ground. They used their silhouette arms to overwhelm the monsters.

Only two—Nav and the hero—continued to chase after Kasasagi. They were desperate to retake their Parva Marga. Even if the Parva Marga and Ernie approached, they wouldn’t be given the time to talk.

“So I’m going to get a little rough,” said Ernie.

“What are you going to do?”

“Leave the negotiating to you, of course.” Ernie turned Kasasagi around, making a beeline for the Caelleus giants.

Seeing the monster(?) in possession of their Parva Marga coming at them, the hero adopted a ferocious smile. “This is our chance, warriors of Caelleus! Open your eyes and seize it!”

“Of course!”

“We’ll save you, Parva Marga!”

The pair of giants took aim with their silhouette arms and fired at Kasasagi.

Kasasagi shot down all the incoming spellfire. There was no way that the strongest knight runner of Fremmevilla would fail to intercept spellfire from giants who had just started training with silhouette arms.

“I’m counting on you to take care of the rest,” said Ernie.

“Leave it to me!”

The sub-arms supporting the Parva Marga let go. Once she was free, she felt a push on her back. Her momentum was enough to make her leave the ether ring’s effective range.

The Parva Marga was thrown out into the air, allowing her to feel the surging wind and normal gravity.

“Come to me, O wind. Vento!” Wind swirled from her outstretched hand, slowing her fall. She aimed to land in the middle of the Caelleus formation while adjusting her speed.

“Are you well, Parva Marga?!” The hero spread his arms to catch her. Once he confirmed that she was safe, he let out a heavy sigh of relief. “It doesn’t seem like you’re hurt. Thank Argos.”

His relief lasted only a moment. The Parva Marga immediately jumped out of his arms and shouted to the group. “Fortissimos! Nay, all of you! I’ll save the details for later, but that is a phantom beast belonging to my magister. It is not an enemy! Stop attacking it!”

The hero’s eyes widened in surprise. Beside him, Nav and the armiger exchanged looks.

“The goblin Fortissimos is inside that thing? Truly?”

“I have witnessed this with my own eyes. I have exchanged words with him. More importantly, we must defeat those beasts, or they will harm the goblins!”

“R-Right. Of course.”

Though they were a little shaken by the news, the Caelleus giants had reclaimed their Parva Marga, and their morale rose. They could concentrate on defeating the enemy.

Duel-class monsters had always been prey of giant warriors. They had honed their skills over many battles and were now equipped with silhouette arms. They overwhelmed the monsters.

◆

Time passed, leaving only flames and corpses behind.

Naturally, with a battle between monsters and giants raging within, the goblin village was decimated. The only saving grace was that pretty much all the villagers were fine thanks to having escaped early.

“Why have these beasts come?”

“Neither I nor the magister know. We only saw an unfamiliar group that looked like giants who called them.” Then, the Parva Marga noticed something and ran off. She examined the nearby corpses to confirm the truth. “I don’t see any here. None of the corpses belong to those things that looked like giants!”

The only corpses present belonged to monsters.

Chapter 63: The One Who Knows

“Hrm, it seems the fight is over.” When things seemed to have calmed down, Addy—who had been with the villagers—left their hiding place to check on things.

The carcasses of the fallen made what had happened clear.

She returned to the evacuation point and relayed what she saw, and the villagers nervously poked their heads out.

“Is everyone okay?”

“Somehow. But the village…”

The villagers were joyous at having survived at first, but they became lost for words as they saw the aftermath. The village was in a wretched state. Giant weapons, giants, and monsters had battled without reservation within. The goblins’ homes were naturally pulverized.

“But you’re all still alive. This could be a new start. Don’t lose hope,” the village chief said as he swept his gaze through the crowd.

The villagers were still despondent, but they weren’t at rock bottom. They’d prepared to lose everything when the monsters came flooding in. Thanks to the efforts of the giants and some luck, they’d been able to survive. The village was decimated, but as long as they were alive, they could do something about it. They didn’t have the time to be down in the dumps.

The village chief walked slowly over to the giants and bowed at their feet. “You have fought the monsters and saved us. I have no words with which to express the gratitude I feel. How should we repay you?”

“There is no need for that. You have created both weapons and armor for us. That work deserves reward. What’s more, we couldn’t protect your homes,” the three-eyed hero replied, feeling somewhat ashamed.

Giants were tough enough to be able to sleep anywhere, but that wasn’t the same for goblins. They needed this village.

Then, the sound of thrusters came from above, interrupting this awkward atmosphere.

Rainbow light rained down equally among the giants and the goblins. They looked up to see the descent of a fearsome monstrosity.

It had a skull face and was really only a humanoid upper torso. It had armor plates spread around it that clanked as it moved—it was Kasasagi.

The rainbow ring narrowed as Kasasagi descended. Eventually, it quietly touched down under everyone's gazes.

The hissing of releasing pressurized air resounded as the chest opened up. Ernie appeared from inside, and everyone sighed.

"It really was you, goblin Fortissimos…"

Without really meaning to, the Caelleus giants had tensed up during the descent. All that tension was released now, though. Their Parva Marga had explained this beforehand, but they had still faintly doubted her words until Ernie really did appear—though that was understandable.

The hero scrunched up his face in a frown. "What is this repulsive thing?"

"Well, that's rude," Ernie replied. "This is my new machine. It's still being adjusted, but it shows some promise, doesn't it?"

"That is not what I am asking!" He remembered that they'd nearly shot it down and lashed out verbally, but Ernie once again smoothly deflected.

The Parva Marga and Nav tried to calm the wide-eyed hero down. "I told you, Fortissimos," the Parva Marga said. "Still, Magister Ernie, I also think it is somewhat…fairly… No, quite strange indeed."

"It really just looks like a beast from the forest, Ernie," said Nav.

"Really? All of you? It's true that I had limited resources, but I tried my best, you know." Even in the face of the giants, Ernie boldly puffed out his chest.

Addy watched all this happen with the villagers and crossed her arms, groaning. "Hmmm… It's impossible to get Ernie to feel remorse about anything pertaining to silhouette knights."

The goblin villagers were also watching this conversation, and they all exchanged looks with complicated expressions.

They were the ones who had helped build Kasasagi. They knew how hard it was to build, but at the same time they could understand the giants' feelings about the shape. They were in a

strange position.

“Kasasagi aside, let’s talk about the future of this village,” said Ernie.

After hearing Ernie try to regain control of the conversation, the villagers started to move.

◆

Several days had passed since the battle with the imitation giants.

There were now several hastily built houses in the village, erected with the help of the giants. These houses were basically just shacks, but they were enough to protect the goblins from the elements and would serve as an emergency measure.

Meanwhile, the goblin villagers examined the ruined buildings, gathering anything salvageable. The damage was extensive, but they were rebuilding.

“So in the end, what were those things?” the hero asked. Now that they had a moment to breathe, the giants and the goblin chief had come together to talk, and the giant hero was sitting as he gazed at the goblin villagers.

The village chief closed his eyes for a while, but before long he met the hero’s eyes and spoke. “Those were…the guardian knights of our race.”

“Guardian knights? They certainly didn’t look it.” Ernie, surprised, tilted his head. Certainly, their act of destroying the village was anything but. “I thought they were allies of the giants.”

“Our race would never employ such beasts! They could not even meet our eyes!” the hero roared, face twisted in anger.

“What you all saw were not the great astragali,” the village chief said. “Those were our esteemed nobles and their mounts… Mystic knights—or phantom beasts—and their riders, you could say.”

Ernie froze. He had a strange smile on his face as he slowly turned. “Mystic knights, you said?”

The village chief faltered, sensing the odd aura Ernie was emitting. “Y-Yes. A mystic knight is the proof that one is a knight. The riders are referred to as knight runners and granted nobility.”

“Huh, really now? So knight runners were controlling those,” Addy said, eyes widening. “Then…”

Ernie's smile deepened as he finished the sentence. "They're the same as silhouette knights…as Kasasagi."

"That is what I thought. That Kasasagi is your phantom beast, no?" The village chief nodded. Their understanding was generally correct, though not totally.

Ernie decided not to correct them. "I see. I didn't expect something like that to exist. Which means…" He sank into thought for a while, but eventually he nodded gravely. "It would have been better to finish them off."

Everyone else decided to pretend they hadn't heard that.

The hero opened his mouth, deciding to get back on track. "Your eyes are not seeing the truth. Why did those phantom beasts attack? No matter their form, are those really your allies?"

"Well… We do not know," the village chief answered, his bewilderment evident.

"Hmm. So even the goblins do not know," said the hero.

"But we do know why they came," said the village chief.

"What?"

"Tithing day is near. They were most likely here for that…" The village chief was about to explain when the sounds of a commotion broke out from outside the village. Instantly, the villagers' faces paled as they ran off.

"O-Oh no! The nobles… The phantom beasts have come again!"

"What?!" The hero stood up, his movements ponderous compared to the agitated villagers. His three eyes narrowed. "Those phantom beasts returned? They must have a query they need answered quite badly to drive them to this."

"But…"

Fervor for an upcoming battle was already spreading among the giants. Meanwhile, the villagers couldn't help but hesitate.

"I do not know why they returned, but we still must defend ourselves. Also, if those are man-made, I'm very interested. I want to try taking one apart, and it seems like they'll make for good materials," said Ernie.

"Ernie?" Addy muttered.

"Chief, we will fight those mystic knights together with the giants," said Ernie. "You all should retreat."

"I understand. We are counting on you…"

Addy reached out for Ernie's back as he tried to walk off,

capturing him before looking into his eyes. “What about me, Ernie?”

“Please guard the villagers.”

“Whaaat?! You’re going to leave me behind again?!”

“We’re fighting mystic knights again. Also, there’s the chance some knight runners will infiltrate separately.”

“Grrr... If you capture some mystic knights, give one to me, Ernie! I’m coming with you next time!”

“I will, don’t worry. I’m planning to wipe them out anyway.” Ernie’s smile was terrifying. Addy was convinced. Things would most likely be fine, so she left to join the villagers. In fact, they seemed more shaken than she at the exchange.

Their guardian knights might really be wiped out today.

◆

“Hmm? Strange.”

The Caelleus giants had quickly gathered at the village’s entrance. They were all armed and armored, totally prepared to wield their silhouette arms. However, they weren’t moving to attack.

“What is happening? Are they trying to hide and infiltrate somewhere?” Nav wondered excitedly.

“Everyone’s eyes are peeled. They will not be able to hide that easily,” the Parva Marga said, her four eyes shifting this way and that.

They were using their multiple eyes to watch out for their surroundings so as not to be caught by surprise. Then, the loud noise of thrusters signaled Kasasagi’s arrival.

“What is the enemy doing? Did they bring monsters again?” Ernie asked.

“No, magister. That...” The Parva Marga slowly raised her arm to point, and Kasasagi creaked as its head shifted.

On the trail that led to the goblin village was a large humanoid form—an imitation giant from the other day. In reality, it was actually a mystic knight, a mount of the knights of this land and guardian to goblins.

What was strange, though, was that there was only one of them.

It hadn’t brought along even a single monster, let alone a swarm like before. It truly was alone. If it planned to fight, it had to be either extremely skilled or insane.

However, the mystic knight didn’t act as the giants expected.

It opened a hand fitted with sharp claws—not a stance ready for battle—before slowly bending down and picking up something from the ground. It was hard to see given the mystic knight’s relative size and imposing presence, but there was a single goblin there.

Naturally, everyone focused on him.

The goblin man stood boldly on the mystic knight’s hand. He was wearing elaborate leather armor likely made from monster materials and carried decorations made of what seemed like overlapping feathers. The armor was brightly colored, showing the status of the one who wore it.

“Ho there! Well met, astragali from a genos that is not Rubel!” His voice carried well as he called out fearlessly.

Naturally, the Caelleus would not suddenly attack in a situation like this. Though they were still wary, they decided that this wouldn’t become a battle immediately.

The giants looked to their Parva Marga, who nodded and stepped in front. She faced the mystic knight, looking at the small figure who stood on its hand. “Do you really intend to exchange words now, after already pointing your claws at us, goblin?”

“My apologies for that! We have our own circumstances, you see. According to the agreement, we must treat all astragali not of Genos De Rubel as enemies! We *had* to fight you at least once, you understand?”

“I care not for your circumstances. You have opened this query—now the result must be left to Argos,” said the hero.

Even in the face of his powerful stare, the goblin man shrugged and sighed, seemingly unaffected. “Astragali always say that sort of thing right away. Don’t you ever get tired of it? It’s just a bother.”

“That does not even deserve an answer,” said the hero.

Though the hero’s drive to fight spiked, the goblin continued to act boldly despite being in range of an attack. He simply laughed mockingly at the obstinate hero. “Hmph! Well, whatever. I didn’t come here for you astragali, anyway.”

“What?!”

His fearless, piercing gaze was pointed not at the giants, but at the monstrosity hanging in the air—the silhouette knight Kasasagi, the only foreign element to this land.

“Not an astragali, not a monster, and not even a mystic knight… Is that a legendary silhouette knight, visitor?!” His shout was answered by the continuing roar of Kasasagi’s thrusters.

It answered his summons, slowly floating over the giants’ heads. “It seems he is after me. Would you allow me to take on this query, Fortissimos?”

The hero hesitated. “Fine. But if he points his claws at us once more, I will not lend you my eyes, even as a favor to you.”

“Thank you. If that time comes, I won’t stop you.” With that settled, Ernie and Kasasagi turned to once again face the mystic knight.

The goblin man still stood proudly on its hand as he laughed. “What a bizarre form! Is this what our ancestors look like?!”

He didn’t seem afraid of Kasasagi, which was the very picture of a specter. In fact, he looked into the bright rainbow light and laughed joyously.

“Grrr… Why is everyone so rude?” Kasasagi paused in the air, and its torso armor opened up. His opponent was there in the flesh, standing in front of the giants, so Ernie felt it was only good manners to do the same.

However…

When the goblin man saw the small figure that emerged from inside the menacing Kasasagi, he clutched at his gut and doubled over in laughter. He was laughing so hard that he almost fell off his mystic knight’s hand. “Bwah hah! Hee hee! H-How could this be?! Y-You’re the traveler from beyond? I was expecting the one who made it all the way here to be a more trained warrior! What a cute little girl!”

“It would be more accurate to say that we’re lost, but that’s not much different from being a traveler,” said Ernie.

After laughing uproariously for an extended period, the goblin man finally calmed down and straightened up. “My apologies, that was just too much for me. Well met, guest! Or should I say, descendants of our ancient brethren. I welcome you from the bottom of my heart!”

“Judging from the way you speak, it sounds like you know quite

a lot about where we came from," said Ernie.

"I do indeed! Yes, I know *very* well," the man said confidently, his feather ornament fluttering. Kasasagi in the sky and the mystic knight on the ground glared at each other. Meanwhile, the two people also confidently faced off.

"My name is Ernesti Echevalier. I am the captain of the Order of the Silver Phoenix, and I am lost. What is your name?" Ernie asked.

"Of course, my name is Oberon. The king who rules over all goblins in this land!"

And that was how the knight captain had an audience with the king.

◆

"You said your name is Oberon? Then you're the leader. That's unexpected. Are you really him?" Ernie was extremely doubtful as he stared down from Kasasagi's vantage point.

Oberon didn't flinch when exposed to the look. Instead, he simply cackled. "Ha ha! So you don't believe me, even after I named myself. How cautious of you!"

What was he finding so funny? He hadn't stopped laughing for a while now. His flippant attitude was one of the reasons why Ernie couldn't quite believe him, but he didn't seem to mind. In fact, his smile deepened in his excessive confidence.

"However, while you may be right to be doubtful, in this case it has no meaning. I am the only one worthy of being king; who else could lead a mystic knight such as this?" He signaled, swinging an arm, and the mystic knight he was standing on let out a low growl.

That alone did not really help in proving his veracity, but Ernie decided to set that matter aside for the moment.

What *was* important was what he wanted to talk about.

"Fine," said Ernie after some thought. "Well then, Your Majesty, may I ask why you came all this way in person? Even if you desired to talk to us, you could have just sent a messenger or stand-in, am I correct?"

"That would be boring, especially when I finally had a chance to meet you!" Oberon once again made a signal as he rejected Ernie's doubtful questions. His mystic knight slowly knelt, letting him down on the ground. "Now, come with me, guest! We will be the

only ones talking, so there's no need for those astragali, no?" With that, Oberon boldly entered the village alone, leaving his mystic knight where it was.

He walked past the Caelleus giants, who were definitely not his allies, and under Ernie, who was still on Kasasagi in the air. They could have attacked him easily, but Oberon didn't seem to care.

After walking a little, he turned around and pointed a somewhat unhappy look up at Kasasagi. "Hmm, what happened to the villagers? Why are they not here to welcome me?"

"We saw you coming, so we evacuated them." Kasasagi started to move along with a low growl of contained thrusters. It touched down in the center of the village, and Ernie disembarked.

"Oh? To think they would run at the coming of their king and his knights! You've tamed them well, I see." Oberon approached Ernie, laughing once again. When facing off, they looked like an adult and child, as Oberon naturally had to look down at Ernie. He spread his arms in a show of harmlessness. "You move fast, despite your cute looks. Or maybe it's *because* you look so adorable? Heh ha ha ha ha..."

Oberon's mouth warped into a grin, and he walked off toward a nearby hut. He didn't even hesitate to enter the shack that had been made by giants, flinging open the door as he pleased.

Ernie furrowed his brow and let out a small sigh. "Par, Nav... Could you please call Addy over? And just in case, please protect the villagers."

"Mm, understood. Keep your eyes peeled, magister. He is an enemy, no?" the Parva Marga said.

"Until a moment ago, he certainly was. Now, I'm not so sure."

"Call us if a fight breaks out! We'll come running!" Nav shouted.

While listening to two sets of feet dashing away, Ernie entered the hut after Oberon. The tiny abode was almost totally empty. Inside, Oberon was sitting back arrogantly on a crude chair. "Once again I say to you: Welcome, guest. There is not much here, but you may relax as you will."

"*You're* saying that? Whose fault do you think it is that this village was destroyed?" Ernie sat opposite him, narrowing his eyes in a glare. If Oberon and his knights hadn't attacked them, the village would have never been caught up in the battle.

Oberon actually seemed to be enjoying Ernie's look. "Ha ha!

You're quite kind, aren't you? But your point of view is somewhat biased. This area is the territory of Genos De Rubel—other genoses should not be here. The villagers were the ones who allowed them in and flaunted the laws of this land. Not that saying this to you would change anything. Either way, that isn't the main topic."

After a beat, he leaned closer. "Such trifles do not matter. Yes, I truly do not care. Let us talk about something more enjoyable, my comrade of old. I wish to talk about our past and our present."

"I see, that certainly is more enjoyable. Color me intrigued."

A crude, makeshift table stood between them. Ernie's expression stiffened as Oberon adopted a thin smile; both sides' gazes were sharp, as if they were trying to bore holes through each other.

"Heh heh heh hah. This is fun, truly fun," said Oberon. "You truly deserve to be a guest of mine. To think I would have the opportunity to welcome you while I'm able to move!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I have the opportunity to speak with a comrade from far away. To tell you the truth, I'm quite frustrated that those villagers stole a march on me, though there was nothing I could have done about it. That is why I came here personally."

Ernie did question internally whether a king would really come all this way for such a stupid reason, but given the man's attitude, he didn't seem to be lying. That was how excited Oberon seemed to be.

Oberon was looking directly at Ernie, taking in every inch of the knight captain from the top of his head to the tips of his toes, trying to burn the sight into his eyes. Ernie's expression grew stern in response to the rude gaze.

"Our clothes are quite different. What do you think of my outfit? We have a lot of beast materials; it's rather stylish, don't you think?" Oberon spread his arms.

The clothing he wore indeed made heavy use of monster materials. It was rather thick, using mostly leather, and was more armor than clothing. It was also fitted with decorations that used the original creatures' natural coloring.

"Clothing like yours is rare among normal people. If I had to say, it is closer to a knight's equipment," said Ernie.

“Oho, a knight’s! Certainly, they were our origin, after all!” Satisfied by that answer, Oberon nodded happily. Then, something occurred to him, and he looked up. “By the way, my guest, you introduced yourself as a knight captain, did you not? I find that hard to believe. You don’t seem to be suited to combat.”

“Grrr. Maybe, but you saw me control it. Do you still doubt me after that?”

“You have a point. Not to mention, you managed to twine an entire genos around your finger so soon after coming here. You aren’t to be underestimated!” Oberon’s cackle came from deep in his throat as he looked at Ernie again.

Ernie glared back slightly grumpily. “I do not have them twined around my finger. How rude. They move according to their own will; our goals just happen to be aligned.”

“Hrm, so you say your intentions align with Genos De Caelleus. How terrible.” Despite his words, Oberon’s carefree expression said it was anything but.

“You… The goblins are under the protection of Genos De Rubel, correct? If so, then I’m sure you wouldn’t want us to succeed, at least to the point of pointing your claws at us.”

“As I said before, we do have obligations we must fulfill. That is all. My own wishes lay elsewhere.” Oberon didn’t even need to think about it. He truly seemed to not care about the genoses from the bottom of his heart.

Ernie sank into thought for a while. “Your relationship with Genos De Rubel… No, I’m curious about your relationship with the astragali in general. I believe we’ll need to start from the beginning.”

“Oh?”

“I want to know how you came to be called goblins. You would know, right? As their king.”

“You are correct. I am likely more knowledgeable than anyone else.” Oberon’s thin smile returned, and he patiently waited for Ernie to speak.

“Then allow me to ask: Why do you call us your comrades?”

“You seem to know a lot, as expected of one who leads a knight order,” said Oberon. “Given all you know, you should have already arrived at the answer, no? Let us compare answers; tell me yours.”

“You people…are most likely survivors of those who

participated in the past expedition into this forest."

Oberon's smile grew far deeper and wider. He kicked away his chair and stood, spreading his arms and shouting, "Congratulations, you are correct! Wonderful, you hit it right on the head, my distant comrade! That is indeed how we were separated!" He clapped with wild, joyful abandon.

"We were told that the expedition force met with a large and powerful monster and was decimated. If so, why are you so deep in the forest? No, that's not it. You could have gotten lost or fled," Ernie said.

"Correct once again! Those that were once in the expedition force met with misfortune and were decimated. However, not all of them died!" Oberon was so excited, his gestures were getting bigger and bigger. If Ernie weren't so wary of him, he might have wrapped Ernie in a hug out of joy. "Whether they were lucky or unlucky, there were many who ran in the wrong direction. Heh heh heh... But that turned into its own fortune, as the expedition force survived while keeping its consumption to a minimum. Then, at the end of their lost wanderings, they met the astragali!"

He took a deep breath and finally calmed down. "I don't know how my parents felt then. After some back-and-forth, we were known as goblins, and we became followers of the astragali. Only a handful of people in this land know the truth. And as expected, I was right to come personally!"

"Shouldn't you keep that a secret? The villagers know nothing about their past."

"That's right. Nothing would come of the villagers knowing, after all! It would be meaningless to complicate things and risk them defying the astragali."

"Then why tell me all this?"

"Because what meaning is there in hiding the truth from those who already know? Not to mention, you are not as insignificant as those villagers."

Ernie narrowed his eyes slightly. The sharpness of his gaze grew in proportion to Oberon's excitement. "This would mean that the mystic knights were once silhouette knights, but with their forms changed?"

"We needed commensurate power to deal properly with the astragali, with their huge bodies. Silhouette knights were perfect

for that. But you know how many materials they require." Oberon leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes in recollection. "Maintaining them was too difficult for us, as we had to spend all our time running. As time passed, the frames had to be replaced with monster parts, and they became closer and closer in form to the beasts…until they reached their limits."

He slowly opened his eyes and looked straight at Ernie. "We searched for a way forward. We searched and searched, hit dead ends…until a *flying ship* appeared. Now, it's my turn to ask questions. You rode on that flying ship to reach this land, no?"

"We did indeed. Our ship encountered kratovastias, and the two of us were left behind after the ensuing battle."

Oberon displayed the most excitement yet, coming so far forward he seemed like he could grab onto Ernie at any moment. "I see! Your silhouette knight also flies! It is strange, but that means you possess the means to have your knights fly, correct?! Then you can fly over this forest, can you not?!"

"If we could…would you aim for the west?" Ernie asked.

"Do you really need to ask? The west is the land of our origin. If possible, I would have liked to return under our own power, but I won't be greedy!"

"Several hundred years have already passed since you goblins were cut off from us. Returning now would be…"

Oberon shook his head fiercely. "That can be overcome! That much time is just the blink of an eye compared to continuing to idle our way back to the great flow like this! I will show you I can reach our destination." With an expression bursting with determination, he shouted, "You are the key. I tried to come up with ways to return myself; do you want to hear the results of my ruminations?"

"No. But…I see. The goblins are the descendants of those who were left in the forest… I wonder if bringing you back would be correct." Ernie sank into thought.

Oberon stood, walked to the entrance of the hut, and turned around. "You have plenty of time to think. For now, I would like to invite you to our capital. Ah, I don't mind if those astragali accompany you. You like them, do you not?"

"You mean the Caelleus? But aren't they enemies to Genos De Rubel?"

Instantly, Oberon's smile disappeared, replaced with a serious expression. "I believe they are actually needed there. The three of us will join hands. Then, we will take down Genos De Rubel."

"Are…you serious?" Ernie leaned back in his chair and fixed the king of the goblins with a steady stare.

Oberon, unaffected by his piercing gaze, gave a low laugh. "Of course I am. I've been thinking about it for so long. Finally, the cards are in my hands. Now is the only opportunity to make it happen. It's sink or swim! No time to hesitate!" He snapped his fingers and made to leave the hut. "Still, I'm sure this is a very sudden proposal to you. Take your time to think about it. Either way, I'm sure you'll also find this necessary…"

Then, when he put his hand on the door to the hut, it was flung open before he could do so himself. The king's eyes narrowed as he saw a girl standing in his way. "Hmm? Those clothes… You're not a villager. Is she your friend?"

"She is. Let him through, Addy."

Addy continued to stare Oberon down. He grinned, and she finally stepped aside. However, instead of leaving the hut, he started to shift his gaze between the two with an amused smile.

"Mmhmm, I see. Those of the west like to send in beauties to do their dirty work. Is this a trend I spy?" he questioned aloud.

"Who knows?" Ernie replied.

"Heh heh heh! Either way, I welcome it! Ha ha ha…"

Though Ernie played the fool, Oberon didn't stop laughing as he left the hut. Addy stepped in as if to replace him, immediately running up to Ernie. "Grrr, what is with that guy?! Are you okay, Ernie? Did he do anything weird to you?!"

"I'm fine. And what do you mean by weird?" Ernie gave a strained chuckle.

Addy wrapped him in her arms in relief. "Who was he? Ah, I heard from Pary that those imitation giants are silhouette knights."

"They are, yes. Though here they would be called mystic knights. His Majesty King Oberon came with them. He's the king of goblins, who rules over this area."

Addy looked up and blinked repeatedly. "Huh? The king is here? Out of nowhere? But he seemed more like a knight captain to me."

"He *is* surprisingly audacious in the way he speaks."

Having the king show up out of nowhere with no prior probing wasn't just audacious. Still, from the scale of the proposal he brought to the table, Ernie thought there was no doubting his introduction.

"Anyway, let's go, Addy."

"To that king?"

"Goblins are essentially the same as us. He invited us to band together and fight the Rubels."

Addy furrowed her brow and whispered into Ernie's ear. "This is too sudden. I don't think we can trust it. What are you planning to do, Ernie?"

"I'm thinking of accepting."

Addy cocked her head, surprised. "Are you sure?"

"There's nothing to be gained from refusing, and if we accept we'll at least gain more allies. Also, the Caelleus want a showdown with the Rubels, and I want to repay them for all they did for us. This proposal is good for us." Ernie's smile deepened. "And it seems they're after something more. I need to talk further with them to find out what it is."

"Mmm, okay. The basic tenet of hunting is preparation, after all!"

"The real thing starts when we learn our opponent's habits."

Addy gave Ernie another squeeze as they resolved themselves. "Heh heh, don't worry. I'll follow you anywhere, Captain!"

"Thank you, Addy. We'll listen to them for a while...but we should also protect Kasasagi," said Ernie.

"What do you mean?"

"Besides fighting the Rubels, they also wish to return to the west. Apparently they know about levitating ships too. So they probably want to know about the Pure Ether Effect, which will allow them to fly without relying on monsters." Ernie turned his gaze toward the village's central clearing, where his precious piece of flying junk stood. "They don't know where any flying ships are, but Kasasagi is right here. They can't easily imitate it, but that doesn't mean we should hand it over without fuss. If they try to lay their hands on it, they'll need to prepare to get burned."

"It uses parts from Ikaruga and Sylly, after all."

Ernie and Addy nodded to each other.

"Then let's start by having them show us their so-called capital,"

said Ernie.

With their plans decided, the pair left the hut and found that, surprisingly, Oberon was still there. He'd been taking in the sights, and he spread his arms out when he noticed them. "Hey there, it seems your conversation was quick."

"It was," Ernie replied. "I think we'll take you up on your proposal. Now we just need to inform the Caelleus about this."

Oberon clapped his hands together once, his smile deepening. "That's great! Truly gladdening news, children from the west! Also..." He paused and looked at the pair for a while. The look puzzled them when he suddenly approached them and reached out. "Hmm... You really are different from us."

He was about to take some of Addy's hair in his hand but found he grabbed nothing but air. Addy had quickly retreated behind Ernie, and she was glaring stiffly from behind Ernie's small form.

"Oh? Heh heh, my apologies. No need to be so harsh, though. Ha ha ha..." He seemed surprised for a moment, but that was quickly covered up with a laugh. After a slight shrug, he turned around and beckoned the pair to follow. "At any rate, let us make for our capital. I cannot properly welcome you in a poor little village such as this."

Addy held on to Ernie tightly, glaring at the receding form of the king. "What the heck is up with him?! He's so rude! I really don't like that guy!"

"Hmm... Well, for now, he's an ally," said Ernie. "Let's think about this if we ever do become enemies."

Addy sulked, pinching and pulling Ernie's cheek. "You may look like you're thinking of the future, but you tend to go with the flow a lot, don't you, Ernie?"

"Whfwhy wfhwould hyoo shay shomeshing rike llhat? Please just say that I am always aiming for the best outcome."

As the pair teased each other, they headed for the Caelleus giants.

◆

The giants were gathered near the entrance to the goblin village.

A mystic knight was standing right in front of them. The giants

regarded it as an enemy they'd fought before, but now Ernie was talking to one of them. They couldn't just attack arbitrarily.

The giants stayed quiet, as if they were meditating. However, the tension did not leave their bodies; they were ready to fight immediately should anything happen.

Then, Ernie returned. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

The three-eyed hero opened one of his eyes and looked down at his feet. "What sorts of eyes were revealed from your query?"

"We decided not to fight."

"I see."

Ernie then relayed a summary of his conversation with Oberon.

The Caelleus giants exchanged looks as they pondered the conversation. The hero cheerfully slapped his thigh. "The goblins wish to fight Genos De Rubel? Perfect. To think that even their minions would bite at the hand that feeds! Their eyes must truly be caked in filth. They cannot see what is around them." The hero let out a low laugh and stood. His three eyes faced the direction of Metropolitan, far off in the distance. "You were correct, goblin Fortissimos."

"About what?"

"Genos De Rubel is the largest of our genoses, enough so that we could not oppose them without forming an Exactus De Varies Genos. However, that was only because of our ignorance. Even they have a weakness. We only needed to learn more about them, exactly as you said."

"Then, Fortissimos…"

The hero nodded in response to his armiger's question. "We will go as well. We must get closer and see in more detail. There is still much to know."

The Caelleus giants stood in response to their hero and clapped.

Ernie nodded too. "Then let us go together. I'd like to leave right away, but I need to relay this to the villagers as well."

He left to go see the hiding villagers and explain the situation to them. They exchanged worried looks, but eventually they firmed up their resolve, and the village chief stepped forward. "Wh-What will our king…do to us?"

"It seems his interest lies with us. He said nothing about you, but it would appear he finds no fault with your actions," Ernie

assured them, causing the stir that the villagers had been suppressing to spread.

“Th-Then, what do we do now?”

“Right. We’ll come with you to the overtown.”

Spurred by the flow of things, the villagers one by one nodded in agreement. However, Ernie slowly shook his head. “Even if you accompany us, what awaits is a battle. One that will involve the greatest of the astragali genoses. It will be a fight against Genos De Rubel.”

That alone was enough to sink the villagers’ spirits. It was well said—the villagers clearly did not have the strength to fight. Recent events had proven that. They felt the waves of a huge change recede.

“We will be going with Oberon, but this battle will eventually involve all goblins in this land.” Ernie fixed his posture as he looked straight at the villagers. “It’ll be okay. I will do my best to make sure that the result is good for you. I need to repay you for helping build Kasasagi here, after all.”

Ernie smiled his airy smile, making his gratefulness known to the villagers as he bowed deeply.

Though they did not know what the future had in store for them, the only thing they could do was cling to this small knight.

◆

The trail surrounded by trees seemed to pierce straight through the forest. Right now, there was a strange group traveling along it.

At the head were strange man-made giants—mystic knights. A small number of regular giants were walking behind. Above them floated an even more bizarre thing. It was Kasasagi, carrying Ernie and Addy.

It was a rather scattered and incoherent group, but their goals were aligned.

The journey to the goblin capital was more peaceful than expected. The only interruptions they faced were the occasional encounter with a pitiful monster that misread their strength and quickly ended up as food.

Ernie and Addy pretty much kept to themselves and the Caelleus giants. They traveled above the pack, and when they took

breaks, they did so with the Caelleus. One evening, during dinner, Oberon showed his face to the group.

Up until now, the goblins hadn't interacted much with the Caelleus, contenting themselves with simply leading the way. The giants also did not particularly want to talk with them, so there was some distance between the two parties, but it seemed Oberon himself didn't care about such things. Still, he naturally couldn't go alone, so he had several attendants behind him.

All the attendants wore leather armor made of beast hides and furs, and they were clearly used to battle. They weren't simple attendants—they were this land's ruling class of knights.

Unlike their wild king, the nobles stood still behind Oberon. They were silent, but every once in a while, they pointed unrestrained stares at Ernie and Addy, their guests from the west.

Addy was somewhat displeased by the looks, furrowing her brow, but Ernie didn't seem to mind at all.

"We can probably get into the details once we arrive. However, spending this time just guiding you would be boring!" Oberon cackled while he partook in Ernie and Addy's dinner. "I see, so if you are constantly accompanying astragali, you will have no difficulties finding food. Seems quite convenient."

Oberon ate as he pleased, nodding to himself before seeming to have a question pop up in his head. "Still, Ernesti, you seem quite friendly with the astragali."

"Are you not?" Ernie asked back.

Oberon's expression grew serious for a moment, but it quickly passed. He laughed bodily, hard enough that he clutched at his stomach, but that ended quickly—though every once in a while, his face would twitch. "You asked if we aren't? Ha ha! That's right, we aren't. Absolutely not! They only think of us as somewhat intelligent bugs!" His laughter still refused to stop, but it didn't reach his eyes. "You possess a silhouette knight, and yet you are friendly enough with the astragali for them to share food with you. How strange! How did you tame them so?"

"I have not tamed them," Ernie replied. "A lot happened, but I've been welcomed as part of their genos."

"A goblin...with the astragali?! Well now, you truly are great at making jokes!" Oberon let out unrestrained laughter, though Ernie didn't seem to be offended.

The reason he was welcomed as part of the Caelleus was because of his extreme skills as a knight. Not just anybody could best a giant Fortissimos in battle.

What's more, all other genoses were about equally warlike. It wasn't hard to imagine how the exhausted remnants of the expedition force got to the present.

"I see that those with the strength to fight—in other words, silhouette knights—no, mystic knights—are who support this land." Ernie directed his gaze to the people standing behind the king, who was still laughing.

While their king raised a huge fuss, they had yet to say a single word. The air they gave off was one of pure, honed violence—possibly even more so than that given off by Fremmevilla's knights. As Ernie suspected, it didn't seem like their relationship with the giants was very peaceful.

"Heh heh, how splendid. That is not completely incorrect, given I am with them. Still, I'm glad I have them to fight Genos De Rubel with!" Then, after some more noise, Oberon and his guards returned to their own camp.

"I wonder what he wanted?" Addy wondered aloud.

In the end, Oberon had been the only one carrying on; his guards hadn't even changed expressions. They must have seemed unsettling in the extreme to Addy, as they just wordlessly looked around this way and that with piercing glares.

"Who knows? Maybe he wanted to get to know us better, or maybe he was just evaluating us. I don't care either way," Ernie replied.

"That's pretty cold of you, Ernie." With that, Addy sighed and wiped all traces of her previous thoughts from her mind, deciding to just hug Ernie for now.

Meanwhile, the goblin party was returning to their part of camp, which was surrounded by their mystic knights. They weren't like the giants, who wouldn't be perturbed no matter what attacked them, or Ernie, who was basically made of the ability to deal with problems. They needed to prepare to fight monsters.

"Trying some new dishes every once in a while isn't bad," said Oberon.

"That does not excuse your behavior, O Oberon…" A man who was more advanced in age than the other guards stepped

forward. His wrinkled face was twisted slightly, cringing, as he spoke.

"Oh, there's no need to worry about such details. They may be lacking in brains, but I like the astragali custom of welcoming those who have hunted with them."

The man couldn't hold back a sigh. He knew such a light remonstration wouldn't get through to Oberon—experience had taught him that. He regrouped and changed the subject. "I must say, your guest looks like nothing but a child to us."

"But you did notice, didn't you? He's obviously not dressed like a regular villager. And if he were one of our knights, we would know."

"That is true. He is most likely from foreign lands. Still, what can a child even do?" The man decided to state the obvious question they all had.

Oberon smiled. "Who cares if it's a woman, child, or elder on the verge of death? Ernie possesses that strange silhouette knight that can fly in the sky under its own power. That is more than enough."

"Indeed, all we require is the silhouette knight. The boy is unnecessary."

Immediately, Oberon's smile disappeared. He let out a long sigh, and pointed a sharp glare at the man—a glare he hadn't wielded previously. "Don't be foolish. How much time do you think we have spent trying to steal the Necrolis Song? We are up against an unknown silhouette knight, and there's no guarantee we would be able to even use it. The child *is* necessary." Oberon stood and swept his gaze across his knights. "I will have the song and the sky within my hands. We will join together and fight our enemies together. The astragali will be driven off and we will obtain that ship... That is my wish."

Chapter 64: Let’s Try Being Welcomed

With the goblin king leading them, the group of Caelleus astragali and goblins continued through the forest. Eventually, they were able to see something different beyond the trees.

“Is that…a wall?”

“Oho, so this is a goblin residence.”

The armiger widened his one eye. Nav and the Parva Marga were looking around curiously, and even the three-eyed hero crossed his arms and let out a noise that indicated he was impressed.

They were facing a large wall of stone. Those at the foundation were so large that even a giant would have trouble carrying one, and the farther up they looked, the smaller the stones got, making for a very solid construction. It rivaled the walls in Fremmevilla’s capital, and it provided plenty of protection against monsters.

To the giants, who were used to living within the forest without much extra, the sight of a goblin—a *human* city was very unusual. On top of that, their only reference for a goblin residence was the villagers’ homes which were destroyed the other day. Those buildings and the ones found here were incomparable.

“These are large enough for us to live in.”

It was understandable why that statement drew some agreeing nods. Oberon heard it as well, and he immediately responded. “Don’t joke about that! This is our land, and astragali are not allowed inside. I can’t make an exception for you!”

The hero exchanged a glance with his armiger. “The wall may be splendid, but the buildings inside will just be the same as what we saw before. They will not even serve to get us out of the sun.”

“Indeed. We encountered the same situation before. We will stay in the forest.”

Nav and the Parva Marga approached Kasasagi, which was floating in the air.

“Magister,” said the Parva Marga. “We will wait outside, as that goblin wishes.”

“Hrm,” grumbled Nav. “But I kind of want to take a look inside!”

“Ha ha, don’t do that, Nav,” Ernie replied. “By the way, you two—if you’re going to wait outside, I have a favor to ask of you.”

Ernie opened up his cockpit so he and the two giant children could properly see each other.

◆

The goblin capital was what those living in the undertowns referred to as the overtown.

It was actually large enough to be called a fortress city, and it was safe inside the walls. There was a clear difference compared to the lives they’d been living, in which the threat of monsters was ever present. This place was where the nobles—knights—lived.

The mystic knights led the way, opening the giant gates. The rest of the group followed them into the city.

“Seeing the walls reminds me a little of Fremmevilla,” Addy said.

“It’s been a while since we’ve last seen a real city. But this one has a different air to a Fremmevillan city.”

Adeltrude was looking around, very interested.

A town was the embodiment of human accomplishment and culture, but this one was very different from what she was used to. There were still many trees left inside the walls. And not just trees on the side of roads—half the town was infested with the plant life, some even fusing with the buildings. It was as if, instead of clearing the forest to make this place, they simply changed the forest to be a city.

Ernie cocked his head, feeling a sense of déjà vu, but he quickly decided to put that out of his mind. It had been several hundred years since the expedition force had disappeared in the Great Bocuse Forest. That was plenty of time for the goblins living here to foster their own culture.

With a wealth of feelings and impressions in their hearts, the group proceeded into the center of town.

The buildings got bigger the closer they got to the center. Every once in a while, a mystic knight could be seen standing guard. This area was where the most high-ranking of knights lived—knight runners.

Some of the buildings here were huge and intermittently emitting puffs of smoke. This sight was common in Fremmevilla,

and Ernie quickly realized what the buildings were.

“Those are workshops, aren’t they? There sure are a lot.”

“You’re so attentive to detail. But only for stuff like this…” Addy muttered.

As if he would ever fail to notice a workshop. Ernie had already memorized the locations of every one of them in this town. The fact that he only did this for the workshops was just like him.

Eventually, the group reached the center of town, where the largest building in the settlement by a sizable margin—the castle—was. Apparently all people in authority thought the same way.

Once they were right in front of the castle, Oberon turned around. “Welcome, guests, to my town and my castle! Allow me to show you my hospitality!”

◆

The pair from Fremmevilla didn’t have time to catch their breath after reaching the castle; Oberon had immediately summoned them.

Wondering what he wanted, they’d answered, only to find a truly lavish banquet being prepared and a grinning Oberon. He seemed to have a rather sincere side, as he had done just as he’d promised.

The banquet was actually much larger than Ernie and Addy were expecting.

The venue was a large room which ended up packed with dishes. The food wasn’t just plentiful; it was all elaborate as well. A group of apparent musicians were in a corner, playing a gentle tune.

This was certainly what was promised, but it was still a little much for a simple pair of travelers. Naturally, Ernie, Addy, and Oberon weren’t the only ones in attendance. There was already a crowd when the Fremmevillans entered the room.

“Oho… So they are guests from the west?”

“I heard that they’re knight runners who control mystic knights, but they’re just children.”

“That’s not necessarily true. Mere children wouldn’t be summoned so grandly.”

“I don’t know about that. Our king…”

Everyone's eyes were concentrated on Ernie and Addy. The venue was filled with this land's nobles, and they clearly didn't yet have all the details, so rumors abounded.

In the midst of all this, Oberon was the only one who seemed happy. "All the morsels in that poor excuse of a village were tasteless things. Eat whatever you like! Now come, everyone, have a taste!"

As soon as permission came, Ernie and Addy dug in ferociously. They'd survived stubbornly in the forest, but all their meals had been *wild*, to say the least. It had been a long time since they'd tasted a real dish. It was enough to blow away all hesitation and thoughts of holding back.

"Ha ha ha! So what do you think of our food, guests?" Oberon asked.

"It's different from what we'd eat in Fremmevilla, but it's good in its own right!" Addy exclaimed.

"Indeed, this is very delicious," Ernie said. "The meat is so tender. Is it not from a monster?"

The attention of the nobles gathered upon them, creating what could hardly be described as a comfortable atmosphere, but the pair concerned seemed to not care.

After all, the two of them were central figures in the Order of the Silver Phoenix. Tension and nervousness had been completely ripped out of their personal dictionaries to be replaced with courage and boldness in large font and bold typeface.

"They are not; we have livestock here!" Oberon confirmed. "We don't have to go out of our way to challenge monsters like the astragali. That being said... You two eat well. You do indeed."

Instead, the gathered nobles were the ones that seemed shocked and disgusted. They'd stopped eating. They were unable to get the measure of the travelers who'd come from beyond the forest.

Though it was somewhat awkward, the banquet proceeded amicably, at least on the surface.

"I must say, thank you for this warm welcome. It is truly more than we deserve," said Ernie.

"Oh, it's nothing. Don't worry about it! This is a reunion between brethren who've been separated for far too long!" Oberon replied.

The pair were talking casually with Oberon now that their

bellies had been filled. The nobles, meanwhile, were too cautious to make a move, which was why Oberon had become the spearhead.

Oberon raised his hand, and the nobles puffed out their chests and nodded. To them, being the guardians of this land was a large source of pride. Finally, they jumped into the conversation.

“We lived surrounded by astragali after being stranded in the forest, but it wasn’t too terrible a life.”

“It wasn’t. We managed to build this city, after all.”

“Our parents borrowed the help of the astragali to survive in this land. Even so, being under their feet like this has significant meaning.”

“Which was why we needed the mystic knights.”

“Exactly. It is because we are here that we can live close to the astragali.”

“I hear our guests from the west are knight runners, despite their appearances.”

“Oh? Then I would love to see their abilities.”

The nobles’ gazes grew sharper. They were trying to ascertain how powerful the foreigners were. A warrior’s habits were the same anywhere.

“Yes, we are,” Ernie confirmed. “I led a knight order back home.”

The nobles furrowed their brows for a moment in doubt, but that soon turned into small chuckles. They’d taken Ernie’s answer as a joke. Meanwhile, Ernie’s smile deepened, though none of them noticed.

“Now now, just wait,” Oberon interjected. “Proposing all that apropos of nothing will just trouble our guests.” He made a show of rubbing his chin and thinking, but it didn’t take long for him to rap his fist into his palm, signaling that he’d come up with a good idea. “Oh, that’s it! I know how to display your strength for all to see. What do you think about showing off your silhouette knight to them, guests?”

“That would be difficult, I’m sorry to say. I left it behind, after all,” Ernie replied.

Oberon’s expression puckered up. “What’s this, honored guest? You left your precious silhouette knight in the care of the astragali? It is good to get along with them, but are you sure you can trust them so?”

“I can. Nav and Par are members of my knight order. They won’t go back on their word.”

A restrained titter spread among the nobles. They didn’t know about Ernie’s relationship with the Caelleus. The goblins were under the control of giants, while Ernie was in an equal (or rather, controlling) relationship with them. What they could see from their respective positions was totally different.

Then, it was Ernie’s turn to have an idea. “Then let us do this. Why don’t you lend me one of your mystic knights? I believe that would be enough to see my skills.”

“Oh no, Ernie’s starting…” Addy muttered.

“Ha! Ha! Ha! I see, so that’s what you want,” said Oberon.

Ernie and the king grinned at each other. Their smiles were amicable but somewhat troubled. Actually, it was clear enough that the surrounding nobles noticed the suffocating atmosphere.

“I would love to lend out a mystic knight for the sake of my guests…but they belong to the knight runners. I can’t give that order too lightly!” Oberon said.

“Oh, that’s too bad. Then I suppose I’ll have to ask one of the nobles here.” Ernie looked around, but all the nobles averted their gazes. None of them wanted to be caught in the middle of the strange tension between Ernie and the king.

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t trouble them so, guest,” Oberon said. “Still, hrm… I see you have an interest in our mystic knights.”

“Yes, I do,” Ernie admitted. “I wish to know of the struc—I mean, power of the knights that protect this land.”

“You need to watch out, Ernie. Your real intentions are leaking out,” said Addy.

Oberon clapped his hands together. “I may be a king, but I would still hesitate to make unreasonable demands of them. So how about this? Tell us about your silhouette knight, and we will try to recreate it. This would be a good way to show each other our skills, no?”

“I see. Unfortunately, recreating it would be impossible without returning home.”

The very air seemed to freeze with tension and vibrate with strain. The next instant, Ernie and the king let out quiet laughs. The nobles gulped as they watched the situation unfold.

“Home, huh? You should desire to return as well. But you

require that ship to do so, don't you? And the aid of mere villagers would not help you make one."

"I agree. Such a task would be too much for them."

"But I believe it would be possible for us to eventually create such a ship. Even more so if you were to help." Oberon's expression stiffened as he fixed Ernie with a serious look. "If you help…we could consider what to do after we defeat Genos De Rubel. There is no reason for us to stay without the protection of the astragali."

The air around the nobles also seemed to change. They aligned their wills with their king's. The silent pressure crept upon Ernie, but he still cocked his head and asked, "Would those from the undertowns be able to board these ships?"

There was a long pause before Oberon answered. "Of course. But…there are many of them. We will need time to take them all."

Still, that was enough for Ernie. With an exceptional smile, he replied, "Allow me to think about it."

"Hmm… I suppose I can allow that. Don't think you can get away with wasting time, though," Oberon replied.

Eventually, the banquet ended, and everyone left.

◆

Ernie and Addy were given a room in the castle. Also, because Addy insisted, they were both staying in the same room.

Though it was quite different from the palace in Fremmevilla, their place generally had all the facilities they needed. Addy walked around, checking what was inside.

"Oh, a real bed! And it looks like it's big enough for both of us!"

"It really does seem like they're welcoming us, but there's still a guard standing watch outside the room."

Though they were accepted on the surface, they were still foreigners. A lot of caution was paid toward their actions.

"I don't care about that! Let's relax and have a good sleep tonight, Ernie!"

"That sounds nice. But before that…" Ernie's gaze turned to the window. It was fitted with iron bars so that the occupants of the room couldn't leave easily. "Why don't we have a little nighttime date, Addy?"

With a great, joyful smile, Ernie took hold of a Winchester on his hip.

◆

The veil of night had fallen over the goblin town.

The buildings fused with trees let out a unique groaning and also made for a strange silhouette to the townscape in the night. Addy panned her gaze around as she stood on the walls of the castle in the center.

She let out a deep sigh of resignation. “Yeah, I knew it would be like this.”

“From what I remember coming in here, there should be a workshop over that way. Let’s hurry.” Ernie was right next to her, pointing off into the darkness. Even in this unfamiliar town, his obsession with robots was alive and well.

Having a good sense of direction and the ability to memorize maps was an essential skill for knight runners. Ernie was a knight captain too, so he needed it even more in order to properly take command and decide headings. So, he was able to remember locations after seeing them once—especially workshops.

He quickly found what he was looking for and jumped off into the night.

“Oh well, it’s Ernie.” The wind coming from the forest gently caressed Addy’s hair. She let out a strained chuckle before grabbing her gunlike staff and chased after Ernie, racing off through the nighttime townscape.

So why were they able to run through the town like this when there were guards assigned to watch their room? Simple: Mere iron bars would never be enough to contain Ernie with all his equipment.

They’d easily removed the window and left the room, reaching the roof by climbing up the wall. After that, they simply used Aero Thrust like usual to move as they pleased and go on their sightseeing date across the night sky.

Even if they were to come across something that was clearly being kept secret, Ernie wouldn’t hold back. “Now then, we’re at the workshop.”

“It doesn’t look that different from what we see in Fremmevilla.”

Despite the passage of hundreds of years, Fremmevilla and the goblins still had some similarities to their cultures. Workshops were among them; they tended to prioritize practicality because of how large they often ended up being. It was only natural for these types of facilities to seem similar everywhere.

"Then there should be an air vent somewhere... There it is," Ernie said.

"Are we really going to sneak in?" Addy asked.

"Of course. They wouldn't tell us much about mystic knights, which means they're telling us to find out for ourselves."

"That's definitely wrong, but it's impossible to stop you, Ernie."

They descended smoothly as they talked and entered the air vent. They managed to infiltrate fairly easily, because people normally wouldn't find it possible to come from such high places.

"Is anyone here? Doesn't look like it. Then without further ado..."

Thick darkness seemed to pool in the empty nighttime workshop. There was no lighting anywhere.

Ernie fixed a small Torch spell in place at the tip of his gunstaff, and it served to provide some light around them. They padded along the beam near the ceiling that served as an overhead crane track. Eventually, they came to the wall of the workshop, and they could see giant forms through the unreliable light.

"Mystic knights..." Ernie muttered.

It was a familiar sight, yet unfamiliar at the same time.

Mystic knights used to be silhouette knights a long time ago but had changed after long years of repeated maintenance and repairs. Neither of them knew whether this was purely because they used monster parts in the repairs, or because there was some plan in place as they changed from their original forms...

"Now, let's see what you're made of." With excited footsteps, Ernie traipsed over to a mystic knight.

Addy followed, giving the mystic knight a close look. "It really is kind of...weird. I like silhouette knights better."

"I can see the effort they put into maintaining these, despite having to use different materials. This is good in its own way."

"You'll say that about anything, Ernie."

Ernie climbed up the machine as they spoke, slipping onto its torso. There was a quiet *click* before the torso armor jumped up

with a jet of pressurized air.

“Heh heh! I’m glad the device to open the cockpit is the same,” said Ernie.

“So it really is related to a silhouette knight, despite how it looks.”

Ernie jumped into the cockpit and gripped the control yokes with practiced ease. Beyond the cool feel of the controls lay flowing mana, and he could feel the connecting passages. Ernie’s face lit up with a satisfied smile. “I knew it would be difficult to completely take apart. I’ll start with taking a look at your magius engine.”

Just like old silhouette knights, the mystic knight’s magius engine was unprotected against hacking. Though no one could be blamed for not anticipating someone as abnormal as Ernie.

His mind captured the massive amount of script stored in the magius engine and understood it in full. “As expected, it’s all familiar. Moving the machine, controlling output…but there’s something I haven’t seen before deep inside. So this is the secret.”

It described a function that was in mystic knights, but not silhouette knights. The quality of Ernie’s smile changed.

“It’s been a while since I’ve done an analysis. I hope I haven’t gotten rusty.” As he spoke, he unflinchingly dove into the script. The basics of analysis were categorization and comparison. He recalled all the scripts he’d ever learned, trying to find any semblance to what was in front of him.

There was an insane amount of script to go through, but that didn’t bother Ernesti. In fact, his calculation ability for magic was one of his biggest superpowers.

He wanted to find out how much humanoid weaponry had evolved in this unfamiliar land after so much time. Like a child opening a birthday present, he proceeded to analyze with extreme joy.

While Ernie was absorbed in analyzing in the cockpit, Addy examined the mystic knight itself. Its looks didn’t match her tastes, but it wasn’t as if she had no interest in it at all. Also, she was bored having to just wait there.

Because the goblins were under astragali control, there were a lot of restrictions placed on what they could do. The most painful had to do with the acquisition of resources. The astragali had

priority on claiming what small amounts of metal were obtained, so it was hard for the goblins to come by.

Meanwhile, they had a wealth of monster materials.

The Great Bocuse Forest was said to be a paradise for monsters. They had plenty of opportunity to fight monsters, whether it be for self-defense or hunting. Monster materials (assuming they could actually defeat said monster) were easy to replenish. To back that up, Ernie had used monster materials in Kasasagi as well.

“It’s even weirder than it looks. And it’s not cute,” Addy said with a pout. She made a quick inspection of the limbs and torso, which resulted in her looking rather perplexed.

She was also well-versed in silhouette knight construction, though not as much as Ernie. Any knight runner would have some knowledge of the machines they rode, but she had history in helping manufacture them.

“Huh? This isn’t an intake vent.” That was why she noticed that a covered tube on the torso didn’t seem to belong. “I wonder what it’s connected to. Intakes and outtakes are useless if they aren’t connected to the ether reactor. Not to mention, I can see an Emblem Graph on the inside.”

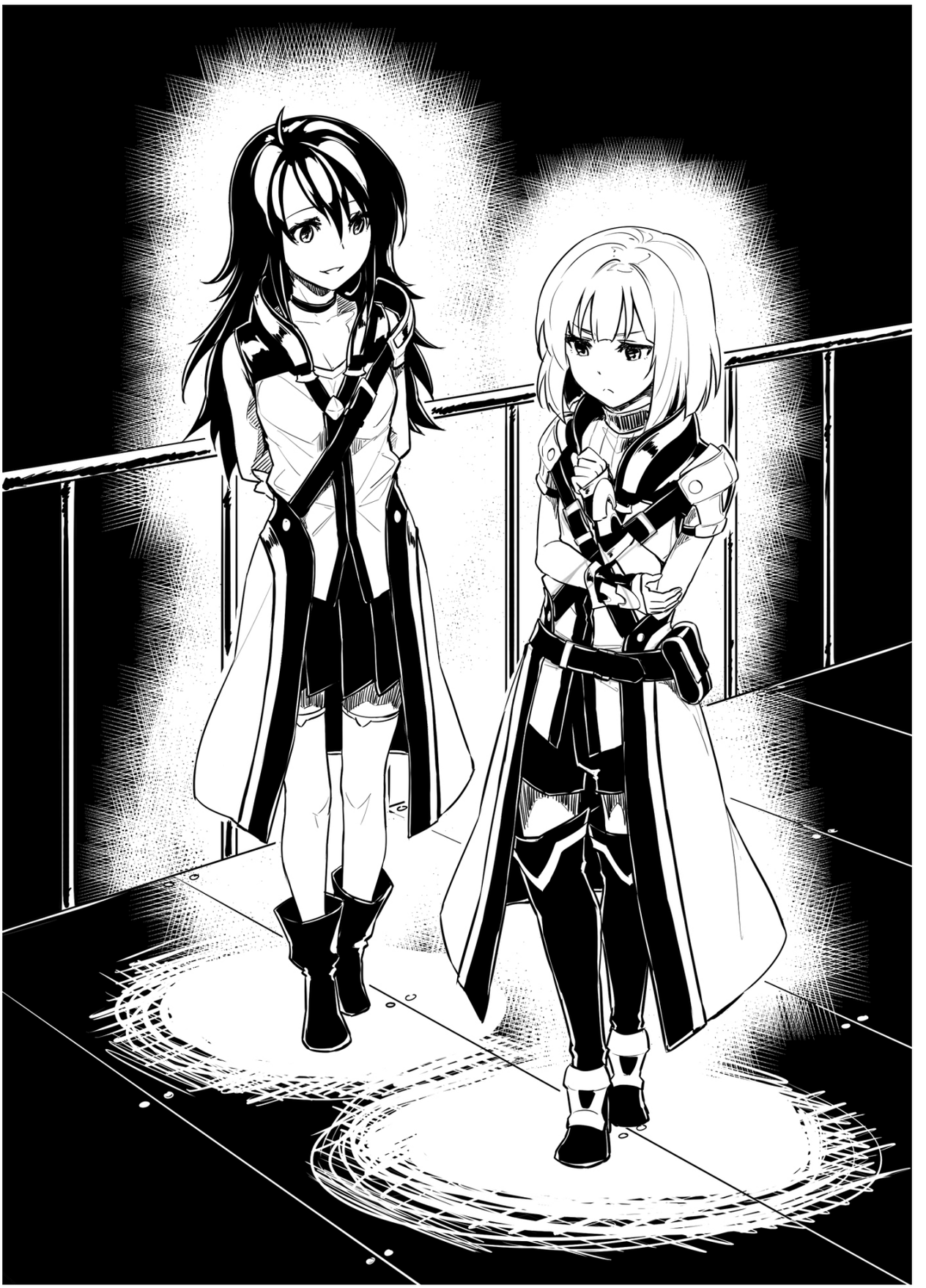
The intake system existed to be able to provide ether to the ether reactor. Naturally, there was no need to line such things with Emblem Graphs. It actually resembled a Magius Jet Thruster, but such technology should not exist in this place.

“Hmm… I can’t tell what the script is!” She tried to read the Emblem Graph but quickly gave up. It was littered with script that she’d never seen, which made it Ernie’s territory. “Hey, Ernie, I found something weird.”

“You found something too?”

“Yeah. What did you find?”

The Torch spell illuminated Ernie’s form inside the cockpit. He was likely still going through the script, as he spoke without really focusing on her.



“There was a strange script in the magius engine. Normally such a function should be unnecessary, so…” Ernie looked confused.

Addy cocked her head. Ernie had thus far managed to solve everything on his own, so this was rare.

“Among all the scripts I know, the one that most resembles it is…the lifesong. But that is the greatest secret of the alves, and no human should be able to use it. Why am I finding it here?” Ernie wondered aloud.

The question melted into the night air. Strangely, it felt like the question itself held an extremely important meaning to it.

“Mystic knights…” Ernie muttered. “It seems they aren’t just distant relatives of the silhouette knight. Now I’m really interested.”

That was when they heard noise.

If they could believe their senses, it came from far away, but it also occurred from multiple places at once.

“Someone’s coming, aren’t they?” Addy said.

“Hrm, it seems we’ve been found out. And things were just starting to get fun…” Ernie heaved a disappointed sigh, but he acted quickly.

They returned the mystic knight to its former state and quickly erased all traces of their presence before returning to the beam near the ceiling. Once they were up near the air vent, Ernie erased the Torch spell.

The workshop interior descended into darkness as noisy footsteps drew near. The pair cautiously looked around and could see someone with a light source. This place was likely to be flooded with people before long. Knowing they shouldn’t overstay their welcome, Ernie and Addy left.

◆

The night deepened, but the goblin town that should have been asleep had suddenly been forced awake.

Lights went on all over town, and hectic footsteps clomped about all over. The same went for the castle. In fact, it only got more hectic closer to the center of town.

Ernesti and Addy, back in their room, heard a knock on the

door.

After a pause, one of them answered, “Yes? Come in.”

Several figures entered the room: Oberon and several hangers-on. Ernie and Addy—who’d just returned—welcomed their guests with looks of innocence.

“What’s wrong?” Ernie asked.

“Sorry for the late visit! I know this is sudden, but we have some rather urgent business,” said Oberon.

“Business, you say?”

It seemed this wasn’t about their little nighttime jaunt. Did he know about it? Did he just not care? The king was unreadable. Though it was clear he was unhappy.

“Yes, business. Well, there’s no use hiding it. An order just came in from Genos De Rubel,” Oberon announced.

Ernie and Addy exchanged looks, surprised. Oberon took that reaction in a different way, nodding as if he understood their feelings.

“Damn them. They really only think of us as expendable underlings. Calling us on a whim like this!” He clenched his fist, but quickly let go. “Soon enough, we’ll repay them for all they’ve done. But for now, we can’t have them catch on. We must obey their orders.”

With that, Oberon stood. It seemed he really didn’t have time and had just come to give the bare minimum of explanations.

“Anyway, now you know. We’ve been given a job to do. I’d much prefer to continue our conversations, but it doesn’t seem like that’s going to happen. I’d love it if you would just wait here quietly for a while, guests.”

“We understand. It’s too bad, but there’s no other choice,” said Ernie.

“My thanks for your understanding. I’ll assign someone to you. Just talk to them if you ever need anything.”

Oberon wrapped the conversation up in a hurry before leaving just as fast as he’d come. After seeing them off, Ernie and Addy breathed out a sigh of relief.

“That was a little close, Ernie.”

“It was, and it would be impossible to take our time investigating with this much noise. Still…” He crossed his arms and cocked his head. “What did those Rubels say?”

The dark town outside was alive with boisterous noise. What were the giants and goblins up to? Ernie and Addy didn't have the ability to see through the veil.

◆

Wind blew furiously across the night sky.

The nocturnal monsters that roamed the forest used the faint moonlight to see as they looked up.

The night should have been filled with the silence of sleep, but a large shadow broke that silence as it calmly swam by. A howl came from the forest, as if to follow it.

Blinking lights that did not belong to the stars of the sky drew small lines in the night. There were many smaller objects present around the larger shadow like a school of fish. The large shadow's finlike sail fluttered, catching the wind.

There were actually multiple of these ships that swam through the sky instead of the sea—levitating ships. They flew large flags with a crest of a sword, shield, and plants. Below the crest was a silver phoenix spreading its wings. Only one knight order in all the west and east was allowed to fly this crest.

The Order of the Silver Phoenix.

They were once again braving the forest to retrieve the two they'd left behind.

Those bug-type monsters were no doubt lurking in the dark woods. The knights were filled with a sense of worry; they didn't know how long their captain would be able to fight those things without his beloved machine. But more than that, they held within them an intense heat like a glowing ember.

At the center of the fleet was the flagship, the Wing Carrier *Izumo*. They flew toward the dawn sky.

The flagship was surrounded by landing ships, cargo ships, and many windine-style silhouette knights. This fleet was the largest in the land, and it had come together to resist the forest of monsters.

It wouldn't take long for them to reunite with their captain.

However, said captain was currently in the middle of a large war that would affect the fate of the entire continent.

—To be continued in *Knight's & Magic 8*

Hisago Amazake-no

Lives in Hakata.
It has been nearly a year since the comic version was serialized. I've been enjoying seeing Ernie drawn so vibrantly... Oh crap, at this rate, the comic will catch up to the novels. I'll do my best.

Kurogin

An illustrator and mecha designer who has worked on character designs for mobile games and light novel illustrations such as the *Gundam Age* light novel series.


story by
HISAGO
AMAZAKE-NO
illustrations by
KUROGIN
The figures were far smaller than the heated giants—just regular humans. They were Ernie and Addy.
Knight's
&Magic
7


Ernie ordered Kasasagi to let go of the Parva Marga.
“Magister?! What are—Huh?”
She quickly realized that she wasn’t falling. The rainbow ring under Kasasagi was supporting her as well.


“Canister Shot.”
Piercing Lance spells came from both Ernie and the wire anchors in a wild scatter, impacting the weapon.

Guairelinde

Main Pilot: Dietrich Künitz

specs

Height: 10.4 m
Operational
Weight: 20.6 t
Equipment: Longsword x4, Lightning Flail, Shotel, Magius Jet Thrusters



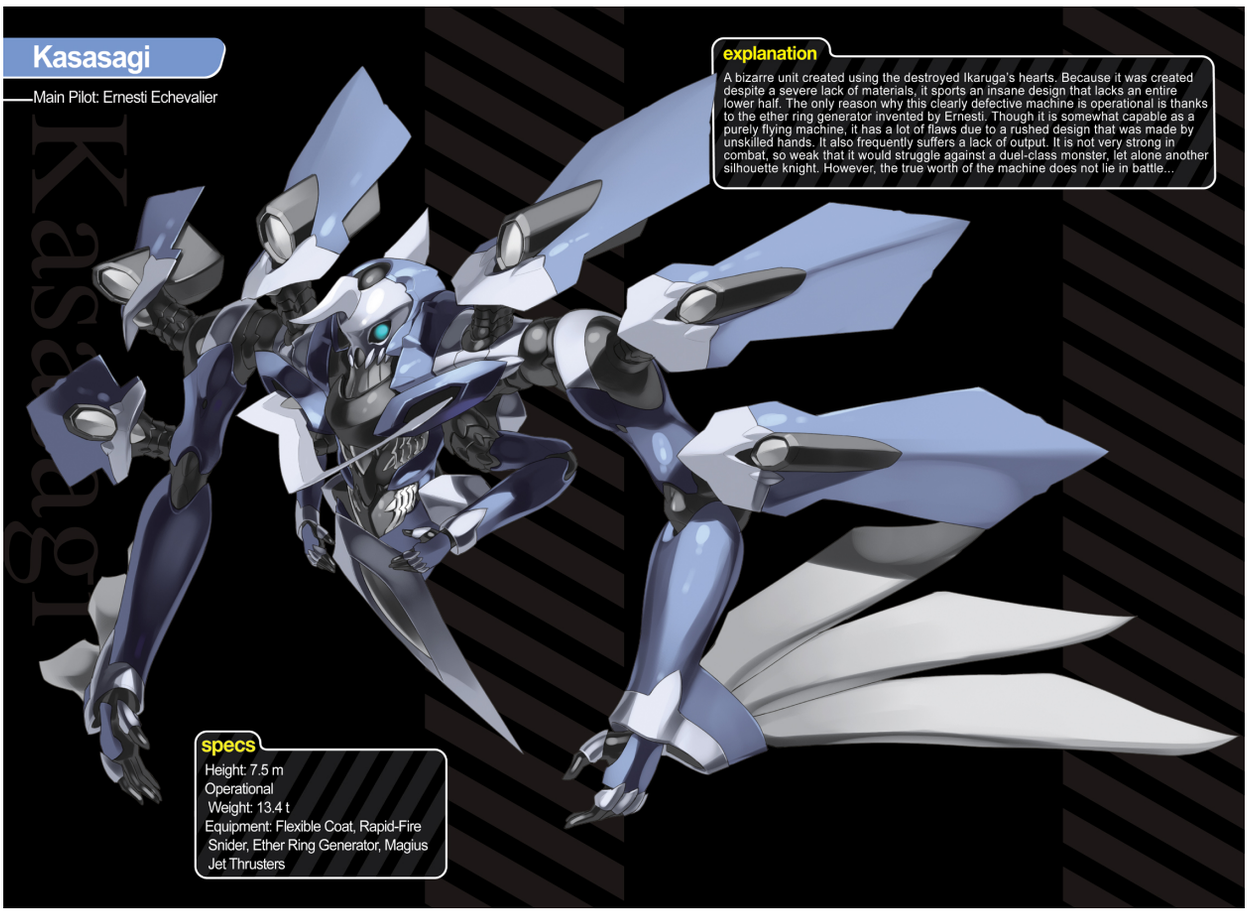
Guairelinde

explanation

A company commander unit created during the founding of the Order of the Silver Phoenix. It serves as the flag unit of Second Company. Though it uses Guaire as a base, several changes have been made that essentially make it a completely different machine. Most significantly, it is the only close-combat unit other than Ikaruga equipped with Magius Jet Thrusters. Though the output of the thrusters have been restricted, the thrusters have been used as a trump card to great effect. This unit carries a great number of weapons for a single silhouette knight, so while it exhibits high performance, it is also extremely tricky to pilot. It is basically the exact opposite of its fellow company commander unit, Aldiradcumber, which is extremely easy to pilot.

Kasasagi

Main Pilot: Ernesti Echevalier



explanation

A bizarre unit created using the destroyed Ikaruga's hearts. Because it was created despite a severe lack of materials, it sports an insane design that lacks an entire lower half. The only reason why this clearly defective machine is operational is thanks to the ether ring generator invented by Ernesti. Though it is somewhat capable as a purely flying machine, it has a lot of flaws due to a rushed design that was made by unskilled hands. It also frequently suffers a lack of output. It is not very strong in combat, so weak that it would struggle against a duel-class monster, let alone another silhouette knight. However, the true worth of the machine does not lie in battle...

specs

Height: 7.5 m
Operational Weight: 13.4 t
Equipment: Flexible Coat, Rapid-Fire Snider, Ether Ring Generator, Magius Jet Thrusters

Knight's & Magic 7

INTRODUCTION

Anime confirmed!
The manga is also doing well!

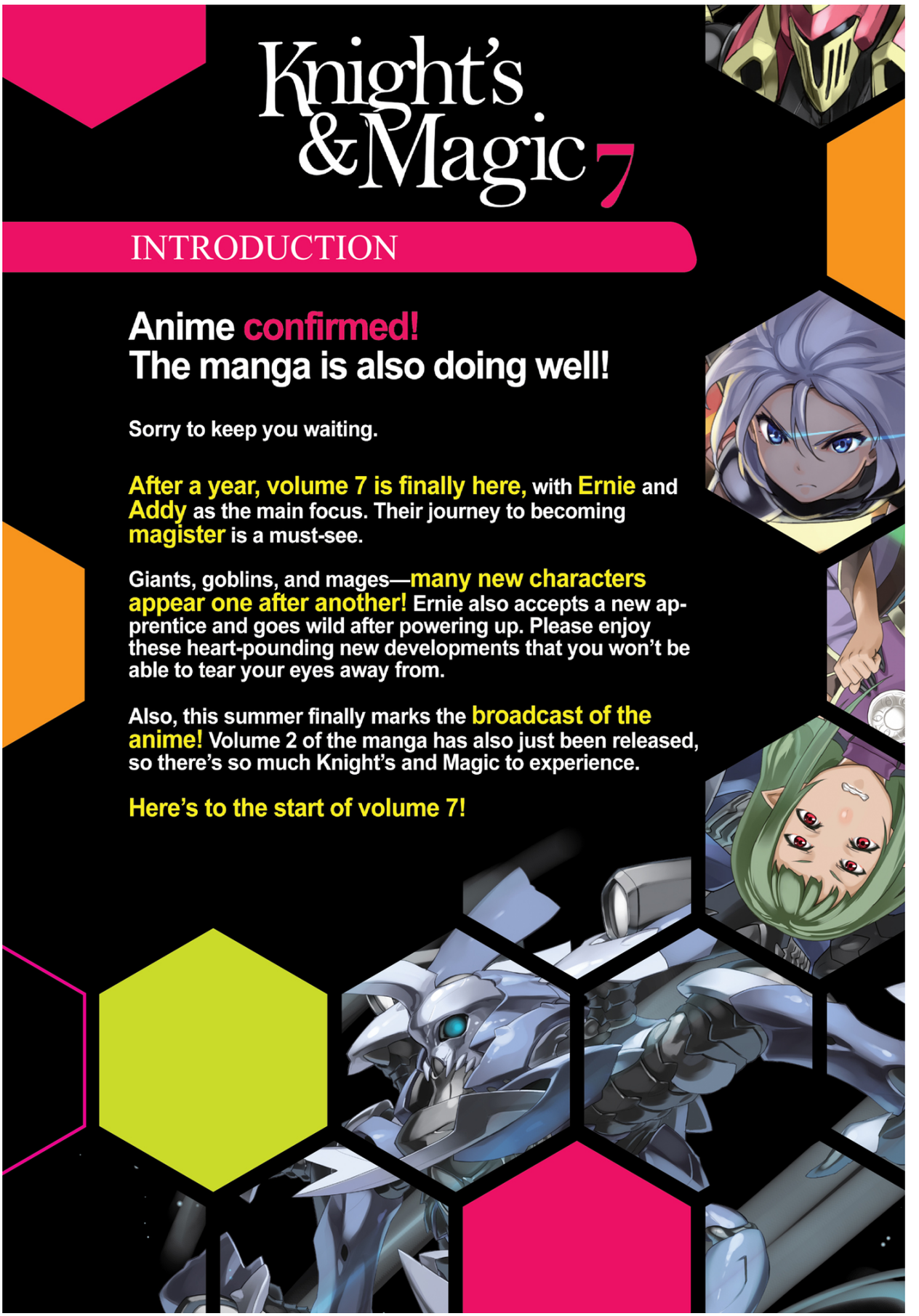
Sorry to keep you waiting.

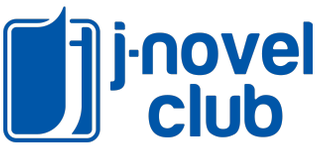
After a year, volume 7 is finally here, with **Ernie** and **Addy** as the main focus. Their journey to becoming **magister** is a must-see.

Giants, goblins, and mages—**many new characters appear one after another!** Ernie also accepts a new apprentice and goes wild after powering up. Please enjoy these heart-pounding new developments that you won't be able to tear your eyes away from.

Also, this summer finally marks the **broadcast of the anime!** Volume 2 of the manga has also just been released, so there's so much Knight's and Magic to experience.

Here's to the start of volume 7!





Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 8 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Knight’s & Magic: Volume 7
by Hisago Amazake-no
Illustrations by Kurogin

Translated by Kevin Chen
Edited by Lyn Hall

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Knight’s & Magic
© Hisago Amazake-no 2017
All rights reserved.

Originally published in Japan by Imagica Infos Co., Ltd.
Through Shufunotomo Co., Ltd.
Translation rights arranged with Shufunotomo Co., Ltd.
English translation © 2025 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author’s intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: July 2025