Knight's & Magic



story by
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Knight's & Magic: Volume 1 [Complete]

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Prologue

Dusk had long since fallen, and the persistent summer sun was gently easing itself into hiding under the horizon. As the shadows grew ever deeper and more distinct, the asphalt which had absorbed so much heat during the day was letting go of its warmth. Once again, it seemed the night would be doomed to a heat which would make it hard to sleep.

Such was the common scenery that could be found here in K city of K prefecture.

Among the throng of buildings clustered around one of the city's train station entrances, there was a certain multipurpose building that was almost hidden in the noise. There, on the fourth floor, existed the offices of a midsized software company—K-soft Works.

This air-conditioned floor was host to several men sitting silently at their neatly arranged desks, facing their monitors while surrounded by a bizarre atmosphere. They were all employees of K-soft Works, and while they were often busy working due to the demands of their midsize company, today was on a different level altogether.

"Only three days until the deadline..."

One of the men, sitting in a corner of the room, muttered incoherently to himself in a voice tinged with despair. Right now, he was embroiled in an intense battle against time—trying to fend off the time bomb that was a fast approaching deadline. The project he was in charge of had stunk of danger right from the planning stages. It was a matter the company, driven by the dark clouds of economic recession, had accepted knowing full well its recklessness. On top of that inherent danger, mistake had piled upon mistake until the disaster that was their current situation. And the problems didn't stop there.

"Nakai-san, Satou's collapsed! He didn't wake up even after I splashed water on him!"

"Nakai-san, if we don't finish our coding by today we won't make it!"

“Nakai-san, I found a letter of resignation on Takeda’s desk...”

“NGAAAHHH SHUT UUUUUPP!!! How could anyone expect to make the deadline like this?!”

The bad news kept coming like an avalanche even as they were already backed into a corner. And finally Nakai, the team leader, snapped, falling flat onto his desk clutching his head in his hands.

However, they didn’t even have the leeway for such coping mechanisms. On top of being short-staffed, their work was never-ending. And all the while, the deadline crept closer and closer. In this situation, with no salvation in sight, Nakai was reaching his breaking point.

“Nakai-san.”

“What is it this time?!”

A voice called down to Nakai as he slumped against his desk. When he looked up with bloodshot eyes, what greeted him was a man wearing a gentle smile.

“I finished my own project over there, so I can help you with yours if you’d like.”

“Ohh...Kurata...you’ll help?” Nakai’s expression did a one-eighty from the depths of despair to the heights of hope.

“I just checked your specification docs, so I understand the general situation. Could you let me handle the progress management?”

“Y-Yeah, okay. In fact, I’ll give you the password so you can look at the master folder all you want. Check through the rest while you’re at it too.”

“No, there’s no way I’d be able to handle everything, Nakai-san... Yeah, looks like you’re dragging on the coding part. Then I’ll mainly take over that...”

The man who had called out to Nakai, Kurata Tsubasa, started to work furiously as soon as he sat at the desk that was prepared for him. He ran code through a text editor, checked the progress of the project, and gave quick orders to those around him as he flipped through the specification document.

“Secure the test machines. Also, the testers should rest now while they can. Yeah, I’m going to push through some trials once the date changes. Also,

Tachihara-san will take care of coding. Can you do two modules? Yeah, I'll handle the other ten. Mokuba, the records for this part and this part of the specification document look off, so fix that. I'll have you help with the tests once you're done."

He was twenty-eight years old and among the youngest men in the company, but everyone listened to his orders. This was all thanks to the achievements he'd racked up ever since he started. The other employees—who had up until now looked half-dead—suddenly seemed much more lively as they got to work.

Kurata had earned a somewhat special nickname among the employees in the company. It was said that the moment he appeared, there was a light at the end of the tunnel. Humans value tangible signs of progress, so they're able to endure intense hardship as long as the end is in sight.

"Okay, that takes care of that. I should get to work."

"Yo, Kurata, you really think you can do it? Ten modules is a crazy amount."

"Oh come on, did you forget, Tachihara-san? My work title is technically 'programmer.'"

Kurata put his hands to the keyboard with a confident smile and a twinkle in his drooping eyes. He quickly started typing at a speed faster than the human eye could follow, his fingers dancing across the keyboard as new text appeared like a waterfall, flowing down multiple text editor windows that were displayed on his monitor. While listening to the heroic sound of keystrokes being made at almost inhuman speed, the man sitting across from him, Tachihara, started on his own work.

"Should have expected as much from the man who's only been given terrible projects over and over—the company's 'Final Defensive Front.' I can't just sit around, then."

After that, the employees all immersed themselves in their work as the battle barreled toward its climax.

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A discordant chime reached his ears, issuing from an old speaker. The clock on the wall noted that the time was 5:15 p.m.—in other words, it was time to go

home. The public front the company promulgated was that according to regulations this was closing time. After giving a big yawn, Kurata flexed his tired shoulders.

It had been three days since he reinforced the failing project team. However, the atmosphere now was very different from the one three days ago, when it seemed like everyone was backed into a corner. While before they had to face the very real possibility that they would fail to meet the deadline, his miraculous skills had brought them back from the brink.

Thanks to his astounding work speed that allowed him to finish the programming within the day, the fact that he continued testing day and night, and the tireless efforts of him and the other team members who kept dealing with any problems that arose, they somehow managed to meet the deadline. It could be said that Kurata's skills were abnormal given that they were able to finish the work even though they were so rushed. Sadly, that was also the reason why he was always given such hard and dangerous jobs.

Having just gone through a fierce fight, Kurata's desk played host to multiple cans of coffee and energy drinks, lined up like gravestones. He looked to his side to see that his fellow brave warriors, the ones running the test machines, were sleeping while using lined up chairs as beds, peaceful smiles on their faces along with a pallor that made it seem like they were near death. They had eschewed sleep as much as was physically possible for the last three days, and were now making up for that.

"All right, the notification of delivery is done! We're finished! Good work, everyone. You can rest now!"

Nakai was doing a little jig, so overjoyed that he was on the verge of pumping his fist in excitement. Kurata was watching him, already half asleep. Though he would have preferred to sleep at home if possible, he couldn't help but fall to the temptation of a short nap. In the end, they would barely catch the last train of the day.

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Time had passed since that battle to the death, and the end of the month was on the horizon. As for what was special about the end of the month—it was a

blessed day to all office workers around the world: payday.

Kurata turned off his computer and hurried to gather his things to leave. He wasn't the only one doing so, as one by one other employees also stood up. Given the social climate these days, labor unions had been crying out for the cutting of work hours. They had been especially forceful about making sure employees are able to leave work promptly at the end of the workday on paydays. That being said, any compliance by companies became in name only whenever there was a crunch. However, given that they'd just crested a mountain the other day, these particular employees had earned some leeway.

It also happened that today was Friday. Some would hurry back to their families, others would group up to spend their just-earned pay on entertainment, and some would simply return home to rest. Everyone had their own plans, but the room was filled with excitement since every office worker's favorite day and the weekend had overlapped.

That was when Kurata was approached by his fellow employees, who had been battling alongside him until just the other day.

"How about it, Kurata? You helped us a lot, so I can treat you if you like." Nakai made a drinking motion, and Kurata could also see Tachihara, Mokuba, and the other team members behind him as well.

Kurata was about to say yes, but then his prior plans came to mind, and he hesitated. "Ahh, sorry Nakai-san. I have something else to do today, so I'll have to pass."

"He's talking about *that*, Nakai-san. His hobby."

"Ahh...*that*, huh? Too bad then; guess we'll just have to make up for it next time."

"Sure thing."

After seeing Nakai and the others off as they filed out of the office, Kurata left for his own destination. Though he was nicknamed the company's Final Defensive Front and was relied on by all of his fellow employees regardless of age, he also had a very distinctive hobby that was widely known throughout the company.

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The streets were filled with office workers going home for the weekend, walking along surrounded by summer's distinctive hot and damp air. The street in front of the station was crowded with an endless stream of people, but all that suddenly disappeared a small distance from the entrance.

"Over! Time! Pay! Yes, got it in full!!!"

A single man, more specifically Kurata, shouted in joy while standing in front of an ATM. If it weren't for the fact that it was an automated machine, he might have been reported as a suspicious person.

The reason for his outburst was the digital number displayed on the screen of the ATM. His many incredibly busy days—half of them spent laboring on projects that were downright dangerous—had come back to him in the form of overtime pay, pushing his account balance up to new heights.

He quickly withdrew some money before running off, smiling broadly all the while. His strides were sure, reflecting the fact that he'd marched this same path many times before.

Eventually, he arrived at a certain facility: a building containing a large electronics retail store. The third floor of the building was also home to this neighborhood's largest toy store—and that was his destination.

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A couple hours later, a man left the store, the chime of the shop's closing doors jingling behind him.

"Just as I'd expect from the end-of-month rush. Wonderful, just wonderful."

The paper bag in his hands was stuffed to the brim. His purchase had to be double-bagged for safety. The bag he had slung over his back was also filled to bursting, swelling to a strange shape. His bags were mostly filled with plastic model kits. In other words, he was an avid plastic modeler.

"I also stocked up on plenty of surface primer, paints, brushes, and filters... The festival of plastic models is on the horizon..."

Spending his money on paydays for a huge purchase and then enjoying a

frenzy of plastic modeling was Kurata's big hobby in his otherwise busy life. The number of models he bought was huge, and his collection only grew year by year, probably as a reaction to his normally cramped and rigid lifestyle. This culminated in his habit of buying in bulk once a month. In a sense, he was showing signs of addiction.

Even so, he couldn't suppress the smile that was spreading across his face as he happily made his way home, huge haul in hand, unconcerned by any odd looks he was getting. The apartment he lived in was a little ways away from his workplace, on the other side of the train station. The electronics retail store he stopped at was a fair detour, but even the return seemed fun to him thanks to the haul of models in his arms.

Under the cover of night, Kurata excitedly made his way through an empty looking residential area, practically on the verge of humming to himself with joy. Given the late hour, there were no cars on the road and everything was quiet.

This silence was abruptly broken as he suddenly heard the engine of an approaching vehicle. Suddenly, headlights shined brightly in his face, disabling his vision. The overwhelming glare of those stabbing high beams forced him to squint hard as he moved to the side of the road. The road itself wasn't narrow, but he couldn't afford to risk his haul getting damaged. Even though Kurata couldn't help but put on a sour expression thinking of the trouble this vehicle was causing the entire neighborhood, he nevertheless paid no further mind to it and continued walking.

However, the headlights continued to nearly blind him, and by the time he noticed something was off, it was far too late. The car hadn't even tried to avoid him or slow down. By the time Kurata had realized what was about to happen, there was nothing he could do.

"Hey, wait a second! Come on..." The fierce sounds of the engine reverberated in his ears as he was engulfed by the light of the high beams, and he could feel his hackles rise.

There was nowhere to run. With his plastic models in his arms, the car hit him head-on. The next moment, he could hear an unpleasant noise sound out from

the core of his body as he was easily flung into the air. He was unable to maintain his consciousness through the unbelievable pain, but in the brief moment he was still awake, many thoughts ran through Kurata's mind. However, they were neither his life flashing before his eyes nor a sense of hatred over the accident that killed him.

Ahh, so I'll never be able to build any of the models I bought today, or the ones still piled up in my apartment, or any of the ones that'll be released in the future... I'm so mortified!

All he felt was an excessively burning desire for the plastic models he'd left behind.

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"Next on the news: A man was run over tonight at around 10:00 p.m. in a residential area in S district of K city. The victim was an office worker who lived near the area, Kurata Tsubasa-san (age twenty-eight). Thanks to reports from residents in the neighborhood, he was quickly picked up by an ambulance, but unfortunately he passed away from his wounds in the hospital. The ensuing police investigation has uncovered that the driver in question had imbibed copious amounts of alcohol prior to getting in the driver's seat—"

Part 1: School Enrollment Arc

Chapter 1: A Different World

This was a different, unknown world.

There was no name for this world, as the people within had yet to know it in its entirety. They were content to simply consider the land they lived on the entire world. One of these lands was the continent of Setterlund.

Setterlund was divided down the center into eastern and western halves by the Auvinier mountain range. Thanks to this almost perfect barrier, the culture likewise differed greatly between east and west. The west was dominated by humans and played host to a crowded multitude of countries, collectively known as the Occidents. Meanwhile, the east was dominated by the Great Bocuse Forest, in which countless massive, powerful, monstrous beasts lived.

Though the eastern half of Setterlund was inhospitable to humans, they weren't completely without a place. There was exactly one human country that existed in the east: the kingdom of Fremmevilla. Because it bordered the Great Bocuse Forest, the people of this country had to deal with constant invasions by the forest's monsters. The border with the forest was considered the front line of the country's perpetual struggle for survival. Fremmevilla raised many knights in order to combat the frequent appearance of monsters all over their lands, and they prided themselves on being the shield of the western countries. Its people referred to Fremmevilla as a country of knights.

This story, in which Setterlund is the stage, started quietly in the year 1268.

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The capital of Fremmevilla, Konkaanen, was located at the foot of the rugged, snowy Auvinier mountain range. Half a day's carriage ride east of Konkaanen was another large town, situated as the entrance to the country's plainsland. This town was somewhat different from the capital, as the majority of it was given over to a single institution that occupied an enormous amount of ground. The buildings here were sturdily built out of stone and brick. However, this

didn’t result in imposing or intimidating architecture, and it was clear that these structures weren’t for a military purpose. This institution was made for the education of children, and its name was the Laihiala Knight Runner Academy.

The role of knights in this country was to protect the people from monsters. Just as one might expect from a country that prides itself on the nickname, “country of knights,” the knights of Fremmevilla were incredibly popular, and it was a very respected profession. Also, because damage from monsters was a constant facet of life in this area, it was necessary to maintain a large number of knights, so their education was a very important matter for the country. That was why the institution conceived to raise knights, Laihiala Knight Runner Academy, had grown so large.

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A low, heavy rumbling sound spread through the stone buildings.

This place had a wide stone-paved plaza which was surrounded by walls that were similarly made of stone. The area was elliptically shaped and situated in a corner of the Laihiala Knight Runner Academy’s grounds, serving as a practice area for knight trainees.

At the moment, there were two knights facing each other on the grounds, their swords drawn. Though one wielded a sword and shield, and the other dual swords, both knights were clad in heavy armor. As one might deduce from the location, they were having a practice match. The swords in their hands were blunted.

That being said, no matter how blunt the weapons were, both combatants were nothing if not serious. Each of them had their weapon pointed at the other as they gauged the distance between them. A dry breeze blew across the pavement, whipping up a cloud of dust. This tension, enough to make them forget to breathe as they stared at each other, did not last forever. Both sides moved at the same time, closing the distance between them. These movements were so light and nimble that onlookers might think them impossible for something so heavily armored. In an instant, the knights were within striking distance of one another.

However, there was something clearly strange about this scene. Each of the

figures' steps shook the earth, producing a deep, heavy sound that resounded in one's gut. No matter how heavily armored they were, it was impossible for normal humans to achieve the weight needed to shake the ground.

The answer to this anomaly lay in their surroundings.

There was a spectator watching all this from seats situated far away from the action. However, this spectator was much *smaller* than the knights. Rather, it was the opposite, the knights were too *large*. If they were compared side by side, the knight would be at least six times larger than the spectator. Of course their movements would be heavy—the knights were gigantic.

Naturally, these gigantic knights were not actually human. In fact, they were silhouette knights:giant mechanized suits of armor that stood approximately ten meters tall. Silhouette knights had a metal skeleton, with crystal tissue acting as muscles, and they moved with the power of mana. These amalgamations of machinery and magic were created to combat monsters, and were the mightiest weapons with the highest combat power available.

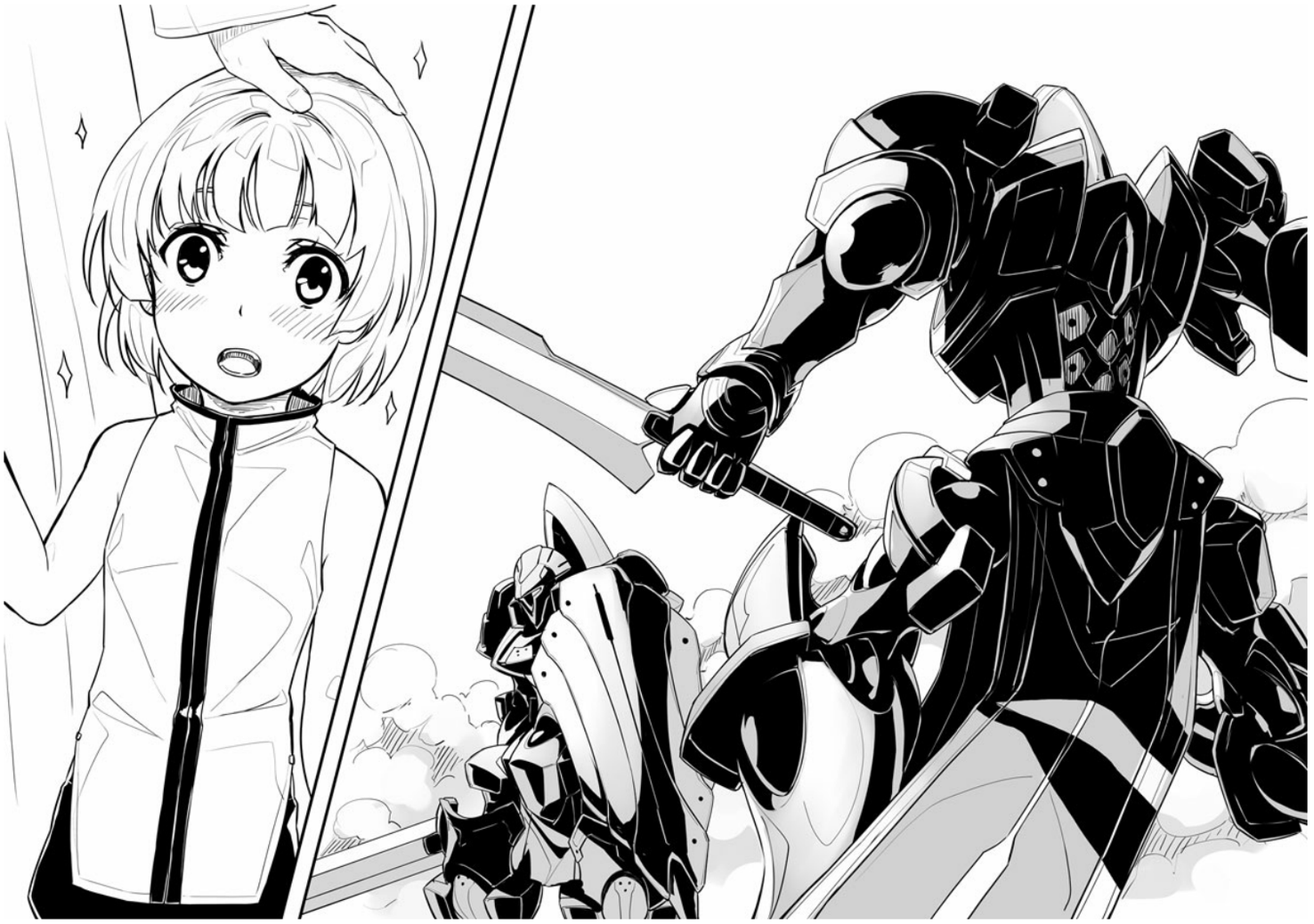
★★★

From the spectator seating, which was a little removed from the silhouette knights' clash, someone among the sparse crowd was watching the bout with very keen eyes.

He was a combat instructor for the academy, which meant that he was the teacher of the currently fighting silhouette knights—or rather, the pilots inside. His gaze was sharp, so as not to miss a single movement made by his pupils in this practice match, and there was a stiff aura about him.

"It... It's a robot..."

Suddenly, he heard a cute voice coming from behind him, and he turned to find a lovely woman, hugging a small child to her chest and walking toward him. The woman had smooth, straight, silken silver hair with a purple tint to it that reached all the way down to her hips. Her hair swayed in the wind as she walked, catching the light of the sun and creating a glittering trail of silver behind her. Her blue eyes had a kind shape to them, and her skin was clear and pale. She looked youthful—at most in her late teens—but she was actually old enough to be a proper parent and wife to the instructor she was approaching.



The man with a fierce look about him, renowned as a merciless instructor, suddenly smiled. Anyone who knew him would be shocked by this, but they would probably figure out the reason for it upon seeing the soft and tender aura around the woman.

“It’s rare to see you here in the academy, Tina. Did something happen?” the man asked.

“Hee hee, I wanted to show Ernie where his father works, so I took him out for a walk.”

“I see. Well, Ernie? What do you think of your dad’s job?” The man asked the child held in his wife’s arms, but the boy wasn’t listening at all. He was flailing his short limbs while staring ravenously at the silhouette knights in the practice arena.

“Hrmm...doesn’t seem like he’s listening...”

Laughing, the man patted his three-year-old son on the head. His son had his mother’s hair color, silver with a purplish tint, and his oval-shaped face looked exactly like a younger version of his mother’s, complete with blue eyes. He was very charming, and the only feature he inherited from his father was the sharp shape of his eyes.

“My, it seems that Ernie is more interested in the silhouette knights than his father. He really is a boy. I wonder if he likes them?”

“I hear that many children aim to become knights because of that. It really does seem like Ernie loves them.”

Having seen their offspring’s childish curiosity and boyish tastes, the parents adopted warm and happy expressions. Meanwhile, Ernie paid no attention to the fact that he was being watched by his parents; he simply waved his tiny limbs about as he fully enjoyed the scene. His eyes never left the practice bout for even a moment, showing incredible powers of concentration for a child his age. The father continued to muss his son’s hair for a while after, but because Ernie didn’t respond, he eventually stopped.

“Wow, he’s really into it. What do you think, Ernie? Those are silhouette knights, the giant knights that defend our country and our people.”

“Shil...ohwette...nait...” In response to the man’s words, his child turned around as if he had just noticed his father before speaking in the characteristic lisps and drawls of a child who had yet to master use of their tongue. After that utterance, he promptly fell into a dazed, pondering state.

Seeing that, his father once again put on a wry smile before exchanging some words with his wife and returning to work. In the arena, the practice bout had ended and the knights were in the process of leaving.

“Okay, it’s time for us to go home. We can go and prepare dinner for your father,” the mother decided before leading her son away, comforting him all the while as he tried to turn around again and again.

“Shil...ohwette nait...”

The child in the mother’s arms continued to stare at the giant knights until he was no longer physically able to.

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The toddler nicknamed “Ernie” had a full name: Ernesti Echevalier. Matthias Echevalier, an instructor at the Laihiala Knight Runner Academy, was his father, while his mother’s name was Selestina.

It had been three years since Ernie’s birth. A normal child his age would be just starting to develop a personality and sense of self, and would thus be acting very selfishly. However, Ernie was a surprisingly quiet child. He was able to understand his parents’ words at an early age, and he listened well. Because of that, everyone around him considered him a very smart child, but there was a different reason for his ability to understand so much.

The moment he awakened a sense of self and was able to recognize himself *as* himself, he knew he retained certain memories of events that he himself had not experienced. He had once lived in a different world, and the memories were of his life there. It was a place called Japan, and it was a technologically advanced culture. There, his name was Kurata Tsubasa, and Ernesti currently had all his memories.

There existed a theory of reincarnation.

It stated that souls that returned to the afterlife would all be reborn over and

over. This was espoused in Buddhism as well, and any Japanese person would at least know about the concept of reincarnation, even if they didn't believe in it. Tsubasa had been one of those people. He knew about reincarnation, but didn't believe, so he never thought he would actually experience it. On top of that, all of his memories from his previous life were still there, leading to quite a smooth next life.

As for why this happened to him, no one knew, not even the reincarnator himself. He was simply both "Ernesti," the boy who lived in this world, and "Kurata Tsubasa," a Japanese person, at the same time. This was why he acted much more mature than was normal for a child of his age. He was calmer and more understanding, with more advanced reasoning ability.

And when, by coincidence, his mother took him to see his father at work, he finally met with a shocking sight that would lead him to spend his entire second life devoted to one thing.

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A woman and a child walked down the streets of Laihiala's campus town as the sun was starting to set.

The entire walk home, the child pelted his mother with questions about the giant knights he just saw, while the mother replied in a calm manner. Seeing how her son would not calm down, the woman flashed a happy smile and answered all his questions.

"You really took a liking to silhouette knights, didn't you? I wonder if you're going to be a knight runner when you grow up?"

"Nait...yes! I will become a nait!"

"My, how reliable! Then let's have your father train you once you get a bit bigger."

"Okay!"

What this phenomenon of crossing over into another world would bring, no one knew. However, one thing was certain: the man who started his second life as Ernesti Echevalier had just started his grand rampage.

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The Echevalier household was located in the residential area of Laihiala's campus town.

The people of the Echevalier family—nay, the entire country—always woke up early. By the time the sun started to rise, the mother Selestina had already woken up and started preparing breakfast. By the time she finished, everyone else had woken up. The family always ate breakfast together.

The youngest member of the family, their only son Ernesti, always woke up the latest.

"Shilohwette nait!"

Whatever dream he had been seeing, it was enough to have him kick away his covers and jump out of bed. Unbeknownst to him, his mother, from her position in the kitchen, couldn't help but giggle as she heard the commotion he caused. The groggy Ernie looked about, confused, before realizing he was in his own bedroom and returning to bed.

Ernie had been so excited that he couldn't sleep last night. Even now, in a half asleep state, he was grinning.

Those were definitely robots. Humanoid ones, at that. Giant humanoid robots!

Ernesti—or more accurately in this case, the Japanese person Kurata Tsubasa—could not stop the tears from flowing. He was too moved from hearing this wondrous news, like the sound of bells chiming from heaven. His cheeks loosened, and he couldn't help but smile. He, as someone with memories as Kurata Tsubasa, had the exact same interests and preferences as his previous life. In short, Ernie's previous life, Kurata Tsubasa, was a dyed-in-the-wool mecha otaku.

Almost all the money he earned as an office worker and functioning member of society went to his hobbies. He bought modeling magazines, games, and sometimes searched for visual media to consume. He was very passionate about his hobbies, almost to the point of obsession. Still, no matter how enamored with mechs he was, he was still a civilian; he wasn't so aggressive as to join the SDF to ride a tank or anything like that. However, things were

different in this life, thanks to the existence of silhouette knights—giant humanoid robots that actually existed and functioned.

When he first “awakened” to his memories, he couldn’t hide his disappointment and despair over having to live his second life in a world with no plastic models or video games. But now, he was nothing but grateful for the miracle, coincidence, guiding hand, or whatever it was that allowed him to be reborn in this world with silhouette knights. After all, they were actual, moving, ten-meter-tall humanoid weapons. To him, a full-on mecha otaku, his chance meeting with silhouette knights was like getting a heavenly revelation as to one’s purpose in life. In other words, he was without a doubt born into this world to ride a giant robot. He had no proof to back up this conviction, but still he didn’t doubt it.

Though he hardened his determination in this matter, Ernie’s young body wasn’t able to win against the drowsiness he felt, and he once again fell asleep for the short time before breakfast.

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As the sun was reaching its peak, Selestina and Ernie were in Matthias’s study.

The study was furnished with plain but functional wooden furniture, bringing a tidy sense of unity to the room. Matthias mainly taught the ways of the sword, but he was fairly well versed in other subjects as well. The shelves of the study were filled with books, including picture books meant for children.

Tina was sitting on a sofa in the study, reading a picture book to Ernie, who was on her lap. Her clear, calm voice weaved the story. Up until yesterday, Ernie would have listened happily, but today he was different. Though he sat quietly for a while, he gradually got more and more antsy, until eventually he spoke up.

“Hey, mother... Mother!”

“What is it, Ernie? Do you not like this book or something?” Tina tilted her head questioningly, but what her son said next cleared up everything.

“I like it, but...I want to know more about shilohwette naits!”

Tina put the book down and peered into Ernie’s eyes. Seeing them filled to the brim with joy and curiosity, she couldn’t bring herself to say no.

“Oh my, I can’t very well refuse now, can I? Okay then Ernie, it’s still a little early for you, but in order to ride a silhouette knight, you first need to become a knight.”

“Nait... How do I become one?”

Though Ernie had received his divine revelation, he was physically still only three years old. His ability to think and reason may have been that of a grown man, but he was still greatly restricted in the things he could do. One of those limitations was his ability to collect information, which was what he needed most at the moment. What should a toddler like him, who couldn’t move as he pleased, do to collect information? Ask his parents, of course.

“Well, you’ll need to study lots...and learn swordsmanship too. Oh, since that’s the case, let’s have your father teach you. He teaches swordsmanship at the academy, after all. Right then, let’s read a book with the silhouette knights you love so much next.”

“Okay!”

This time Ernie listened with rapt attention, and Tina stroked his head as she read stories about silhouette knights. While listening to these stories, which used simplified words so small children could understand them, the world seemed to sparkle to Ernie, and his heart beat faster.

They were gigantic weapons shaped like knights, built to protect people from the threat of large beasts. While imagining himself controlling one of them, Ernie made a new resolution. Of course he would pilot a silhouette knight no matter the cost, but now he wanted to do so as soon as possible. In order to accomplish that, he knew he had to make use of his uniquely strong sense of self at this early age. While thinking up detailed plans for the future, he continued to quietly listen to the story.

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“May I have a moment, father?”

Matthias Echevalier, who was taking a break in his study, heard a voice from behind him and turned around to see his son, Ernesti, trotting over to him with small footsteps. Ernie, who had turned five this year, had the same silver hair

with purple tint as his mother, Tina, and it was cut in a bob that reached down to his chin. He also inherited his mother's lovely looks, and even Matthias, who usually had a tough and fierce expression, couldn't help but have that facade crumble in front of his son.

"Sure you can. What is it, Ernie?"

"I wanted to ask you for a favor, father."

Ernesti was much more articulate than other children of his age. While his tongue couldn't quite keep up when he was three, now that he was five he spoke smoothly. He always used to act politely toward everyone, but as he started to get more articulate, that tendency only became more marked. However, instead of weirding others out or putting a gulf between him and others, his tendency only came off as lovable, and it suited him greatly.

Seeing him work up his courage to ask his father a favor, Matthias's smile grew. His doting parent levels only got higher as time went on.

"I want to become a knight, father. Please teach me the sword."

So it's finally time, Matthias thought, but took care not to let it show. Secretly, he was troubled. He knew that his son had started wanting to become a knight a couple years ago. That in itself was fine, especially with how motivated he was. However, Ernie was still only five years old. It was too early to teach him swordsmanship; until his body developed a little more, such training would only have an adverse effect on him. On top of that, Ernie had started to resemble his mother more and more as the years went by. His cute and lovely looks, along with the fact that he was shorter than his peers, made Matthias worry whether his child could even swing a sword properly.

Even so, Matthias steeled his resolve and faced his son head-on, just as Ernie had done to ask him for this favor. He couldn't very well treat that sort of thing offhandedly, neither as a father nor as an instructor. In clear words, he told his son to not be in such a hurry, to focus on building his basic strength and stamina first, and to also make sure to learn magic as well since that would be useful.

"Magic... I understand, father. Please teach me swordsmanship sometime soon, then."

Matthias returned his son's determined gaze with a sincere nod, firmly promising that he would teach his son the ways of the sword someday.

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"And so, mother, please teach me about magic!"

After extracting a promise from Matthias, Ernie immediately turned and went to find his mother, Tina. Why? Because Tina's father, or Ernie's grandfather, was Laihiala Academy's current headmaster, Rowley Echevalier. Tina easily consented to teach Ernie and used her family connections to obtain a full set of magic textbooks.

Magic was, of course, something that didn't exist in Ernie's previous world, Earth. The only place one would find even a mention would be in fictional stories and legends, though many people also played RPGs set in worlds of swords and magic. Such supernatural powers were normal in this world, and they were used to supplement the power of knights.

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With his mother Tina serving as an impromptu teacher, Ernie started reading through his new magic textbooks.

Ever since he had resolved to ride a silhouette knight, Ernie started taking steps to achieve his dream in secret. That being said, all he'd done so far was the most basic of the basics; learning the alphabet. Still, for a three year old it had been a blazing fast start. Even the most privileged class of nobles in this country wouldn't start their studies at that age. Thanks to that head start, five-year-old Ernie was able to understand even the most difficult of books, such as the one he was reading now.



And while it was a matter of course that children would not take well to book learning, Ernie was different. Since he knew it was all for his dream of becoming a knight, and by extension riding a silhouette knight, he not only did not chafe at having to read such books, he happily read all of the textbooks from cover to cover. In fact, given the subject, he enjoyed it far more than ordinary studying. It was sort of like playing to him. That, coupled with a child's ability to learn flexibly, had him understanding the subject matter at frightening speeds.

Though she wasn't a professional, Tina served quite well as a teacher. After all, her father was the headmaster of the academy and her husband was an active instructor there. She responded to Ernie's wishes and taught him persistently.

What was referred to as magic in this world was, put simply, the technique to convert mana into a physical phenomenon. All living things in this world absorbed the ether that existeds in the air, and those same living things all possessed the ability to turn ether into mana. Furthermore, they also had the ability to store some mana in their bodies.

“Mana is like fuel. Magic is created by writing a script that details what the magic will do, then manifesting it in the world through a catalyst.” Tina continued her explanation to Ernie, who was sitting politely in front of her.

There were two types of living things in the world: those who couldan use magic on their own, and those who couldan’t. The reason for this difference was the presence or absence of a catalyst within their bodies. Those who could use magic had a crystalline catalyst in their bodies. It is because of such catalysts that these creatures can do things like a dragon’s breath attack.

“By nature, we humans do not have catalysts in our bodies, so we are the kind that cannot use magic on our own.”

Because they were living things, humans had mana. However, they could not normally use magic since they didn’t have an innate catalyst. It was an established, immutable fact in this world.

However, humans had learned to use magic. This was all thanks to their unique weapon: wisdom and knowledge. Once they had learned the secrets of magic scripts and could prepare external catalyst crystals, they were able to overcome their natural disadvantages.

With that discovery, humans—who had been in the weakest tier of beings of this world—had begun to grow stronger and stronger. From then on, human magic only increased in strength as more research was done, until it eventually resulted in giant weapons—silhouette knights. And so humans had climbed into the highest tier of strength.

“Mother, if silhouette knights are so strong, wouldn’t we be able to make a larger country with all our knight orders?”

“Well, we might be able to, but it’s still difficult.”

Silhouette knights were certainly powerful weapons, but they were also

strategic arms of the type that were very expensive to build and maintain, incurring great costs in both funds and effort. It wasn't realistically possible to gather enough to conquer the entire continent. As a result, the countries to the west of the Auvinier mountains did their best to achieve stability using the mountains as a border, while Fremmevilla was left to act as a shield for the west. That deadlocked state had carried on for hundreds of years until today.

"Let's leave the details for when we study history later. You'll have to memorize a lot of things when you go to school, anyway."

There was a defined method to use magic. As was noted before, in order to cast magic, the caster would first need to start with a script. Such scripts were constructed and processed by a virtual organ in an organism's brain: the Magius Circuit. This magic calculation area existed in every being with a will in the world.

"So, Ernie, each magic script has a defined shape depending on the phenomenon you want. Let's start with the basics; manifesting a simple phenomenon is split into the foundational element and the control script connected to it in order to use the element."

Combining a foundation and a control script created a single spell, and resulted in a shape that people back on Earth would have described as a magic circle.

The highest hurdle for anyone who was starting to learn magic was the construction of magic scripts. Most people could grasp implementing the foundational script right away, but trying to expand the entire script to make the spell bigger required practice to understand. Because humans couldn't originally use magic, constructing and casting high-level magic needed a good amount of experience. That was where the differences of talent between individuals played a large part.

So there's the foundational script that determines the effect of the spell, and the control script needed to expand it, Ernie thought. *Combining each shape follows certain rules... Oh, right. I get the feeling I've seen this stuff before, but it's...*

What helped Ernie's ability to understand here was his experience as a

professional programmer in his previous world. In other words, the rules governing the combination of shapes in magic scripts were the same as the logic used in programming languages, and the Magius Circuit was basically a virtual computer. Not only that, there was no startup lag for a Magius Circuit as it was inside the brain, which meant “programming” was far more convenient than in his last life.

After learning the grammar he needed, Ernie started to pore over and “load” the foundational and control scripts from the textbooks into his Magius Circuit —which could also be thought of as an in-brain editor. It didn’t matter how skilled or experienced they were, no programmer would be able to compile a large piece of source code in their brain alone. They would always need the help of an editor. However, using his Magius Circuit as an editor, Ernie continued to edit and compile scripts one after the other in order to construct magic.

Because he was a beginner with no common sense or practical knowledge about the subject—meaning he didn’t understand how well the people of this world could handle magic—he never noticed how easily he was constructing and controlling incredibly complex syntaxes. Nor did he realize how abnormal his calculating ability was.

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Ernie took a small staff made of plain wood in his hand, closed his eyes, and focused on his thoughts.

The tip of his staff had a small crystal embedded in it—a catalyst crystal, to be precise. A miraculous “fruit” of the world which allowed humans to use magic. It was common knowledge that a human needed to use a staff with a catalyst crystal embedded in it to use magic, just like what Ernie was using at the moment.

With a *pwhoosh*, a jet of fire extended from the staff in Ernie’s hands, charring the center of the target in front of him. He had cast an elementary spell using fire as the foundational element, Torch.

“Wow! Ernie, you’re amazing! Even though it’s an elementary spell, you were able to use it so fast!”

“Mother, the textbook said that this foundational script was the most basic of basics, and that anyone would be able to learn to use this immediately.”

“*Use*, sure. But making it hit the center of the target so accurately like that takes practice. Also, your magic is so pretty, Ernie.”

No matter how familiar Ernie was with programming, classroom learning was still ultimately theoretical. And so he had erected a simple target behind the house in order to conduct practical lessons in magic with his mother, Tina. He tried each foundational script one after the other in order to develop a feeling for actually casting magic.

As he unleashed spells in quick succession, Ernie started to experience a strange feeling. It was a unique sensation, like power was draining out of his body. It was somewhat similar to the exhaustion someone would feel after working out, but it was different from physical exhaustion. He felt bewildered at this new feeling, but it was just something brought on by expending mana. His body was trying to suck in the ether around him in any way it could in order to make up for the lost mana.

I didn’t expect to get this tired, Ernie mused. *If I ever try to cast large-scale magic, I’ll probably end up falling over and finding it difficult to breathe.*

That was when Tina, who had up until now been watching over her son, walked over and patted him on the head with a warm smile.

“That’s how it feels to use up mana. If you don’t experience it at least once, you could find yourself in trouble in the future.”

“I feel breathless... This is...really tough to bear... How pathetic... I’m already out of mana...after only casting...this much?”

“You’re not pathetic at all. You’re still little, Ernie. It’s natural to not have much mana.”

“So if I get bigger, I’ll have more mana?”

“Hmmm, well...that’s not quite right. Think of it like stamina. It does have something to do with how big you are, but you’ll also train it the more you use it.”

“I see. Okay, I understand. I will start training to increase my mana, mother!”

Faced with Ernie’s endless enthusiasm, Tina adopted a somewhat forced smile as she continued to pat his head. “My, you really are a hard worker, Ernie. But don’t be in too much of a hurry, forcing yourself is not a good thing.”

Ernie reflected on his impatience. Tina was right: trying to hurry along his growth wouldn’t bring about good results. Also, he didn’t want to make his mother worry after she spent so much effort to teach him.

“Right. Then I will start with what I can do right now, mother,” Ernie promised with an earnest expression.

Seeing that, Tina embraced her son in a comfortable hug.

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Thus started Ernie’s days of training.

Keeping in mind both the future, and his promise with Tina, he decided to start by gradually building up his stamina and mana reserves. Constructing magic scripts was Ernie’s specialty, so as long as he let his skills from his previous life shine, he’d be able to handle that. The problem was having the mana reserves to make use of that ability. His plan was to do cardio as well as a range of other exercises for physical stamina, and to cast spells to expend his mana to build up his capacity. That was how Ernie spent his days, putting effort and hard work into training.

But at some point, he came upon an interesting spell in a textbook. What he found was the Physical Boost spell. As its name implied, Physical Boost enhanced the user’s physical parameters. More specifically, it raised raw strength, endurance, and movement speed. Ernie had the idea to combine his normal physical training with this spell in order to train both physical and magical ability at once.

However, Physical Boost was considered an advanced spell, so it wasn’t easy to use. The construction of the script was what determined a spell’s effect. The closer the spell was to the effect of the foundational script for the element, the easier to control the spell would be. The more targets a spell had, the more complicated its script had to be, in turn making control even harder.

Though the name of the spell was simple and easy to understand, it was a composite spell that entailed targeting each individual muscle and enhancing it, along with all the person's bones so that they could withstand the recoil of such newfound strength, as well as toughening up the skin to be able to withstand any punishment it might take as a result of the powered-up movements. On top of controlling and maintaining the spell, the user would also have to manage their every movement carefully, since their muscles would be operating wildly differently from normal. Compared to a spell that simply needed to output a single attack, no matter how large-scale it was, this sort of strengthening spell was much more complicated.

Normal people would have given up at this point and chosen a more normal, doable route toward growth. However, Ernie had a solution for this hurdle. It lay in his unique skill, the ability to program. Having had experience in designing and coding embedded software, he knew how to keep track of and control multiple variables at once. Thanks to that, instead of launching straight into magic practice, he first attempted to modify an existing spell. Looking over the script for Physical Boost, he compressed the code within using functions as well as obfuscation. After reducing the number of variables as much as possible, he created a sub-function to automatically keep track of the user's condition, making it so that the spell would control itself once it was cast, lessening the mental burden on the caster.

Though it was rare for anyone to be able to modify and improve scripts, Ernie didn't know that, so he finished his work in a flash, with the spell showing frighteningly incredible improvement. It would most likely still be categorized as a difficult spell that put a high burden on the user, but Ernie's abnormally strong calculating ability could easily handle that. Unbeknownst to everyone, a world-changing event had just happened. Though the person who had caused it only considered this event to be a small step toward his real goal.

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With his staff in one hand, Ernie finally cast his long-awaited, improved Physical Boost spell, and he enthusiastically went about his daily physical regimen. Though he set off with a skip in his step, he quickly met with tragedy. Though he was able to fully enjoy the immense effect the spell had on him, he

ran out of mana within a couple hundred meters and ended up falling over.

As one might expect out of an advanced spell, the mana cost was just as high as its demand for precise control. Having completely overlooked such an elementary point, Ernie couldn't hide his disappointment as he decided to spend some time casting foundational spells to build up his capacity first.

It took about three years of ceaseless effort to develop his reserves to the point where he could maintain Physical Boost for a decent amount of time. With that, Ernie pushed forward toward his goal—which he was too fervently passionate about to be able to dismiss as just a childish sense of admiration—every day.

Chapter 2: Let's Play with Friends

The land bordering Laihiala Knight Runner Academy's grounds was dominated by facilities intended for students, including lodging, restaurants, and other businesses. This included smithies as well, since the academy maintained silhouette knights. These workshops tended to be large, incorporating living spaces along with the actual workshop.

Actually, because Laihiala Knight Runner Academy was the largest school with the largest campus in the nation, it and the town around it rivaled the size of the capital itself. Thus, the town took the name of the academy it was built around. This was the place Ernesti lived in.

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The setting sun hid behind the walls surrounding the town, ensconcing Laihiala in darkness. Most shops had closed already, and the streets had emptied of people. Silence enveloped the area as a small humanoid shadow raced along the rooftops. The shadow was clothed entirely in black, making it difficult for anyone to properly recognize it in the twilight as it leaped from roof to roof with lithe, nimble movements.

It needn't be said that the true identity of the small shadow was Ernesti Echevalier, now eight years old. His daily routine of exercising to tune his body had changed form over time, and now it was custom for him to make a lap around the entire town atop the roofs. According to Ernie, doing so allowed him to feel that he was in a wide open space, and the undulations of the roofs were perfect for his exercise.

After his first failure using Physical Boost, he continued to tune the spell until he was able to cast it at low output so that it only affected his legs. More experience also helped him to keep full control of the spell even after an intense workout, making it possible to output quite a lot of speed from his enhanced legs.

As Ernie continued to run, he reached the end of the row of roofs he'd been traversing, and a large street yawned before him like a deep ravine. Taking a

deep breath, he increased the strength of his Physical Boost spell. Suddenly, he accelerated as if being launched by a slingshot, all while feeling a strong feedback from his body.

Instantly reaching the end of the roof, Ernie kicked off and jumped into the air, casting a spell at the same time. Air compressed in front of him, forming a dense pocket of compressed air. It was the elementary spell of the wind element, Air Bullet, but instead of firing it at a target, Ernie waited until he had passed through the pocket and then had it burst behind him. Instead of the compressed air being shot off like a bullet, he had instead given the explosion directionality so that upon release it would act as an improvised source of thrust.

Ernie's body, having instantly increased in forward momentum, drew a neat arc in the air as he sailed over the wide street. Furthermore, he suppressed the effects of Physical Boost as he flew through the air and cast another spell at the moment of his landing. It was another Air Bullet spell—except the bullet was much larger than normal. Instead of firing off an attack, he instead used it as an Air Cushion. Having stuck a fine, soft landing on the roof on the other side of the street, Ernie bent his body to burn off the rest of his excess momentum and continued running.

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It was the year 1273 of the Occidental Calendar.

Three years had passed since Ernie started training his magic. Because he had tirelessly trained until now, his mana reserves had grown far past what his small stature would suggest into something that was utterly insane for someone his age. That said, normally no one at his age would be polishing their magic ability to such an extent, so taking that into account, his exceptional mana capacity made sense.

At the same time, Ernie had committed to other forms of training as well, so he had gained quite a lot of physical stamina on top of his magical growth. However, he still found it impossible to have Physical Boost perpetually cast upon himself at full strength. The solution he found to that problem was to instead have it constantly activated at low strength on specific parts of his body,

and to only open the spell to full strength when needed.

When it came to movement, as he had demonstrated before, he could use other spells in conjunction with Physical Boost to increase his speed and movement options. All this training had elevated Ernie's calculation and control abilities, which were already remarkable, to new heights. That in conjunction with his steadily increasing mana reserves made it even harder for him to wear himself out when casting magic.

There was a reason why Ernie was dedicating so much of his training to movement-focused spells. Even he could not spend all day every day training, and some time had to be devoted to playing with other children his age. The main reason for doing so was to avoid worrying his parents, but it was also simply fun for his childish heart and mind. So Ernie quite liked playing, but it caused him to realize that his vertical growth was sluggish, and it brought the weakness of his light weight to mind.

Of course he would continue to polish his magic skills, and he didn't plan on losing in power to anyone so easily, but Ernie knew that having such a lightweight body would make it harder to output strong attacks. So, to make up for that, he decided to strengthen his mobility. Part of the reason was to allow him to confuse any opponents with his movements, but he could also rely on momentum to augment his attack power in a pinch.

Yeah, basically I just have to be like Ushiwakamaru. It fits perfectly with a Japanese person's tastes, doesn't it? Like the saying goes, "Be water, my friend." Well, in my case it's more like I have urgent circumstances that require it though.

While carefully considering such frivolous things, Ernie was once again doing his daily run through the darkness. He was taking his usual training course using the usual methods. However, one thing was slightly different from usual.

"Huh? Someone's coming," came a girl's voice, seemingly from somewhere along his path.

"Who're you?" added another, harsher voice.

When no reply came, both voices issued another challenge. "Is someone there?"

Ernie had never before met anyone while on this course, but there was a first time for everything.

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Both sides faced each other in silence for a while. They had encountered each other in a place neither side had expected to find anyone else. Not only was it natural to be wary, but one party was wearing an all-black outfit complete with hood. There was no way someone dressed that way wouldn't be considered suspicious.

Ernie carefully studied the people in front of him. It was hard to make out details in the starlight, but from what he could tell he was facing a girl and boy pair who seemed to be around his age. Ernie was somewhat smaller than average for his age, but both of the people he was facing were thin and tall. They didn't seem likely to be younger to him, but they also didn't look much older.

It was boring just standing there in silence, so Ernie decided to start by introducing himself.

"Good evening, my name is Ernesti. I am in the middle of a walk right now. How about you two?"

The pair, who were wary of the boy clad in black, seemed surprised that he suddenly introduced himself. Ernie wasn't able to make out the details of their expressions, but he noticed that the boy's eyes narrowed in the reflected moonlight.

"I'm Archid. And this is my little sister."

"My name is Adeltrude...uhh, we were just stargazing a little...yeah."

Ernie peeked behind them. There was a window there and it seemed they had used it to get out onto the roof. While he was somewhat surprised at this sudden meeting, it seemed that it was just a coincidence. So, Ernie immediately figured he'd go back to his training.

"I see. Sorry for interrupting you. Then I'll be off..."

"H-Hey, wait a second. You said you were taking a walk? On the roof? Looking

like that?”

“Isn’t that, like, way too suspicious?”

“Yes, well...I suppose so.”

From the tone of their voices, Ernie understood they were clearly exasperated. He himself would feel the same if he were on the receiving end of the explanation he had just given.

“I said I was taking a walk, but I’m really training. That’s why I’m taking a course that’s hard to run along, and that’s why I passed by here.”

“Huh...and that somehow led you to running on roofs? You’re weird,” commented Adeltrude.

Everything Ernie said was the truth, but from the twins’ point of view, it was still pretty strange. The two of them looked at each other, confirming that neither of them were satisfied by that explanation, and they turned back to Ernie before tilting their heads questioningly.

“Well, whatever. Sorry for interrupting you too, I guess.”

“Please, don’t worry about it. Well then, I’ll be taking my leave...”

“H-Hey, wait a second! If this is training, does that mean you run by here all the time?” As Ernie tried to leave, Adeltrude called out to his retreating back. Ernie had already taken several steps and seemed about to run off, but he paused to leave behind a “Yes,” before returning to his run.

For a while after that, the twins followed his form with their eyes, though he almost completely blended in with the darkness. After seeing him run at unimaginable speeds, they were surprised. On top of that, they witnessed him accelerating so fast he seemed to become a blur just after jumping off the edge of a building. As his body drew an arc in the air, the two of them widened their eyes in shock.

“Wow, amazing! What the hell, that looks so fun!” Archid exclaimed.

“Whoa, he’s really running! Look, he jumped off of the edge of the roof!” Adeltrude followed up.

Even after they could no longer track Ernie’s progress, Archid and Adeltrude

would not calm down for a while. They had just happened to want to get up on the roof after a somewhat bad day, and by complete coincidence met a strange child. Their lives were about to change greatly thanks to this coincidence.

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The day after Ernie met Archid and Adeltrude, they saw each other again in the same place. Unlike yesterday when it was just a coincidence, this time the twins had been waiting for him, so Ernie slowed down and called out to them.

“Good evening. Are you two out to see the stars again?”

“Yo! And nah, today we wanted to talk to you.”

“Yeah!”

The two of them smiled so brightly it was easy to tell how happy they were, even under the light of the stars. Though Ernie couldn’t quite understand what they were getting at, he nevertheless decided to talk with them a while, thinking, *If they’re cooking up something troublesome, then I can just run away and change the route I take tomorrow.*

“By the way, about that hood...do you *have* to wear it?”

Archid’s offhand comment made Ernie realize that chatting with a hood on *was* rude, so he took it off and sat down on the roof with them. With that done, Ernie tried to continue the conversation, but the twins had frozen with a hard-to-describe expression on their faces.

“Uhhh...Archid? Adeltrude? What happened, you two? Those looks on your faces are really weird.”

“Huh? Oh, no...um...you...were a girl this whole time?!” Archid exclaimed.

“Seriously, you were so amazing yesterday that I totally thought you were a guy...”

Ernie had always taken after his mother with his good looks. That aspect of his appearance had only gotten stronger as he grew, and by now he truly had the looks of a beautiful young girl. He had purple-tinted silver locks that came down a little farther than his jaw, and it swayed slightly in the wind. The meager light of the moon did nothing to hide this beauty either. In fact, the weak light

reflected on him with an almost mystical radiance, further enhancing his beautiful, pale skin. Ernie's beauty seemed jarringly at odds with his incredible movements yesterday, throwing the twins into utter confusion. Seeing that, Ernie let out a small laugh.

"No. I take after my mother, but I am a man."

That didn't seem to help, as it took a moment for Archid to reply, "No way, there's a limit to that excuse. Are you *really* a guy?"

"I am. What purpose would there be in lying?"

"Ohhh...so...so cute...Ernesti..."

With wriggling hand movements, Adeltrude started to creep closer to Ernie for some reason. Sensing danger in that, he retreated and Archid quickly reined his little sister in by grabbing her by the nape of her neck and returning her to his side.

"Uhhh... Oh, I'm sure my name is hard to pronounce, so you can just call me Ernie."

"Ah, then you can call me Kid."

"Ernie, got it! Call me Addy!"

With self introductions out of the way for the second time, Ernie tried to broach the main purpose of the conversation while continuing to be cautious of Addy, who was still trying to approach him.

"So what did you want to talk about?"

"Oh, well, after you left yesterday, we watched you go from roof to roof. It was amazing! I was curious how you did that."

"Oh, that's..."

"And if you'd be okay with it, maybe you could teach us!"

Ernie couldn't help but wonder where all the wariness from yesterday had gone, as Kid was already talking casually like they'd known each other all along. Seeing his enthusiasm, though, Ernie had to ponder what to do.

"I'm fine with teaching you, but it's not something you can really learn right

away.”

“I’m okay with that. As long as I keep practicing with you, I’ll eventually be able to do stuff like that, won’t I?”

“Well, there’s the possibility you won’t be able to learn it in the first place...”

With that advance warning, he told them about the details of his training—in other words, about magic. Kid and Addy were pretty understanding, and they quickly swallowed his explanation even though it was relatively complicated. But it was because they understood that their faces scrunched up so heavily.

“Isn’t that stupidly difficult?!”

“Ernie...you’re so amazing...”

“That’s why I warned you.”

The twins groaned as their eyes rolled into the back of their heads. But suddenly, they realized something and looked up again.

“By the way, why are *you* able to use magic like that, Ernie?”

“Well, part of it has to do with talent, but I’ve also been training for years.”

“Years...how old are you?”

“I’m eight.”

“What?! Then you’re the same age as us!” Addy shouted in astonishment. She was more surprised about his age than any of the things noted before that.

After some further conversation, Ernie found that Kid and Addy were indeed twins, and they were both eight years old as well. Knowing that they were all the same age, Kid’s earlier bewilderment seemed to evaporate as he pumped himself up, saying that if Ernie could do it, he could too. Kid seemed ready to start that very moment, so Ernie had to hurriedly restrain his enthusiasm.

“But Physical Boost is an advanced spell, so you won’t be able to use it unless you start with the basics.”

“Then you teach me, Ernie. Magic, that is.”

That shocked Ernie into silence for a moment. “What?”

“You’re amazing at it, right Ernie? Look at how much you were using an advanced spell!”

“You’re super reliable, even though you’re so cute!”

That doesn’t have anything to do with teaching, and it’s totally out of left field to boot, Ernie thought, unable to keep his face from twitching. The pair’s request was a lot of bother, and if at all possible he wanted to avoid it, but seeing them talk about methods of training with such sparkling expressions, it hurt his conscience too much to ignore them.

“Ahhh, uhh...well, fine. Then, umm...I’ll teach you magic...I guess.”

“Of course you will! You totally get it, best friend!”

“I knew you would, you’re so cute!”

“You’re praising me too much, and my cuteness has nothing to do with anything! I need you to wait a while. As I said before, you won’t be able to use magic right away. You need to start slowly with the basics, okay?”

“Sure, you got it! Leave it to me, I’ll catch up to you right quick!”

Kid’s careless promise only made Ernie more worried for the future, and after confirming the details of their arrangement, Ernie left.

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The day after that, the twins Kid and Addy visited Ernie’s home. This time, they came properly during the day, not in the middle of the night.

Ernie wasn’t able to really notice yesterday under the moonlight, but the twins had pretty black hair and dark brown eyes. As a person with memories as a former Japanese man, it was a color combination that made Ernie heavily nostalgic. Kid’s hair was messy and had grown to an unkempt length while Addy’s was slightly wavy and reached down to her shoulders. Being twins, they had similar airs about them, being both thin and tall, and their eyes shined with a strong will.

“Welcome to my home. Please, this way.”

Ernie guided them like he was halfway to enlightenment. This wasn’t the home of Laihiala Knight Runner Academy’s headmaster and his family for

nothing. The Echevalier estate was bigger than the homes around it. Kidd and Addy couldn't resist looking at their surroundings curiously as they happily followed their new friend.

Out of everyone, Ernie's mother Selestina was the most overjoyed by their visit. Her son, who had rarely if ever invited friends over, finally brought two of them. And they were both the same age, to boot. Thinking this was the time to show off her specialized culinary skills, she pulled out all the stops and produced as much tea and snacks as she could muster. Addy in particular was really happy about that, and she got along so well with TIna that soon enough they were making snacks together. That didn't last long, though, as Kid forcefully pulled away his sister.

With the curtains drawn on that small episode, the twins headed for Ernie's room in order to take their lesson on foundational magic. His room was exceedingly neat and tidy. The only furniture inside was a desk, a bed, and bookshelves along the walls. Many textbooks about magic were lined up along these shelves, along with a pittance of fictional volumes. It was almost *too* functional a room for a child who was too young for school. The twins (especially Addy) explored the room with deep interest, but they were quickly chided by Ernie.

After a lot of wrangling, they finally got around to the magic lesson. Using his favorite magic textbook, Ernie started teaching them the basics. Though the twins were full of confidence, they were still eight year old children. Ernie figured they would get tired of studying right away, but unexpectedly Kid and Addy were very passionate about the lesson. The foundational element practice Ernie held afterward saw the twins able to hit the center of the target within a few tries, displaying their exceptional control.

Ernie thought back to the conversation they had yesterday. *They understood my explanation of magic right away, didn't they? These twins are pretty sharp.* While reflecting that he had underestimated them a little, Ernie gave advice to the two who had fallen over due to mana exhaustion.

"What you two are experiencing right now is mana exhaustion. Your mana reserves are still small, so you should spend some time training to raise them."

“Urghh...haaghh...this is...tough. So...what do we do to train?”

“Use magic every day until you run out. You’ll expand your reserves faster that way. You should also exercise at the same time. Training both body and magic at once is the most efficient.”

Silence prevailed for a beat. “Ha ha, so that was why you were running on the roofs, wasn’t it, Ernie?”

“Exactly. As I said before, it isn’t that simple, is it?”

“You’re right, but I’ll do it! I just have to continue every day, right? In that sense, it is simple!”

Surprised, Ernie turned around to face Addy, who had recovered quite a bit by now and was standing boldly with her arms at her hips. Her strong-willed eyes were shining with confidence, and for some reason she was smiling proudly. Seeing that, Ernie couldn’t help but think something off point. *She’s tall, I can tell she’ll be a real beauty in the future. But her personality is going to make her tough to hang around...*

Finally he spoke again. “If that’s the case, I’ll have you on a training menu based around using foundational elemental spells for the time being. Once you build up your reserves, you’ll be able to do the same training I do.”

“At this rate, I can’t tell when we’ll finally be able to catch up to you... But we’re definitely going to do it faster than you expect, Ernie!” Kid declared.

“Of course we will!” Addy joined in. “We’ll be training with you in no time, just you wait!”

Ernie quietly raised his evaluation of his first friends in his heart. *They’re tougher than I expected. How should I put it? I get the feeling they’re going to be very interesting friends.*

That was how the twins, Archid Alter and Adeltrude Alter, joined in on Ernie’s training, and Ernie’s days got a step more lively.

★★★

Ernie wasn’t just learning magic. In between his basic training to increase his mana reserves and stamina, he learned swordsmanship from his father

Matthias as promised. What Matthias taught him was the same standard swordsmanship taught to all students at Laihiala Knight Runner Academy. Of course, Kid and Addy also joined in.

Among the three of them, Kid was the one with the most talent in the sword. Because he had a good build for his age, he quickly outpaced Ernie in learning how to wield a blade. He wouldn't lose to pretty much anyone in a fair, head-on spar.

They continued like that, practicing swordsmanship and magic, and the trio's lives turned into something far too busy for any child of their age. Ernie had originally imposed this training on himself in order to achieve his goals. The training had continued on for so long though that at this point it had become habit, and it wasn't much of a bother to him. He reflected, *In my previous life I was a really lazy person. Taking that into account, I guess sheer momentum is really powerful, and also, desire is a really powerful motivator for humans.*

Then how was it for Kid and Addy? They tackled every day of training with enough passion to match Ernie, but his training was excessively high-level, and not something that should be tasked to "normal" children such as them. If they just wanted to become knights, then there was no need for them to go this far. Even so, they never voiced any complaints or gripes.

What was motivating them so? Ernie, who was a "motivated middle-aged man" on the inside, couldn't think of a reason for them to go this far in training.

★★★

The three friends' days were very busy, but their time wasn't just occupied with training. They also spent time like normal children their own age, hanging out with their parents or playing with other children in the neighborhood. As one might expect of the largest campus town in the country, there were a lot of children in Laihiala.

The kingdom of Fremmevilla had to deal with a large problem other countries didn't: monsters. Unlike all the countries west of the Auvinier mountains that were controlled and shaped by humans, the kingdom of Fremmevilla's territory bordered the Great Bocuse Forest, which was squarely monster territory. Many monsters still remained within its borders, threatening the lives and livelihoods

of the people. Because of that, the majority of the cities in Fremmevilla kingdom were surrounded by sturdy walls to defend the city itself and the people inside. At this point, such measures were regarded as common practice.

Though most all the citizens of the kingdom of Fremmevilla understood and accepted this, mischievous boys and girls would naturally feel that the walls were nothing but constricting and boring. They would make the entire town their playground to burn off all their excess energy, raising raucous voices as they ran around. Not a day passed where the voices of children couldn't be heard coming from back alleys.

Today as well, a group of children were happily playing through the well-ordered and planned town. However, if anyone looked closer, they would see a single child lagging behind by a large margin.

"Look at you! What a slowpoke!" Children from the group turned around and jeered as the child who lagged behind stopped running after them, panting hard.

"Hahh, haahhh, haggghh...of course I am!" the boy yelled back, throwing his hands into the air. "Everyone knows dwarves don't run fast!"

The kid who yelled that was much shorter and wider than his peers, with a solid and dense build. His legs were stumpy, to be blunt, and he certainly seemed the opposite of speedy.

"Awww, little Batson really is *slow*...in both ways!"

"The hell you say?! Yoouuu!"

"Oh no, slowpoke Batson's mad! It'll hurt if he hits you! Run awaaayyy!"

Batson's face was red with rage as he stomped forward, causing the other kids to snigger and cackle as they scattered and ran. As one might expect, the difference in their speeds was hard to overcome, and the crowd quickly outpaced Batson, leaving him alone.

"Feh! Dammit..." he said after a while. He clenched his fists in frustration, but there was nothing he could do. Lack of speed was one of the unfortunate traits all dwarves were shackled with.

Dwarves—they were a mountain-dwelling race that originally lived in the north.

They had lived in a nearly impregnable land that would be completely isolated by snow in the winter, and naturally tended to live in the caves that dotted their homeland. As time went on and generations passed, that custom of cave-dwelling turned into digging caves for themselves, which in turn transformed into advanced excavation techniques. Moreover, the northern lands were home to a lot of mineral and ore veins, so in the course of their daily tunneling, the dwarves came upon a lot of natural resources. And in order to use those resources, they also developed their blacksmithing abilities up to the present day. Thus dwarves had come to be called a race of blacksmiths.

Because of that, over a long time the dwarves had adapted into forms more suited for activity in cramped caves. Their most standout feature was their short stature, contrasting their wide build. Also, they tended to be extremely muscular—enough that they could have more than double the pure physical strength of a normal human. This could all be easily summed up by saying that dwarves tended to look and be very rough and rugged. The men easily grew beards as long as their hair, and would generally start growing facial hair at around ten years old. As an aside, in dwarven culture those with more hair tended to be seen as handsome, and it was custom for dwarven men to be proud of and prize their beards once they started growing.

However, the dwarves weren't cooped up in the northern mountains for the entirety of their long history. Many of them spread out through the world by relying on their cultural proficiency at blacksmithing and inherent strength.

The child from earlier, named Batson Termonen, was part of one such family of dwarves. His parents had opened a smithy here in town, and that was why he was mixed in with the other children in town his age. Children's games didn't change much no matter where you were, whether it be tag, racing, or hide and seek. This was especially true in settlements that were surrounded by walls. It was easy to imagine how much of a handicap being slow of foot would be in such play. That was why Batson had become the target of mockery from the other children.

Batson had already lost track of where the kids who had made fun of him had run off to. He had given up on chasing them long ago, so he just sulkily turned on his heel and walked the other way.

“Huh? You’re alone, Batson? Where’s everyone else?”

A voice called out to Batson as he was about to irritatedly return home. He turned around to find a trio of kids, the one in the center outstandingly shorter than the companions flanking him. It was Ernesti, accompanied by Archid and Adeltrude.

“Oh, it’s you, Ernie. I bet you’re just here to make fun of how slow I am!”

The trio were taken aback by the anger that was suddenly taken out on them, but they immediately realized that the usual had happened. Though dwarves weren’t exactly fleet of foot, they were tough and possessed a lot of physical power. In other words, they were crazy strong in a fight. If things came down to a scuffle, Batson wouldn’t lose even if several other children ganged up on him at once. That was exactly what had happened in a previous quarrel, which was one of the factors that led to the current situation.

As Batson tried to stomp away, Ernie drew closer to pat him on the back and comfort him. That was when an idea for a prank came suddenly to his mind, causing him to grin.

“Ahh, the usual, huh?” He started, then seemed to think something over a bit more. “Okay, then let’s give chase!” Ernie’s suggestion came out of nowhere, causing everyone else to give him blank, dumbfounded looks.

“I’m fine with that, but what do we do?” Addy questioned. “Us aside, there’s no way Batty’ll be able to catch up to them.”

“You’re right. That’s why we’ll carry him. Look, just think of it like the usual training, and Batson is a weight.”

“I see! Okay, I get it!” Addy agreed.

“Sure, sure.”

Addy and Kid had agreed to the plan without Batson’s input, and likewise without his input, they walked up to either side of him and grabbed him.

“Huh? Uh, hey...what’re you guys planning to—”

“Well then, commence today’s running!” Ernie announced.

Batson had been excluded from the talks as he couldn’t keep up with what was going on and had fallen into confusion. Meanwhile, Kid and Addy ran off once Ernie gave the signal. Batson was being treated as a piece of luggage, one which both twins were carrying at the same time. This was something they could do because they’d learned Ernie’s Limited Physical Boost spell and were now able to exhibit extraordinary power that belied their looks. Unable to resist, Batson was thus carried off at speeds he wouldn’t have thought possible, his eyes rolling into the back of his head.

“I’m sure they’re all in the central square! Charge!”

“Whooo!”

“Yaayy!”

“Seriously, what’s going oooon?!”

★★★

Laihiala Academy town could generally be split into two areas: the school campus and the general town. The town section had a large public square, and it was referred to in a very straightforward way: the central square. During the day, it played host to many stalls, and its lively atmosphere made for a very obvious hangout spot to children.

“Oh come on, he’s not chasing us?”

“There’s no way he’d be able to catch up with how slow he is!”

“Yeah. But it really hurts when he punches you, like he did before...”

“It’ll be fine, we can just run away again! He’s a slowpoke, so it’s easy!”

It was the children who had just been mocking Batson. They were sitting on some wooden boxes that happened to be available, enjoying some fruit they bought at a stall and as well as the thrill that came with having gotten their revenge. In the midst of their happy mood, though, a cheerful voice reached their ears.

“We’re comin’ through!”

“Move it!”

“Where’reyouguysgoincomeonstopiiiiiiit!”

One of the voices they could hear was still fresh in their minds, surprising them greatly. It was the voice of Batson, whom they had just been mocking to their heart’s content. The group of kids hurriedly looked around, trying to find the source of the voice. What they saw was Batson being carried on either side by Kid and Addy, who were rushing at them with explosive speed. The group of children yelped in surprise and confusion.

“Whoa?! Wh-What’re you guys—?!”

“Ah, found ‘em. Now! Launch, Batson!” Ernie had found his target and given his orders.

In response, Kid and Addy grinned widely. Taking advantage of the momentum from their run, the twins used all their strength to throw Batson. They had plenty of room to build up speed and power. While Batson was small, he was densely packed with muscle and quite heavy, but the twins still easily launched him bodily through the air at high speed. The other group of children weren’t able to react quickly enough, so they could only stand there dumbfounded as Batson flew in a parabola toward them. Finally, they realized that he would land right on top of them, and that was when they started to panic.

“Gah! Stop you idiot don’t come any closer!”

“Wooaaarggggghhh! D-Dodge—”

Though the children hurriedly tried to run, they were too late. Batson fell on them, hitting them with his rocklike head. His momentum further carried the entire group through the wooden boxes they’d been resting on until they all came to a rest in a disorderly pile, their travel having kicked up a cloud of dust. Ernie and the twins, the cause of this situation, looked at each other as they realized that they might have gone too far.

“Maybe...that was a little too much?” Ernie eventually wondered aloud.

“Hmm...it was a really clean hit.” Addy remarked.

“Ahh, I’ve got an idea. Let’s get out of here,” Kid suggested.

“You guuuyyysss! As if I’d let you get away!” Batson stood up, throwing broken pieces of wooden box off of him. As should be expected, the sturdiest one was the quickest to get back up. The other children were all still down for the count. Burning with anger, Batson ran at them with undwarflike speed, prompting the three fools to retreat like the wind.

“Well then, see you later!”

“Shut it! All of you freeze! Raaghh!”

As an aside, the other children were caught by adults before they woke up and were reportedly raked over the coals for breaking the wooden boxes.

★★★

A little ways away from the center of town was not the residential area, but the merchants’ district. There was a building there that was a size larger than everything around it. The architect seemed to prize sturdiness over aesthetic sense, and it fit well for the smithy named, “Termonen Workshop.”

Ernie and the twins, along with Batson who was chasing them, ended up running throughout the town until they finally ran out of steam in front of this smithy. Though Ernie himself looked fresh as a daisy, Batson was the exact opposite.

“You...*_huff_*...you guys...too fast...” Batson could barely get the words out.

“Of course we are; we train every day.”

“*_Pant_* That’s why...I asked...why you train so much...”

Ernie smiled. Batson might win out in natural physical stamina, but unfortunately for him Ernie had access to magic. The dwarf didn’t stand a chance.

“Aghh, whatever. I don’t care anymore.” Utterly exhausted, Batson started to feel like everything he had just done was stupid and worthless, so he just gave up and collapsed on the ground. After some time panting hard, a smile eventually grew on his face, and he started to laugh with a low voice.

“Still, it was kinda funny when I hit ‘em with my head.”

“Well now. If you liked that, I’d be happy to help again.”

“No way,” Batson replied. Eventually, he calmed down and got up again, pointing to his house. “Well, whatever. By the way, wanna stop by my place? I’m thirsty.”

The heat from inside the building could be felt where they were, probably because they were so close to the entrance. Batson’s parents were likely still working hard at the forge inside.

“That reminds me, I’ve never been to your house, Batson.”

“Yeah...I’d get dad’s fist if we interrupted work, after all. We can’t make too much noise.”

When the trio entered, Batson’s father and several other blacksmiths were working silently. Batson’s father, like a true dwarf, had a long beard and a well-muscled body. Batson was right, it would probably hurt to get hit by that fist.

On the opposite side of the smithy was the shop, where finished products were displayed. Batson pointed out these products and puffed out his chest with pride.

“Come on, look, this is what my dad made.”

Everything from weapons and armor such as swords, spears, and shields were on display, along with common utensils and other daily necessities like pots. As one might expect from dwarves, a race known to be especially good at blacksmithing, every item was well made, without a deformity in sight.

“I see...you guys make a lot of things,” Ernie remarked as he walked through the store, looking curiously at the wares. Addy followed behind him with no real purpose in mind, while Kid was excited to see the weapons. Batson seemed to be in an extremely good mood, probably because they had praised his father.

“Hey, can you make something, Batty?”

“Uhhh...dad doesn’t really let me touch the metals, but I can make stuff out of wood. I’m a dwarf, too, after all. My craftsmanship was praised by my dad!”

Addy’s question had arisen from a sudden thought, and Batson pointed to a

corner of the shop in reply. Though the items were simple, they were well made, and they showed a glimpse into Batson's skills. All three of them were impressed, but Ernie was particularly drawn to something that was placed in the corner.

"You make staves?"

After a beat, Batson responded. "Staves? Oh, yeah, they're easy as long as you have the materials. I've been making them to earn some pocket change."

In order for humans to use magic, they needed an external catalyst crystal. The most common tool made with these crystals was the staff—essentially a stick with the catalyst crystal stuck to the end of it.

Most staves were made using white mistoe wood. It was easy to pass mana through white mistoe trees, so their wood was prized as staff material. The ones Batson made also used white mistoe.

"I've been practicing magic, and there's something I've always been thinking about..." Ernie looked away from the staff toward the short one that hung from his waist. It was made shorter to match his small frame, and was his favorite tool that he had been using since he started learning magic.

"What's wrong, something up with your staff?" Batson didn't understand what Ernie was getting at, but Ernie simply twirled his short staff around and smiled.

"Aren't staves kind of hard to use?"

Ernie's sudden statement seemed to confuse not only Batson, but Kid and Addy as well; they tilted their heads in response. They were all used to using staves to cast their magic, so they had never thought that. Consequently, they didn't quite get what Ernie was saying.

The source of the discomfort Ernie was feeling was the memories from his previous life. In other words, it was because he remembered all the science lessons he'd learned in his previous world. Taken to the extreme, a staff was a tool to unleash magic. Outside of support magic that "strengthened" something, almost all magic that humans used was of the emission type. In other words, something that launched a powerful attack. Meaning, a staff was

something like a firearm to Ernie.

Ernie's memories of Japan—and of being surrounded by plastic models and toys—included a toy called an airsoft gun. The piece that remained strongest in his memories was a lever-action rifle with a beautiful flowing form, the Winchester Model 1894. Guns, or more specifically rifles, resembled staves in form. That similarity ran through Ernie's mind and made him wonder if a gun-shaped staff couldn't be made.

"Also, since we're going to be knights, it'd be a lot to have to hold a sword in one hand and a staff in another..."

Even though knights mainly fought using swords, having magic as a means of attack was important. The basic equipment of right-handed people would be a longsword in their right hand and a staff in their off-hand. Other than that, a shield in the off-hand was also an option. In that case, a staff would often be held behind the shield.

"Holding a bunch of stuff like that is a huge bother, isn't it? That's why I've been wanting to combine everything into one if possible."

"It's not like I don't get what you're saying, but...what do you want to do about it?"

After laying out all his desires like that, Ernie got a flash of inspiration. It was a very simple feat of association: putting a sword and a gun together obviously made a gunsword. Historically most gunswords were just pistols with knives attached to the barrel, turning them into a close-combat weapon. Thanks to Ernie, that old idea was now staging a comeback in a new world with a strange new form.

"Well, let's see...I did think of something interesting." Ernie smiled, and weirdly, Batson felt chills.

★★★

After that, Ernie returned home and immediately headed for his room, sitting down at his desk to jot down the design ideas he had. The twins followed him on a whim, and were somewhat amazed at the incredible concentration he was showing.

“What’s that? What a weird staff.”

That was the first reaction Addy had upon seeing the finished blueprint. The gunsword, basically a gun that shot magic and had an attached short sword, was an entirely new form of “staff.” To Addy, who had only ever seen the kind of staves currently being made, it was a very bizarre thing.

The next day, Ernie once again visited Batson’s home with his blueprint in hand.

“I came to continue what we were talking about yesterday. Could you make a staff like this?”

Batson was gobsmacked that Ernie had already come in with a blueprint, but since he couldn’t tell if it was possible or not until he saw it, he nevertheless started to pore diligently over the blueprint. As he did, his expression visibly got more and more puzzled.

“Ernie, this...what is it?”

“It’s a Winchester rifle.”

“What’s that? I’ve never heard of a staff by that name. And it’s in such a weird shape to boot...why does it get wider at the bottom? And what’s with this lever?”

“You see, this part is the stock...” As Ernie expected, Batson didn’t grasp the concept with just the drawing. So, he answered all of Batson’s questions, giving detailed explanations on everything.

“Well...I’ll give it a try.”

Batson only seemed half-convinced that it would work, but he still agreed to make it. Ernie was at once relieved and thinking that this was a good chance to see Batson’s skills.

★★★

A few days later, Ernie received a message from Batson. So he visited the dwarf’s house for the third time, only to be shown a strange weapon of his own design.

The grip was built to resemble a rifle’s stock, wide but with a slight curve.

There was no trigger at the base, but the lever mechanism was still there. The tip of the staff, made to look like a gun barrel, was long and contained the catalyst crystal. Because it wasn't actually a gun, there was no need for a chamber. Instead, the lever action unfolded and locked a blade into place. At the moment, it unfolded into a short sword. This was the completed version of a gunsword in this other world, which Ernie came to call the gunlike staff, or just gunstaff.

"I made the wooden parts, but I had my dad help with the metal ones."

"He didn't get mad at you? I would have been fine with an all-wood version if you couldn't shape metal."

Ernie had learned that Batson's father was busy when he visited the other day. That was why he didn't intend to push Batson into doing anything he might get in trouble for.

"Well, uhh...when I was making it, my dad showed some interest, so..." Batson replied.

Ernie nodded in understanding. After asking Batson to thank his father, Ernie immediately took the item in hand and started getting a feel for it. It was built exactly to spec, and it melded with Ernie's hand perfectly. He could only give praise to dwarven technology in his heart.

"So I made it just like you asked... It looks really chaotic and confused, though... How is it?" Batson asked.

"A demonstration would be best, wouldn't it?"

Ernie, having checked the lever mechanism, asked whether Batson had a place where they could try shooting magic. Just like that, the pair immediately headed for the yard behind the smithy. There were logs positioned there in a disordered cluster to act as targets so people could try out weapons, and Ernie chose one to slash at.

Right before he hit, he cast a wind-element intermediate spell: Sonic Blade. The gunstaff's crystal catalyst changed mana into a physical manifestation, and a vacuum surrounded the blade of the short sword. Ernie didn't hesitate to follow through with his slash, and the gunstaff sliced the log in two with a single

strike. Before the top half, which had been sent flying, could hit the ground, Ernie pointed his weapon up at it and fired off a fire-element intermediate spell: Fireball. The spell hit the half-log dead-on and exploded, breaking it into pieces. While Ernie was very happy that the weapon performed better than expected, Batson could not get his mouth to close.

“How should I put it...? It’s crazy. Just absolute nonsense,” was the only impression Batson could give.

“Well, let’s just leave it at that. More importantly, you did a great job building it Batson! Now it’ll be even more fun to use magic!”

“I’m just glad you like it, I guess...”

“By the way, could I get you to make another one?”

“Come on, hold back at least a little!”

In the end, Ernie managed to get a second one made. These two gunstaves, which would later be officially named “Winchesters,” were now affixed to Ernie’s waist in sheathes that had also been custom-made. From this point on, Ernie would never go anywhere without them.

The gunstaff, a magic weapon that could handle close and long range combat with ease, was the deciding factor to lock in Ernie’s fighting style, one specializing in mobility and firepower.

Chapter 3: Let's Enroll in School

One day, Ernesti was sitting in his living room, pondering something with a conflicted look on his face. The cause of this expression was a letter lying in front of him. The words "Notice of acceptance to Laihiala Knight Runner Academy" were written on it. Now that he was halfway through being eight years old, it was about time for him to attend school.

Laihiala Academy town, where Ernie lived, was built around Fremmevilla kingdom's largest school: Laihiala Knight Runner Academy. The school could generally be split into three courses, each course lasting for three years. The elementary course started at age nine, the middle from age twelve, and the high from age fifteen. Most students only enrolled for six years, taking the elementary and middle courses, and that was normal. In Earth terms, the high school course was more like college—devoted to advanced study. So only a small number of students enrolled for it. As an aside, in this world people were considered adults at the age of fifteen. While it was common for people to only get serious about employment at eighteen, the number of people who were independent at fifteen was not small.

At any rate, though "knight runner" was in Laihiala Academy's name, it wasn't just attended by those who wanted to become knights or knight runners. The elementary and middle courses were subsidized by the country, so many children attended school regardless of their status. Fremmevilla kingdom's education system was a little different from Earth's system of compulsory education, having been shaped by the country's special circumstances.

Fremmevilla kingdom was hailed as a country of knights. Though that sounded cool, looked at from the other side, it really just meant that battles were all too common. The country was rife with monsters, and the many farmers who worked large plots of land were easy targets, enduring long years of constant damage from monsters. Because of that, it became a matter of national importance to protect the farmers, who paid their taxes in crop yields. The reason the country didn't try to eliminate all monsters was simply because there was no end to them.

Of course, knights existed to protect the people, but unfortunately, the kingdom was so large that it was not easy to protect all of it, no matter how many knights there were. Also, in most cases, knights only deployed after getting a report of monsters, so it was easy to be caught on the back foot. Relying solely on the knights wasn't enough to keep the damage from spreading. Because of that, the farmers started to want means of defending themselves. It didn't take long for the kingdom to respond to that desire. In order to teach them the bare minimum of combat skills and magic, institutions were built and laws were written. In the end, Fremmevilla kingdom wasn't so peaceful a place that farmers could get away with not fighting; they needed to defend themselves.

There were those who worked for the monarchy in domestic affairs who disliked the idea of teaching the lowest class of peasants how to fight, but the measure was deemed necessary to maintain the kingdom itself. The result was obvious looking at Fremmevilla today: such measures had proven effective. By spreading a certain amount of education widely, the people's awareness that they were citizens of Fremmevilla was strengthened and they became proud of that fact, resulting in an overall improvement in public order.

That was how multiple academies were built within the nation. Among those, Laihiala Knight Runner Academy was close to the capital, so nobles attended it as well as farmers and merchants. Because of that, the school was subdivided into different departments such as an agriculture department, commerce department, and knight department. Though each department had some basic combat classes in common, outside of that the students were taught about whatever profession they were interested in. Students were divided into classes corresponding to their family circumstances, but all were guaranteed to learn at least some skills in their years of study.

★★★

Besides Ernie, who was staring at the document in front of him with a serious expression, the twins Kid and Addy had already looked over their papers and begun making their way through the snacks that were available on the table. By the time they finished everything, Ernie had yet to come out of his funk, and the two were understandably puzzled.

“Say, I know you’re really worrying over this, but why? You’re going to be a knight, right Ernie? Then just enter the knight department.”

“Yes, that’s the plan...but there’s something that’s troubling me.”

“Troubling you? Like the knight classes being way too easy or something?”

“No, not that. It’s just...my final goal is to become a knight runner.”

Knight runner was a term for knights who were allowed to pilot silhouette knights. Ernie had stated this was his goal many times, and not just to his family, but the twins as well.

“There can only be a limited number of knight runners. On top of that, only the most capable knights can become knight runners. Given the fact that the basic knight department will require a total of six years, and I’ll only be able to enter the knight runner department after that, and only upon completing it will I finally be given an assignment...it’s going to be a long time until I can actually ride a silhouette knight.”

Becoming a knight runner wasn’t an easy feat to accomplish. Silhouette knights were weapons. Even if they were meant to protect the nation and its citizens, a long period of training was needed until a pilot could enter the cockpit.

After a bit more thinking, Ernie turned to his father, Matthias.

“Father, I have a question. Is it possible to skip grades in the knight curriculum?”

Matthias frowned, at a loss. He could understand Ernie’s feelings of wanting to hurry, but at the same time he knew how challenging the coursework was.

“It’s true that given how hard you work, as well as your magic skills, it wouldn’t be impossible, Ernie...but the knight curriculum is still difficult. It doesn’t just require skills in the sword and magic; the curriculum also teaches etiquette. You haven’t learned any of that yet, have you, Ernie?”

It certainly was a blind spot for Ernie. Matthias kept going, though he seemed pained to say it.

“Training to ride silhouette knights is one of the final subjects taught in the

knight runner course. They expect you to be fifteen by the time that happens, so...as things stand, Ernie...you, umm...aren't tall enough to ride one."

Everyone's eyes gathered on Ernie, and the room sunk into a hellish silence. It was true that he was smaller than average for his age. That fact was only made more striking because he was always close to the Alter twins. However, no one had thought that such a thing would come back to bite him at a time like this.

Clearly disappointed, Ernie lowered his gaze. As things stood, it would take him another seven years at least to become the giant-robot pilot he dreamed of being. It wasn't that he couldn't wait that long, but it was understandable for him to feel like seven years was a long time to wait. Still, some things were just impossible. Just as Ernie was about to try and shift gears, a shadow loomed overhead. When he looked up, he saw that it was Tina.

"Sorry, Ernie. It's because you look so much like me that you won't grow..." she said apologetically while stroking his head.

Seeing his mother so sorry, Ernie's eyes popped open as he shook his head. "No way! That has nothing to do with it, mother! I'm still too young anyway, and there's no guarantee that there's only one way to—"

An idea seemed to suddenly occur to Ernie, as he suddenly stopped speaking. He had given himself a shock with his own words, and so he slowly shut his mouth. Along with the idea that came bursting into his head like a meteor came a high-speed reimagining of his path.

"That's right. There's no guarantee that that's the only way. It's going to take so long only because I was so overly focused on piloting. Since that's the case, I should use my time in a different way..."

Tina tilted her head in confusion as Ernie raised his, showing a determined expression.

"So I can just make one."

"Make what?" There was no logical connection in his eyes, so Kid just turned the last part of the sentence back as a question.

"A silhouette knight. I can just make one myself."

That threw Kid for a loop. It was a while before he got out a “What?”

Addy seemed to be the same. It took her a while to say, “Huh? Ernie? Are you being serious?”

Everyone around Ernie was taken aback not just by what he said, but by the fact that he said it with a more resolute expression than ever before.

“W-Wait a second. Make? What do you mean by that?”

“Exactly what I said. I have taken action all this time with only the thought of piloting a silhouette knight. But now that I think about it, even if I succeeded, it wouldn’t be with a personalized unit for me.”

Everyone around him exasperatedly wondered if he had thought that he would come to personally own a silhouette knight this entire time. Excluding a small subsection of nobles and wealthy merchants, silhouette knights weren’t something that could be obtained privately. This was because constructing and maintaining one cost a lot in terms of both funds and manpower. That was why, to pilot a silhouette knight, going from a knight to a silhouette knight was actually a shortcut. However, that was only going by conventional logic. That held no meaning to a mecha otaku who had crossed over worlds.

“That’s right. Don’t you realize? There’s no way I’d be able to customize a unit given to me by the kingdom as much as I wanted! Why did I never realize such a simple thing until now? Customization is exactly what’s so great about mechs. If I’m going to be remodeling every inch of a mech anyway, then I’ll need the knowledge for doing so... I was careless.”

Seeing Ernie’s smile project an increasingly ominous aura, Kid and Addy each slapped a hand to their brow as if to say, *Oh no, there he goes*. While Ernie was usually mild-mannered and relaxed, he would sometimes get into extreme fits of passion, and Kid and Addy now felt like they got a glimpse of the source of all of those feelings.

“Are you really serious about this, Ernie...?”

“Of course I am! As things stand, the only thing that’s certain is that I’ll be wasting too much time. So, making a silhouette knight of my own would be an interesting alternative. Not to mention, if I started saving now, buying a

silhouette knight would be much more realistic, wouldn't it?"

Aren't both of those options just pipe dreams? Kid thought, but he wisely decided to not speak the words. While Kid was feeling tired from all this, Matthias spoke up from beside him.

"Ernie...I understand how you feel, but...that's not as easy as you're making it out to be, you know?"

"I know, father. But if possible, I would like a silhouette knight made just for me. That's why I'm going to do whatever I can."

"I see... Okay, I understand. But make sure you study to be a knight seriously."

"All right. I have no intention of cutting corners as a pilot."

Ernie's expression did not betray even a hint of hesitation. Seeing that, Addy's exasperation went so far it turned back into her being impressed. For that reason, she started to stroke Ernie's head.

"How should I put it...? You'll really do anything for your goals, won't you Ernie?"

It took a beat for Ernie to reply. "I'm not totally happy with the way you said that, but there's no reason not to use something that's available."

"It's seriously amazing how you look so cute when you're so fierce and passionate, Ernie," Addy gushed.

It's because *I look this way that normal means won't cut it,* Ernie thought back as he looked out the window at the huge institution that took up the larger half of this town: Laihiala Knight Runner Academy.

"Mm, now I'm looking forward to the day I can attend Laihiala."

Matthias and Tina looked at each other and broke into laughter. Neither of them wanted to see their cute child depressed. They also knew that even though his goals were a bit too extreme, Ernie would progress along that track without hesitation.

Kid seemed to be inspired as well, as after a moment he chimed in, "You really never break, do you? That's awesome, Ernie. Now I can't allow myself to lose."

“Kid?”

“No, it’s nothing. All right Addy, let’s aim to become knights ourselves!”

“Yeah!”

Kid and Addy decided to apply for the knight curriculum as well, so the trio were now all aiming to attend Laihiala Knight Runner Academy. They couldn’t help but look forward to their school life, which would soon start.

★★★

It was the year 1274 of the Occidental Calendar.

The seasons had changed and it was now spring—the time when new students were admitted to Laihiala Knight Runner Academy.

Students attending Laihiala Academy not only came from the town of Laihiala itself, the capital Konkaanen, and other nearby cities, but from all over the place. Since transportation was perilous thanks to the danger of monsters, most students arrived at the academy with plenty of time to spare, and new faces were seen all the time at the student dorms and their surroundings.

The morning of the scheduled date for the entrance ceremony, Ernesti, Archid, Adeltrude, and Batson arrived at the academy together. Since the dorms were almost entirely filled by students from out of town, those who already lived in Laihiala’s town tended to commute from home.

Laihiala Academy town was surrounded by a giant wall, but Laihiala Knight Runner Academy had its own walls. These walls were mostly to denote the campus grounds, but since the campus was so large, the walls stretched endlessly through the town, becoming something of a landmark of their own.

“That reminds me. I’m used to seeing this wall, but I’ve never been inside.”

“We’ll be going inside a lot from now on!”

“Of course.”

As they continued to walk along the length of the wall, eventually the group came upon the academy’s gigantic main gate. It was made to be so large to accommodate the entrance and exit of silhouette knights, as the school prized its knight runner department. Of course, the gates were currently open wide, as

today was the entrance ceremony.

While feeling somewhat nervous, the group of four attempted to pass through the gate. But suddenly, Ernie stopped. The other three looked back at him quizzically, but they quickly understood why when they looked to the side of the gate. The wide-open gate was flanked on each side by silhouette knights, posed as if to welcome the newcomers. Ernie had immediately started to pay reverence to these silhouette knights, and he had to be dragged along by his friends.

The biggest event planned for the day was, of course, the entrance ceremony. Though it was called a ceremony, it mostly consisted of the teachers' welcoming speeches. After that, a period for lunch was sandwiched in between the ceremony and splitting the students into their chosen courses, followed by providing them a simple outline of the lessons they would be having. Though they were split into different courses, elementary students had a lot of shared basic lessons, so the different cohorts would spend most of their time together anyway, making the distinction between them seem vague. The courses only really started to differ significantly in the middle grades.

The entrance ceremony was held in the great auditorium. While many people got lost in the expansive grounds, Ernie smoothly made his way to the auditorium, as he already knew where everything was thanks to visiting his father at work. His three friends simply kept up with his small form as best they could.

"It's great that we already have a guide, but it's way too easy to lose Ernie in a crowd. He's tiny," Kid complained.

"You're right. He'd be easier to find if he was just a *little* bit taller. But I'm fine with it, since he's cute!" Addy said.

"I'm basically the same height as him..."

Ernie called out exasperatedly to his hangers-on as they were having a lively conversation among themselves: "I'd be okay with leaving Kid and Addy here."

"Ah, that's right! I just had a great idea. I won't lose sight of Ernie if I'm holding him!"

“I would like you to stop even considering that.”

The group reached the great auditorium while joking around, and found it was already filled to overflowing with a great mass of students. They were all newly admitted, and it seemed Laihiala Academy’s title of largest academy in the kingdom wasn’t just for show. Though the group thought there wouldn’t even be room to stand inside, it was surprisingly easy to find seats. The academy had probably expected this dense crowd.

★★★

The entrance ceremony started quietly, wreathed in a naive and innocent sense of nervousness.

Starting with Ernesti’s grandfather, the headmaster Rowley Echevalier, the higher-ups of the academy took turns making speeches one after the other. At first the children listened, backs straight with rapt attention, but they steadily got more and more sick of it. The students showed great patience for children, but by the end almost everyone was about to die of boredom. However, their need for patience ended before noon. Once the speeches were over, so was the entrance ceremony, so all the new students streamed out of the great auditorium.

The time was perfect for lunch, so the students went straight to the cafeteria. While some would eat in the cafeteria, others brought food from home, and seasoned upperclassmen would instead leave the school to eat at nearby stores. Everyone had their own way of spending their lunch, but that didn’t keep the cafeteria from being extremely crowded. But, among that crowd, a group of people stood out greatly in a corner of the cafeteria.

One member of this group had moderately long silver hair tinged with purple, and was a small-statured beautiful...girl (?).

Two others had black, slightly wavy hair. A boy and girl pair of similar height and looks.

The last member of this group was a dwarven boy with reddish brown hair.

It was impossible to tell from the outside how this strange combination of people came together. Though they were exposed to inquisitive looks from the

people around them, somehow no one had the courage to say anything to them.

“Still, this cafeteria is crazy packed, isn’t it?”

“We were able to get seats pretty easily though. Not sure why.”

“I wonder. They totally just gave us the seats without any fuss...”

As Batson started up the conversation, Ernie bit into his crepe made with thin pie dough. It was made smaller to be easier to carry around, but it didn’t look small when juxtaposed with his diminutive figure. Meanwhile, in secret, Addy happily watched him eat.

“Seriously though, there’s even more stuff to listen to in the afternoon? It’s too much.”

“Not like you’ll be listening anyway, Kid, so who cares? You were sleeping the whole time.”

“Let’s just finish eating first. It’s so crowded, so we should free up these seats soon.”

The table they were sitting at still had some room at it. No one was taking those seats though, probably because they were feeling hesitant to get close or disturb the group. However, there was one girl who sat next to them without minding any of that public sentiment.

The sight of her, walking with her head and its honey-blonde tresses held high, caused a slight stir among the crowd of students. It was because her coming to the cafeteria was a rare thing. And, as if it were planned, she naturally sat next in an empty seat next to the group of four.

She was clearly older than Ernie and the others—an upperclassman. Laihiala Knight Runner Academy had no official uniform, but she was wearing a plain, albeit well-made, outfit with just enough decorations that they wouldn’t get in the way. The way she carried herself spoke of a fairly blessed upbringing. Ernie idly guessed that she was either from a rich merchant family, or possibly a noble.

Reactions to this visitor were split in two. Ernie and Batson inclined their

heads, puzzled as to how to react to this unfamiliar person. Meanwhile, Kid and Addy stared at her with bated breath. They weren't paying close attention to her because she was beautiful, but because they found her unpleasant. That only caused Ernie to tilt his head further. There was no doubt that she had some connection to the twins.

The girl flashed a small smile at the nervous twins after her sudden appearance before turning to Ernie and Batson. Her smile softened as she introduced herself.

"Nice to meet you, adorable friends. My name is Stefania Serrati. And you are?"

Ernie felt a bit gobsmacked, but nevertheless he put down his partially eaten crepe and straightened his posture.

"My name is Ernesti Echevalier, and this is Batson Termonen. As for those two..."

"It's fine; I know them already. It's been a while, Archid, Adeltrude. I'm glad you two seem healthy."

In contrast to Stefania, who smiled softly, Kid seemed excessively stiff—a large difference from his usual sleepy demeanor.

"It has been too long, 'big sister' Stefania."

The words that came out of Kid's mouth were so formal the others couldn't believe he was the one who said them. For a moment the girl named Stefania knitted her brows in sadness, but she quickly recovered and went back to a smile.

Those changes only took a moment, as after a beat she said, "So you two are finally at the age to enroll in Laihiala. We're finally going to be attending school together. You could have told me."

"You're in your elementary third year, aren't you big sister Stefania? That reminds me, is big brother Balthazar here too?"

"Yes, he's in the elementary second year of the knight curriculum. You should have a chance to see him eventually."

In contrast to Stefania's familiar attitude, Kid was acting overly stiff, and Addy was far more silent than she normally was. Iit was all very strange. The content of their conversation made it seem like one between family members, but it still felt unnatural. The atmosphere of the table had gone in a weird direction, and Batson was looking between both parties with a bewildered expression.

At this point, everyone had stopped eating. That was when Ernie suddenly scarfed down the rest of his crepe in a manner that was surprising for his small frame. He paid no mind to the surprise on everyone's faces as he wiped his mouth and smiled.

"Now then. I'm done eating, and the cafeteria is terribly packed. We can't afford to hog this table forever, so why don't we move somewhere else?"

It took a moment for Stefania to recover. "Yes...yes, you're right. You're all in the knight course too, right? If that's the case, it shouldn't be hard to meet up. Let's take our time and talk later."

Stefania seemed somewhat disappointed, but for some reason she gave Ernie a light pat on the head as she left, leaving just a confused party of four. Batson seemed like he wanted to ask what just happened, but Ernie suggested that this was a good time for them to move to their classrooms and somewhat forcefully pushed them all in that direction. Batson wasn't entirely happy with this, but there wasn't anything he could do, so he headed over to the blacksmithing department by himself, leaving the other three to themselves with a hard-to-describe air hanging around them.

Each department's orientation, which started in the afternoon, wasn't terribly interesting. All the students received was an outline of the classes they would be taking starting tomorrow, and a simple explanation of what was being planned for the future. After that, they were let free, so the students split up and started moving about on their own.

Even after the orientation, Kid and Addy were still acting stiff. They wouldn't joke around like usual, and it seemed like their heads were in the clouds. They simply followed Ernie as they made their way home, with Ernie talking to them all the while.

"I don't really know the details, but don't let what happened get to you. Classes start tomorrow, so let's skip the training for today and take it easy."

The twins stopped. "Hey, Ernie," Kid started with a depressed tone in his voice. It seemed he'd resolved himself to talk.

"What is it?"

"You aren't going to ask? Like, who that was and stuff?"

"If you need to tell me, then I'll listen."

After a deep breath, the tense air around the two loosened. They exchanged looks of confirmation, and after a beat Addy broached the subject.

"Ernie...there's something we'd like to talk to you about after this."

"Okay. Then let's head to my room."

After leaving the school, the three friends went to Ernie's house, or more specifically, his room. Because they normally used it for magic lessons, the twins already knew how to get there. They each sat in their usual spots on chairs or on the bed, but unlike usual, no one started talking right away. Kid opened his mouth to start, but instead of saying anything he sat with his mouth agape for a while, trying to find the words.

"Ahh...well...put simply, our father is a pretty important noble." At the end of all his searching and worrying, what ended up coming out was far too simple. Ernie blinked.

"Then are you two nobles as well? But I've never seen you do anything noble-

like. You always just train with me."

"Ahhh...that's actually pretty complicated..." Addy chimed in. "Basically, our mom isn't his legal wife. She's his mistress, if you will."

"Well, mom's pretty casual about it. She has us, so she said she doesn't care if she's a mistress."

"Our father's legal wife...how should I put it...she's a *really* jealous person. And yet, she also really cares about her reputation."

"So, she doesn't like our mom *at all*, but her pride won't allow her to deal with a mere mistress."

Of course Ernie was troubled as to how to react, so he decided to just listen and make some noises every once in a while to show he was still paying attention.

"Our mom is really mature. She always avoids the rest of the family as much as possible. But then our father's wife up and said that she couldn't allow us to live in the same place as her, which kicked up a huge fuss."

"So a house was prepared for us to live in, and that's where we are now. Also, our father provides us with money for food and looks after us."

"Well anyway, that's how things are...and 'big sister' Stefania from earlier, well, she's the daughter of the legal wife."

"Big sis Tefa is nice enough, but she's got two brothers. The younger of the two is just the worst."

"He always goes out of his way to throw his weight around, harping on about us being bastard children or whatever. He's worse than father's legal wife!"

The two went on and on in rapid succession before taking a huge breath. Their expressions got the worst when talking about the two brothers, making Ernie think that something had happened between them.

"And this younger brother...he's attending Laihiala right now?"

"That's right. He's a year older than us, so he's an elementary second year student."

“I see. I get the feeling that there’s going to be trouble.”

Kid vehemently shook his head. It was more than just a feeling for him—he *knew* there would be trouble. He couldn’t help but think back to everything that had happened back at home, those days where all he could do was bear with it. Once he got stuck in the mire of memories, it took a while for him to get back out.

“Just so you know, we’re grateful to our father. He gives us money and looks after us. But...”

“If they’d just leave us alone, we wouldn’t bother them either. But they always try to mess with us. I hate them.”

While Addy was quiet and trailed off, Kid spoke with large, exaggerated motions, probably to illustrate how mad he felt.

“If big sis Tefa found out we’re attending school now...they will too, eventually. When that happens, Ernie, you’ll probably be caught in the crossfire since you’re with us...”

Ernie couldn’t see any of Addy’s usual energy. She was so downcast, and the gap between her current state and her usual energetic brightness was striking.

“I understand the gist of what’s going on. And?” At some point, Ernie had stood up and walked in front of the twins.

They puzzled over the meaning of that for a moment before Kid replied, “What do you mean, ‘And?’”

“Is the plan to drive them back? Disregard them? Or do you want an ambush?”

“Yeah, good idea, an ambush—hey wait!”

Kid reflexively jumped on board before he registered what Ernie had said and made the appropriate horrified reaction. Ernie had just made a terribly violent suggestion without losing the usual smile on his face. Even Kid, who already knew Ernie wasn’t as cute as he looked, couldn’t help but be taken aback.

“You’re already going that far?! You know how glad I am that we’re friends? It’d be too scary to have you as an enemy.”

“Yeah, seriously! Ernie!” Addy joined in. “You’re like, super reassuring to have around, but...umm...we really shouldn’t trouble you with our problems.”

“You’re right. I certainly am not sure how far I should poke my nose in. But I can’t just leave my friends alone when they’re in trouble. If you need help, just say so. I’ll do what I can.”

“Yeah, got it!”

The twins confidently nodded, and with their smiles regained, Ernie saw them out and homeward bound.

However, while he was doing that, his thoughts were focused on another matter. *I never would have guessed that nobles were the source of their troubles. That was really unexpected. From the looks of things, the older sister doesn’t really hate them, so what should I do? Either way, it doesn’t look like we’ll be able to avoid trouble...*

Those vague doubts and worries stuck in a corner of his heart. It seemed to Ernie that their school life would be more eventful than he had expected.

★★★

Despite the tumultuous start to their school life, Ernie and friends nevertheless pushed on and went to school the day after the entrance ceremony.

There were no classes today either, though. Instead, ancillary explanations took up most of the day. To mere nine-year-old children who had yet to experience formal schooling because they’d just been admitted to the elementary grades, this was extremely boring. Most of them simply let the never-ending droning coming from the teachers go in one ear and out the other. It was easy to tell that the prevailing thought in common between all the kids was, *I wonder if this’ll be over soon...* However, among them there was one person whose heart had been overtaken by a shocking truth that had nothing to do with these speeches.

To think...that there were classes...like this...

Yes, it was Ernesti Echevalier. What had given him such a shock? The coarse, badly made paper in front of him was the cause. Written on it was an orderly

table detailing the daily class schedule. It was the most fundamental piece of information for all new students. Still, what truth had he gotten from such a document?

Fundamentals of Silhouette Knight Design...that's a class?!

However, the class schedule he was gripping in his hands wasn't the one for the knight curriculum. As one might expect from the name of the class, it was meant for blacksmiths who engaged in the manufacture of silhouette knights. More specifically, it was meant for those who aimed to become the highest ranking of those smiths: knightsmiths. In terms of school year, the course would be held for those in the second year of middle school, when the student was around thirteen. It needn't be said that it was far away from something Ernie, in the first year of elementary school of the knight curriculum, would be able to take.

However, of course, the runaway express train that was Ernesti wouldn't sit still when faced with such a heart-pounding class. He immediately identified what class he would be taking during that time period. What he found was one of the most important classes for the knight curriculum: Fundamentals of Magic.

I want to take that *class no matter what. In order to do that...this class, it's in the way!*

In that moment, the professor standing at his lectern suddenly felt a strange sensation. It was as if a starving beast had wandered into his classroom, and the tension felt like something sharp stabbing into his skin. He shivered, stopping his exposition to look around the classroom. However, all he saw were rather unmotivated children. Where would a starving beast even be in this place where all that was happening was his speech? With that in mind, the professor casually shook his head and convinced himself it was only his imagination.

He hadn't noticed a single odd, small-statured student who was quietly burning with passion.

★★★

The courses in the knight curriculum that Ernie and the twins were taking could broadly be split between two categories: general education and beginner

level knight classes. The general education classes were shared between all curriculums, while the beginner knight classes were focused on raising the student's knowledge of magic, mana reserves, and swordsmanship.

The kind of magic humans used could generally be placed into three categories by the difficulty of casting and the power of the resulting spell. These categories were: common spell, intermediate spell, and advanced spell.

Spells classified as common could be used, and were thus learned by, nearly all people in Fremmevilla kingdom, which was why they were called common spells. In a sense, real magic only started when someone started getting into intermediate spells. Though the courses other than the knight course only aimed to teach a few intermediate spells by the time the students were through middle school. The only course that wanted its students to learn advanced spells was the knight course. This was because of how much mana those spells required. In order to increase one's mana reserves, it was required for the practitioner to put forth unceasing daily effort, just as Ernesti had done. That was why the field of combat jobs (represented by knights) devoted a lot of time toward training its hopefuls to have a lot of mana. The big feature of the knight course was that it spent most of its time doing just that.

★★★

Then it was time for the Fundamentals of Magic class.

The plan for this commemorable first meeting was not a lesson in a classroom, but an evaluation of each student's magic talent. This was one of the merits of the course they had signed up for.

The trio of Ernie and the twins had been learning magic for a while now, so they were already able to use magic to an extent. There were also other students who had already begun learning magic. In this first class, the ones with magical experience would be split from the ones without. Those without experience would be assigned to the general class, while those with experience would be put into the advanced class. Though it was called the advanced class, it was only advanced compared to those without any experience with magic whatsoever. Nonetheless, those "advanced" students were still sometimes viewed as elite.

This was because the advanced class was mainly populated by nobles or the children of affluent merchants with blessed home lives. Being able to hire tutors for magic and the sword naturally required a family with some economic leeway. In that respect, Ernesti, who was from a family of educators, and the twins, whom he was teaching, were outliers.

★★★

Students of the advanced class noisily followed their teacher to the exercise field and gathered at the edge of it. The best way to evaluate someone's magic was to have them use it. In order to use magic, which tended to bring destruction, they needed to move to a specialized, walled-off training area. While looking around at all the lined up targets with used, old, and battered armor on them, the students started to get more and more excited.

This would just be a small demonstration, and each student's magical abilities weren't set in stone at this point. That was the official stance, but of course people would be happy to outperform others, and they would feel special for doing so. This was particularly true for those in the advanced class, since many were confident in their abilities. That was why the atmosphere of the class was so excited—in essence, they were competing to see who would unleash the strongest spell.

Among them, one student had cast Fireball, an intermediate spell using the fire foundational element. The shining orange sphere of magic flew from his staff and hit the target while leaving behind a faint trail of flames. In an instant, the spell lived up to its name as it exploded and spread fire to the surroundings. Though the target managed to maintain its shape, it was burned and charred all over, showing the power of the spell.

This sight caused a stir among the rest of the class. Not many students could already cast an intermediate spell right after entering school, especially not Fireball, which was well known for its power. As one might expect, its power came with a corresponding cost in mana, and the boy who used it could not cast it a second time. He was already only a step away from complete mana exhaustion, but he couldn't hide his satisfied expression even as he breathed raggedly.

While watching all that, the professor started to hold hope for this year's students, thinking that they were exceptional. If they could use this much magic right after enrolling, then if they did well in expanding their mana reserves while in school, they could become quite powerful. The professor tried as best he could not to let his feelings show on his face, as he silently recorded the results.

"Quite a few of 'em are using Fireball. Should we also do something along those lines?" Kid asked.

"Yeah... Ah, Ernie, what do you think?"

A little ways away from the excited crowd, Archid was standing lazily with his arms crossed. Beside him, Adeltrude was latched on to Ernie, as had become the usual for her, as she talked. But that was when she noticed something off with him. Normally Ernie had a sort of floaty or fluffy air about him from her perspective, but now his expression was stern, as if he were about to step onto a battlefield.

Addy tilted her head, puzzled. From her experiences with him up until now, Ernie only ever got this serious when it had to do with silhouette knights. However, she couldn't see what this class, in which their magic was being evaluated, had to do with that subject.

★★★

Meanwhile, the evaluation proceeded until it was finally Ernie's turn. He was even smaller than the other children his age, and his expression was unusually stiff, revealing his unusual seriousness. He took his position, but out of nowhere he spoke to the instructor.

"Teacher, may I ask something of you?"

"Hm? What is it?" He seemed perplexed at the sudden question.

"If the results of my evaluation greatly exceed the purview of this class, may I be excused from attending it?"

The instructor was not prepared for such a question, and his face froze in a silly expression as it took him a moment to squeeze out a "What?" Eventually, his brain processed what had been asked and his face scrunched up.

He took the time to look down at the list of students before saying, “Ernesti Echevalier? What are you trying to accomplish by rejecting this class? If it was supposed to be a joke, it’s not—”

“No, I assure you I am being completely serious. I have a different class I want to take; that is why I would appreciate it if I did not have to show up for this one.”

Now the instructor was astonished beyond words. He had been teaching for some time now, but this was the first time he’d ever seen such an overconfident student. Not only that, the boy was newly admitted into the elementary school instead of being from one of the higher grades. There was no way the instructor could assent to such a request.

“How dare you have such a big mouth. I won’t allow you to skip class for just anything. Let’s see...yes...since you suggested it, I suppose if you were to show me an advanced spell, I could think about it.”

“So you’ll agree to it depending on the results. Now that I have your word...”

Having heard this conversation, the other students in the class watched on with interest. Most of them were just curious, but the twins—who were the only ones who knew Ernie’s true abilities—exchanged a glance, having already imagined the results.

The instructor had set such a high bar with the intention of punishing Ernie. However, he was talking to a person who had made designing silhouette knights his calling in life. Without hesitation, Ernie decided to display his full power.

He started constructing and running scripts through his virtual thought-space—his Magius Circuit. His incredible calculation abilities started to process everything with a hum. Even quicker than that, he drew the Winchester from its sheath and activated magic along the arc of the weapon’s swing. The spell he activated was Piercing Lance; when the compressed fire and heat hit its target, it erupted in a directional explosion. In essence, it was a fire bullet with increased piercing capabilities. However, Ernie hadn’t activated just one instance of the spell, but *ten at once*.

In the blink of an eye, he finished setting the Piercing Lance spells, and after a

beat they fired off all at once toward the target. The thin lances of fire each hit their mark, letting out a sharp noise as they burst in succession. The heat, unleashed in such a confined space, pierced through the rear of the armor and utterly obliterated the target stand inside. There were a total of ten shots, so there was no way for the target to resist all that firepower. The pierced sections glowed bright red as the armor melted before it scattered in the explosion.

The teacher and students, having seen that display, couldn't believe what had happened in front of their eyes. Piercing Lance was actually an intermediate spell only a little more difficult than Fireball, but Ernie had constructed the magic in an instant. Moreover, he had simultaneously done so for ten instances of the spell, which was no mean feat. Even more surprising was the fact that Ernie's breathing hadn't elevated in the slightest even after all of that. This showed that his mana reserves were large enough that expending in that many Piercing Lances was nothing. That kind of feat wasn't possible for a newly admitted student by mere chance.

Just that display would have been more than enough, but Ernie had made a promise. He drew his other Winchester, having already constructed the next spell script. A fine, well-ordered magic circle appeared that was far more brutal than Piercing Lance.

The atmosphere started to swirl. Quickly, it became a tornado which traveled in a straight line from Ernie to another target with a thunderous roar. The wind was so strong it would have carried the target away if it hadn't been so solidly affixed to the ground. Along with that, thunderclaps exploded in the ears of the people in the area. Lightning born from magic struck the target, hitting it with even more power than the Piercing Lances had. That one attack reduced the armor and the target inside to smithereens.

The spell was called Thundering Gale—a composite spell of the wind and lightning elements, and an undeniable advanced spell.

To Ernie, who had been tirelessly training his mana reserves since he was five, firing off multiple advanced spells was no big deal. His breathing had not elevated in the slightest. When he turned around, he was met with a lineup of utterly shocked faces. Looking toward the instructor, who had his mouth wide open as well, Ernie flashed a satisfied smile.

“Well then, teacher, what do you think? May I be excused from this class?”

It took the man a while to respond. “Huh? Oh, sure. Go ahead.”

No one objected to that. And that was how Ernie won the freedom he needed for his brighter tomorrow.

★★★



While the other students gave a wide berth to Ernie, who was feeling very happy after obtaining victory with overwhelming force, the twins looked at the destroyed targets exasperatedly.

“Man, Ernie, you went really flashy, didn’t you? You’re totally pumped up,” said Kid.

“Yes. With this, I am free from class, and I’ll be able to take Fundamentals of Silhouette Knight Design!”

“So that’s what you went so far for...” Addy commented. “You tend to turn everything that gets in your way to ash, Ernie...”

Addy had been backing away from him slowly as she talked, but then Kid, with a wry smile, stopped her.

“You’re wrong, Addy. He has a goal, and he won’t hold back when chasing it. All right, I’mma gonna go hard too!”

Kid swung his arm in circles to show how motivated he was, causing Ernie to ignore the theatrics he had just performed to give a warning.

“Leaving me aside, is it all right for you to stand out, Kid? Your ‘nasty’ brother is here too, after all. Are you trying to provoke him?”

“You’re willing to say that even after what you just did? As I said before, we’ll be sticking with you either way, so we might as well stand out too.”

“That’s...so on point I can’t argue against it.”

“Right? Then I’m off.”

“Have fun out there. Do your best.”

The crowd at the training area had yet to calm down after the impact of Ernie’s explosive show. Kid, who seemed insignificant after all that, walked forward while surrounded by empathizing looks from the crowd. It would have been rare for a person to want to follow after a display of such monstrous magical strength that trying to compete seemed silly. Even knowing that, Kid stepped up with his head held high.

As expected of Ernie, our teacher. I always knew it’d be hard to catch up to

him. Still, I'll at least give him a show!

Since he was being taught by Ernie, Kid was used to his ridiculousness by now. And he himself knew that he had yet to achieve his goal of catching up. That was why he decided to pull out all the stops and show everything he could do right now.

Kid calmed his breathing and closed his eyes before starting to assemble the script he would use with his Magius Circuit. He, being better with brute-force type spells, chose one that at least had high power going for it. Picking up his favorite staff from its spot at his waist, he pointed it at a target with exaggerated motions. As the script and Kid's mana flowed into the catalyst crystal, it started to shine crimson. The spell he chose was a simple but high-powered intermediate spell that could outdamage Piercing Lance: Flame Strike.

A flashy, elliptical ball of flames flew forth, leaving behind a trail of fire, resulting in a huge explosion larger than that of a Fireball. A reverberating roar washed over the somewhat dazed and stupefied crowd and returned them to the world.

"Ragh!!!" Kid roared triumphantly.

He immediately fired a second shot. The overlapping explosions that resulted blew away a second target. Currently, he was able to fire off Flame Strike twice before running out of mana, and he was already unsteady on his feet, only barely able to stay standing. Still, he had a satisfied smile as he switched with Addy.

"You always rely on brute force, Kid...watch me!"

Kid and Addy were twins, but their areas of specialty were quite different. Unlike Kid, who prized raw power, Addy was good at fine control. She carefully constructed a script and held her staff in both hands, pointing it toward a target. The next instant, a bright flash of lightning came from the staff, spearing into the target with a roar loud enough to split the atmosphere. The spell she chose was an intermediate lightning elemental spell: Riot Sparrow.

Riot Sparrow created a javelin of lightning and launched it at a target. Lightning spells had fairly good power, but because of the nature of lightning, they were difficult to aim accurately. Being somewhat hard to control, the

burden on the caster was high. Since lightning spells were so hard to target, they tended to be categorized as higher than similar spells from other elements. Though Addy didn't have much experience with the spell, she was able to unerringly hit the center of the target. That superb control was very characteristic of her, it could be said. In the end, all three of the trio were able to put forth results far above the others.

Leaving behind the rest of the class, who by now had sunk into an indescribable atmosphere, the trio celebrated with each other. Addy had picked up Ernie and was spinning him around while Kid had collapsed to the floor and was taking it easy. Unlike those three, though, the rest of the advanced class couldn't be so easygoing. They were trembling with fear, thinking, *Oh no, what if we have to keep taking classes with those three?!*

As was noted before, many of those in the advanced class were nobles or children of affluent merchants. Of course, those children had more than enough pride to match. Their immature sense of self-respect, coupled with a childish short-temperedness, made them easy to displease. However, what was displayed in front of them was such a devastating scene that both their self-esteem and their fighting spirit were shattered. The other children all heaved a long, heavy collective sigh as they gave up. The trio saw everyone else in their dispirited states and seemed to not care. The suffering (?) of their classmates had only just begun.

★★★

A few days had passed since that disastrous class of such rarely seen catastrophic proportions. Batson Termonen was currently guiding his small-statured childhood friend while confirming his business for the umpteenth time.

"Ahh, that's it. The classroom you're looking for...but seriously, are you really going to be taking that class?"

Laihiala Knight Runner Academy contained within it many grades and departments of study, so naturally it needed just as many classrooms, as well as buildings to contain those. These buildings were generally divided by department and grade, so students generally only ever saw students of other departments at the cafeteria.

“Of course! I would never allow such an interesting class to escape me! Ah, so I’ll be good now. Thank you very much, Batson.”

“I see...”

After waving goodbye and seeing off the other boy, Batson couldn’t help but tilt his head quizzically on the way back.

“But this is the blacksmithing department, and that’s a middle school class...”

★★★

Before the class started, the mood in the room was relaxed. Among those in the room, some were preparing for the next class, some were grappling with their homework, and some were simply engaged in trifling conversation.

“Class is starting, quiet dow—actually, it’s really quiet today already.”

The professor in charge of the class walked in with what seemed to be a standard line, but he stopped when he noticed the atmosphere was different from usual. Normally before class the room would be noisy with boisterous students, and they wouldn’t quiet down for anything. Students aiming to become blacksmiths tended to be the practical type, so they were much better at moving their hands than thinking. Though that kind of tendency wasn’t altogether wrong, they struggled to sit still as a result.

Such students tended to dislike classes like this one that were basically lectures. Unusually, today the classroom was already quiet by the time the professor walked in. Though he knew he should be happy, he couldn’t help but feel that something was wrong. The professor, who was forty-ish, looked around the classroom to find that almost all the students’ gazes were concentrated on one point. Tracing those looks, he saw a clear outlier.

After a moment of trying to puzzle it out himself, he said, “You. What are you doing here?”

He was questioning a certain student who seemed very out of place, one who had taken a spot at the center of the front row of seats.

This boy in no way seemed like a middle school student. He was small and looked far too young. And because he was sitting at a desk meant for middle

school students, the size didn't fit him. He had to sit in seiza—a form of sitting with one's legs folded under oneself—on top of the chair just to be able to use the desk. He sat with his back straight in an attentive posture, and was hugging the textbook for this class preciously with an excited look on his face.

It was actually a very heartwarming sight, but that had no bearing on the situation at hand. This was a class for middle school students, not elementary schoolers.

"Yes! I'm preparing for class!"

"I see. Class is about to start, after all. But that is not the problem. You do not seem like a middle school student."

"I am an elementary student in the knight curriculum, but I came because I wanted to take this class."

It seemed the professor had a rather calm disposition, as even though he felt that they weren't quite speaking on the same wavelength, he refused to be flustered and immediately moved to guide the boy instead of making a fuss.

"Hm, it's always good to be passionate about your studies. However, you should have your own classes as a student of the knight department. You should return to that class."

"It's fine. I've already learned everything there is to learn in that class, so I got permission from the teacher there to come here. You can confirm with him; he'll say the same."

The professor thought about that for a moment. "I see. Very well, I don't mind if you stay, I suppose. Now then, continuing from yesterday, the structure of a silhouette knight..."

Almost all the students in the class shouted, "Seriously?! You're all right with this?!" in their hearts, but the professor started his class anyway.

While being bathed in sidelong glances, the foreign object sitting at the front of the class—Ernesti Echevalier—opened his textbook while seeming happier than he'd ever been, and prepared to take notes. Seeing him so happy even though this was just a normal class, the other students started to feel like it was too much of a bother to comment on the strangeness of the situation. With

that, the class started in a strangely calm manner while accepting a foreign element.

★★★

In order to design a silhouette knight, one first needed to understand a silhouette knight's structure. This reasoning was simple and easy to understand. However, what did an aspiring designer need to do to learn that? In terms of concrete methods, learning silhouette knight structure would be very hard. One reason was how complex a silhouette knight was. An aspiring learner would need knowledge in a wide range of fields, from blacksmithing to magic to alchemy. Learning how silhouette knights worked could also be said to be a problem of sheer resources. Because of that, only people who would actually work with silhouette knights were taught about their design. Or, in short, only those aiming to become knightsmiths. Such knowledge wasn't something that would ever be taught to a busy knight runner hopeful, not even as backup for if they never ended up becoming an official knight runner.

Though that was the case, Ernesti, the anomaly in the blacksmithing department, was an existence far removed from common sense. After all, he was a serious mecha otaku who hadn't changed even after dying and being reborn. In his previous life he had diligently pored through design documents on all the giant robots he could get his hands on, and had not only memorized all the robot's names but their unit specs as well. It was easy to predict what he'd do when given the option to learn about actually building one. He tore through the textbook even while treating it like a bible, perfecting his memorization of the subject to an abnormal degree. In fact, he'd already left the lesson plan of the class far behind and had started looking into topics beyond the scope of this course. It could certainly be said that his attitude toward the class was extremely sincere, but he was so passionate about it, he was creeping out the older children in this class.

★★★

"...So, by collating all the differences between the current model used by this country's army, the Kaldatoah, and the last generation unit, the Solodreah, like this..."

While only half-listening to the teacher's lecture, Ernie flipped through the textbook. He was sitting in the same spot as he did every class: the center of the first row. After attending this class several times, it had now become his spot.

With the pleasant sound of scraping chalk, the professor jotted down on the blackboard the basic structure of a silhouette knight. There were five important points to a silhouette knight's composition—the magius engine which acted as the brain of the unit, the ether reactor which was the heart, the crystal tissue serving as the muscles, the "bones" of the inner skeleton, and finally the armor which made up the outer skin.

"As you all know, both models have the same reactor. The difference in output mainly comes from the crystal tissue..."

A silhouette knight needed the mana produced by an ether reactor to move. An ether reactor was a machine made to mimic a living thing's ability to convert ether to mana, so it could produce mana pretty much indefinitely as long as there was still ether in the air around it. The mana produced by the reactor, if left alone, would then be released back into the surroundings as-is, so it would just naturally revert back to being ether. In order to prevent that, a silhouette knight had to send the mana to the surrounding crystal tissue to store the it.

Crystal tissue was made by processing a crystal catalyst using alchemy, and it had the property of activating a special script that allowed it to change form when fed with mana. Using that property, silhouette knights would use the tissue as muscle to move. In addition, the tissue could store magic internally, so it also served as a mana battery.

"Though the script in the magius engine has been improved somewhat, there isn't a big difference between models. Since its use is already more than sufficient for our needs, the script hasn't changed much in three hundred years..."

The magius engine was what controlled the reactor and the muscles. It contained an intricate, massive script that allowed commands from the cockpit to control the entirety of the silhouette knight.

Meanwhile, the inner skeleton and outer skin were comparatively simple structures made of metal. However, in this day and age no blacksmithing

technique existed to create a ten-meter-tall giant's skeleton and armor as a single piece. Thus, the solution was to make many smaller pieces and fit them together using a variant of Physical Boost to reinforce their unity and allow them to handle the weight of the entire body. This had the upside of making a silhouette knight tougher than it looked, but at the same time once it ran out of mana the strengthening spell would be cut off, and the silhouette knight would become unable to support its own weight.

A silhouette knight could be said to be a simple imitation of a living thing made by a combination of blacksmithing, magic, and alchemy.

"Now then, let's move on to the next page. From here, I will be talking about silhouette arms. This does not pertain directly to silhouette knight design, but it's an important piece of knowledge, so all of you should make sure you understand it."

Silhouette arms were handheld equipment that enabled silhouette knights to use long-range attack magic. Though they were inherently like giant clumps of magic, surprisingly silhouette knights by themselves couldn't actually make use of long range magic. The magius engine was specialized for controlling a silhouette knight's body, so there was no function to activate long range magic within it even if the pilot wanted to. In order for a silhouette knight to use magic, the knight runner inside would have to construct the magic themselves.

Of course, magic suited to the scale of a silhouette knight—called overspells, and more specifically the construction of the scripts required to cast these overspells—was extremely difficult for a human to handle. Although humans with the processing power to construct them did rarely appear, constructing an overspell script still took time, so it wasn't viable in combat. Consequently, in order for silhouette knights to use overspells in combat, it was necessary to prepare an exterior script.

"While there is no need for you aspiring knightsmiths to learn about silhouette arms and their Emblem Graphs, you should at least understand the script used to make the Culverin spell, a standard example."

The term Emblem Graph referred to the technique to construct and process a script not using a living thing's Magius Circuit, but by grafting it onto an object

and allowing magic to be used with it. It was an application of people's ability to recognize magic scripts as figures and shapes. In order to use an Emblem Graph, all someone had to do was pass mana into the object that had been etched with the script and it would manifest the spell.

All that might make it sound like a convenient piece of technology, but transcribing a script onto an object necessitated an object large enough, meaning any such object would be very bulky. Basically, in most cases the necessary object ended up being too large for the desired spell to be worth it. The size requirement as well as the effort and difficulty in actually making an Emblem Graph meant that weapons with them weren't very widespread.

On the other hand, the biggest advantage of Emblem Graphs was that any spell could be transcribed as long as the surface was large enough. On top of that, the mana to manifest it just needed to be supplied from the outside, so there was no real need to control the spell. In other words, it was a perfect match for silhouette knights who were both huge and basically walking clumps of mana. The only shortcoming that mattered there was that each Emblem Graph could only make use of one spell. Thanks to that restriction, silhouette arms were made to suit a variety of situations and thus they took all forms. It was common for a silhouette knight to carry many weapons into combat on its back.

At this point in the lesson, the ringing of far away bells could be heard in the classroom. It was the academy's clock tower signaling the end of the lesson.

"Oh, seems like it's time. This is it for today, then. Everyone, make sure you review what we learned today...and you make sure to go easy in that regard, Ernesti."

With that, the teacher left. After watching him go, Ernie flipped through his notebook that he had filled with so many notes in such small writing that it looked almost entirely black. *What's wrong with this?* He wondered. As an aside, he had already learned material that was months ahead of the lesson plan.

With the day's lessons finished, Ernesti quickly retrieved his textbooks and returned home so that he could review what he learned. Though he still trained with Kid and Addy, on days like this when the silhouette knight design class was held, his brain was filled with too much joy for him to do much but immerse himself in study.

Ernie had assimilated a lot in class. Consequently, he had learned much of the basics of silhouette knights and was understanding more as time went on. As he learned, he started to have more and more questions that were in no way basic as well. In practical use, out of the five main points of a silhouette knight's structure, its crystal tissue, inner skeleton, and outer skin tended to be lost or damaged frequently. In light of this, many forts and towns on the front lines had facilities and infrastructure to make it easy to obtain more of these components. Many blacksmiths and alchemists commonly studied how to perform repairs and maintenance on these elements. Quite a few of the blacksmithing students who were Ernie's classmates already had experience building such spare parts. However, there was almost no information on magius engines and ether reactors—a silhouette knight's heart and brain. Even in class, all that was taught was their function. Their inner workings remained entirely unknown.

While silhouette knights were a very important source of military strength for the country, detailed knowledge of them was also something that would cause problems if it was readily available to the public. Of course its circulation was closely controlled by the state, and the inner structure of the engines and reactors, as well as the ways to manufacture them, were kept top secret. As one might expect, Fremmevilla kingdom, hailed as the country of knights, was also very strict about this.

However, keeping the production methods secret also lowered the efficiency of the manufacturing process for what they were keeping secret. Since these parts could not be mass-produced, each piece in circulation was worth that much more. It was often said that silhouette knights were very expensive tactical weapons, but these inner parts made up most of that cost.

"Well to be fair, I'm not really that worried about magius engines."

Magius engines used magic script to control a silhouette knight's body. Given that, it seemed like it should be possible to interfere with and modify that script. In short, Ernie was planning to simply hack a magius engine. It was an idea that would only occur to Ernie, with his fearsome solo calculation ability and experience and knowledge as a software programmer. However, the component that was not a piece of theoretical information and was instead a pure crystallization of magic techniques—the ether reactor, something that imitated a fundamental root of magic—was too much for his abilities.

"If only...if only I could at least get some more leads... As things stand... It's only the reactor that never even conceptually existed on Earth," Ernie groaned with a frown as he rolled around on his bed.

The only thing he'd learned from class was that the ether reactor used some sort of mineral called a "Spirit Stone." How these stones were used or how to obtain them had remained a complete mystery. In fact, Ernie knew so little it was almost refreshing. Though he had made it his goal to make his own personal silhouette knight from scratch, it was possible that he might have to compromise and buy a reactor. Still, given the cost, even the idea of buying one didn't seem very realistic.

"Oh well, being impatient won't solve anything. Let's start by mastering everything I already know the theory for," Ernie grumbled as he faced his desk once again. He took out a second notebook and placed it next to the first—which was already filled so densely with notes there was absolutely no space left—and began to review and copy his notes.

He dipped his pen into an inkwell and quickly started indulging in his hobby: namely, going over what he'd learned. Ernie's life was unbelievably busy, but to him it was an ideal life filled with happiness.

★★★

Some time had passed since Ernie started going between the knight and blacksmithing departments.

At first he stood out in a bad way, since this was unprecedented, but as time passed, people got used to him and he started to blend into his surroundings. Once that happened, he instead stood out for the adorable features he'd

inherited from his mother. He, with his small frame and elated energy as he took his classes on silhouette knights, had been adopted as a mascot of sorts for the blacksmithing department. Like that, it started to be custom to greet him with a pat on the head, which by now he'd gotten used to. This day was no different.

"Oh. You are..."

As he was on his way back to the knight department once his class in the blacksmithing department building was over, Ernie heard a familiar voice, causing him to turn around. He was immediately greeted with the sight of a wealth of honey-gold locks that drew a loose curve as they spilled off their owner's head. Under those locks were a pair of well-shaped eyebrows and slightly drooping blue eyes that were narrowed in delight.

"Ernesti, I believe?"

As she spoke, Archid and Adeltrude's half-sister from another mother, Stefania Serrati, walked up beside Ernie. She smiled genuinely as she knelt down to meet Ernie's line of sight. Once he politely returned her greeting, her face lit up with happiness.

"My! That reminds me, you're the same age as Archid and Adeltrude, aren't you? Why are you here?" Her question was sharp, despite her happy expression. They were in a building meant for middle school students, which wasn't normally a place Ernie—as an elementary student—should be. Once Ernie replied honestly that he was here to take a middle school class, her eyes widened in surprise.

"Wow, you're so smart, Ernesti! But why are you in such a hurry with your studies?"

In a sense, it was a natural thing to ask. Normally a student would have their hands full with just the classes from their own department. Even in Laihiala Knight Runner Academy's long history, there weren't very many such extraordinary students as Ernie.

Ernie's response to that question was truly brief. "It's my hobby."

"Hobby? Studying? Hmmm, so that's your answer... You're pretty strange,

aren’t you?”

Because they had to get ready for their next classes, the two walked as they talked. Most of what Ernie did was fairly crazy. While hearing his story and being surprised, all while occasionally stroking his head, Stefania’s smile never left her face.

Because people were currently in between classes, the hallways were pretty much filled with students. However, all of them were shocked by the gold-and-silver duo approaching them and they all ended up making way for the two. Thanks to that, the pair made good time and were soon approaching Ernie’s destination. Stefania was a third-year, so she had to split from Ernie to head to her own classroom. As she offered some sorrowful parting words, though...

“Ah, I found Ernie!”

Adeltrude had coincidentally encountered them, and was now running up to them very enthusiastically. Since Ernie was so short, it was easy to lose him in a crowd, but the fact that everyone was making way for him today made him easier to pick out. Though Adeltrude had been happy when she found him, she lost that smile halfway through when she noticed who was by his side, and she stopped on the spot.

“Ah, bi...big sister.”

“My, if it isn’t Adeltrude.”

Addy’s gaze bounced restlessly between the two, silently asking Ernie to explain the situation. However, Ernie himself didn’t have an answer for her, so all he could do was return a vague smile. On the other hand, Stefania’s smile softened and she approached Addy. Because of everything that had happened in the family so far, Addy was not her half-sister’s biggest fan. However, that was not the case for Stefania.

“Please don’t be so wary of me. I won’t do anything mean to you.”

“Okay...”

Though she was being uncharacteristically taciturn, Addy still obediently agreed, causing the other two to give wry smiles.

“Still, why is Ernie with you, big sister?”

“Oh, that’s simple. You see...I love cute and smart children!” Stefania explained with an expression full of confidence, putting a hand on her hip.

It could be considered a ridiculous reason, and Addy froze in place once she heard it. Meanwhile, Ernie was strangely understanding of that explanation, thinking, *They really are sisters.*

“I was interested in him ever since we met last time. There’ve been some rumors flying around about him too. And when I finally got to talk to him, it turned out he was really smart, and also incredibly cute!”

Stefania got more and more excited as she talked until finally she wasn’t able to hold herself back from wrapping Ernie up in a hug.

“Hey ‘Ernie,’ you’re aiming to become a knight, right? What do you think of becoming a guardian knight for your big sister here? If you accept now, I’ll welcome you with three meals a day and a place to sleep.”

“W—” Addy stammered, flustered, “Wait a second, no! Ernie is *my* stuffed doll!” Though she’d been frozen up until now, that shocking confession jarred her into action, and she let out a hysterical shout as she took Ernie back. She displayed none of her usual carefully worded speech around Stefania, probably because she was so worked up.

What kind of family is this? So scary. Actually wait, did Addy just call me a stuffed doll?

Stefania reacted to all this not with a smile, but with an expression more accurately described as faintly amused. Because she was naturally a beautiful person, this expression was somehow alarming. Ernie thought he could hear her trill in a singsong whisper, “Oh my oh my, I see,” with her hands clasped together, but he decided to ignore that.

“Addy, you’re speaking like you usually do,” Ernie commented, causing Addy to bring her hands to her mouth with a stricken face like she’d just messed up.

Stefania was quick to shake her head in response. “It’s fine. You don’t need to force yourself here like you do around the rest of the family. Unlike Balto, I don’t mind.”

“If that is what you wi—” Addy took a deep breath. “If you say so, big sister.”

“WIth that settled...Addy? I’d appreciate it if you’d let me go now.”

“Huwha? Ah, sorry. My bad. You fit so snugly I just...”

Finally, Ernie was released. Stefania watched on with a jealous glint in her eye.

“She’s right... Ernie, with your height, you, like, fit perfectly into our arms...”

“Exactly, big sister. Not only that, but Ernie’s hair is so smooth and silky...”

“Adeltrude, you...you really are my little sister!”

“Sis...!”

Ernie wasted no time in making some space between him and the perverted sisters who had grasped each other’s hands. He had a lot of retorts he wanted to make about what they had just said, but when he looked closer he saw that the two were having a lot of fun. *All that stuff Stefania said about me was probably a joke she made in order to get closer to her little sister*, Ernie started to think. At least, that’s what he *wanted* to think.

While Ernie was averting his eyes from the possible truth with all his might, the half-sisters’ discussion about how much they liked cute things was steadily heating up. At this point, they were weirdly dyeing the atmosphere around them pink. Just as Ernie was halfway to trying to escape from reality with a “Do whatever you want with me,” mindset, he suddenly remembered an important fact.

“Ah, it’s time for class already.”

Almost as if it were planned, that was the moment the chime for class rang. The trio hurried to their classrooms, but in the end they were late and had to suffer through angry lectures.

★★★

“Oh? Well now, if it isn’t Archid. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

While Ernie and the others were living it up, Kid was in another place meeting with a certain person. That person being the one he least wanted to see in the

world: Balthazar Serrati. He was Kid and Addy's half-brother from another mother, and was a longtime bully of theirs.

Balthazar had what could be described as a well proportioned and well defined face, but his clearly nasty smile wasted those good looks.

Even though it was the older boy's normal attitude toward his half-brother, Kid almost reflexively scrunched up his face at the hateful expression Balthazar was making. However, he managed to maintain a calm facade. It was all thanks to the lessons he'd learned from enduring this treatment when he was younger.

"It's been too long...big brother Balthazar."

"I've heard the rumors. You know, *those* rumors? They weren't worth much, though. Apparently some new student was really amazing or something?"

Balthazar went straight into the subject he wanted to talk about. He tended to never listen to anything Kid said, probably as another way to harass him. That part of him also greatly annoyed Kid, but he didn't say anything back. The smiling Balthazar was taller than Kid, so he looked down at his half-brother as he continued to talk, seeming to have the time of his life for some reason.

"And lo and behold, when I asked for details, apparently that student hangs around with another student that matches a certain someone's description..."

"Really? I don't know anything about those rumors..."

So it's finally come, Kid thought as he readied himself. Judging from his half-brother's more-tedious-than-usual attitude, he couldn't expect anything decent out of this conversation.

"Oh no, what kind of attitude is that? And toward your own brother no less. I guess newly admitted brats really haven't had the chance to learn manners yet, have they?"

Kid gritted his teeth, causing a pause before he answered, "My apologies."

"Well, whatever. I am magnanimous. I will forgive you, an improperly trained brat, out of the grace of my heart."

Balthazar's eyes narrowed and his smile deepened. There was a ferocity to that expression not unlike a carnivorous beast leering at its prey. Kid tried his

best not to let his wariness show.

Looks like the main issue is coming up. Now then, what to do...?

“When I asked, I found out that somehow you two made it into the advanced class. I’ll praise you honestly; you useless pieces of trash have managed to get quite far. Well, even if you are born of a mistress, you’re still related to me, so I suppose you *should* be at least a *little* talented... Yeah, just a little. There’s not much a freshly admitted brat like you can do, right? However, a somewhat concerning rumor reached my ears. It’s truly nothing worthwhile. But if it’s true...”

Balthazar’s eyes narrowed even further. An indescribable sense of unease ran down Kid’s spine.

“It seems you guys *really* overdid it with that rampage the other day. Hey, tell me I’m wrong. There’s no way, right?”

WIthout any prior warning, the smile disappeared from Balthazar’s face. Just like that, he edged closer to Kid with small steps as he lowered his voice, concerned about being overheard.

“Don’t you think that such things are beyond your position as a mere child of a mistress? Huh? You guys?! Rumors are irresponsible things. I have no idea what actually happened, but it’s just everyone around you misunderstanding on their own, right?”

“No, there’s no misunderstanding. Big brother, we...”

“Whatever. Shut up.”

At some point, Balthazar’s smile had inverted. Seeing the older boy gradually get more emotional, Kid braced himself so that he would be able to deal with whatever happened. However, contrary to his expectations, Balthazar let out a breath, flattened his expression, and asked:

“So, what’re you trying to accomplish, Archid?”

“What...do you mean?”

“You’re freshly enrolled, but can already easily cast intermediate spells. Wouldn’t you eventually be able to make it big as a knight? Are you aiming to

become just a knight, though? And are you planning to come back ‘home’ with some trophies in hand?”

Balthazar questioned him matter-of-factly, his face still an expressionless mask.

“You’re wrong. Nothing’s changed from what I told you before. We don’t want to have anything to do with your family. We just want to become knights for our and our mother’s livelihood.”

Balthazar paused in thought for a moment. “That’s good. Your kind older brother will believe his foolish little brother’s words here.”

“Thank you...very much.”

Balthazar’s face went back to its smirk. Just like that, he patted Kid on the shoulder and left. Kid, now alone, breathed out a huge sigh of relief.

Even though nothing happened here, he’s definitely not going to just let it go. Kid thought. *I’ll just grin and bear any harassment, but I hope he doesn’t try to cause too much of a fuss.*

Though Kid thought that, in his heart of hearts he couldn’t get rid of the bad premonition he was having.

Chapter 4: Let's Duel

It was now the spring of 1276 O.C.

Two years had passed in a flash since Ernesti and his friends had enrolled in Laihiala Knight Runner Academy. First, in Ernesti Echevalier's case:

"Well then everyone, for the next year in this class, Applied Silhouette Knight Design, we will... I should have expected you to still be here..."

A new term had just begun, and everyone was starting new classes. As he arrived in the classroom, the professor's gaze was pointed straight at a certain small-statured student sitting in the center of the front row. Ernie, who was a third year elementary student in the knight department but also took classes from the blacksmithing department, was at this point no different from a celebrity.

"I suppose the instructor from the knight department has already given up," the blacksmithing professor said.

"He has. I'm very happy to have such an understanding teacher."

The sight of Ernie tilting his tiny head was unreasonably adorable, but if anyone were to think back on all the incidents he'd instigated up until now, they wouldn't be soothed by it. At the beginning of the new school year, when he'd just risen to the next grade, he had predictably tried using brute force to get rid of all the courses that could get in the way of taking classes he really wanted. The knight department instructors were all crying about it in secret. The blacksmithing professor heaved a truly deep sigh of resignation as he switched tacks to teaching the class. Leaving aside that single particularly destructive display at his first magic class, Ernie was a good student who was passionate about his studies. There was a saying about sleeping dogs that applied here.

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Next, in the case of the twins Archid and Adeltrude Alter:

The knight department had an antipersonnel combat training space. Normally

at this time students would be in a classroom learning, so there shouldn't have been anyone making use of this space. However, currently it was occupied by the twins. They had outstripped the lesson plan of the course they were supposed to be attending, following after Ernesti's example, and had chosen to further their personal training rather than attend class. In these past two years, magic class time had become an occasion for them to train. Of course, Ernie was not around because he was doing something that more aligned his interests.

"Awright, let's get to it!"

"What happened? You're more into this than usual." Addy tilted her head in confusion, but Kid just waved her off casually, signaling that it was nothing.

Instead, he resumed his stance with his weapon. Since he was taller than most people his age, he tended to favor larger swords. Being that this was training, his sword was wooden, but it still carried enough weight to have an impact.

On the other hand, Addy's weapon was the polar opposite of her twin's. She dual wielded slender swords. Her fighting style resembled Ernie's in that it emphasized speed.

That wasn't all they had prepared. Each of their weapons had strange instruments attached. They were holding pseudo-staves made with white mistoe—meaning they were using gunlike staves. More specifically, they were a new model named the Gandiva. Ernie had made his Winchesters using his previous life's knowledge with his own interests in mind, but there was no need to include the twins in that as well. For that reason, the Gandivas were a more polished product and made into a shape that could accommodate any style of sword. As before, the design was done by Ernie, and the actual weapons were manufactured by the Termonen Workshop.

The twins faced each other and took their stances. Before crossing swords, they first activated magic. Doing so showed the true worth of combining sword and staff together into a composite weapon: it could smoothly activate magic and be used as a blade at the same time. The spell they cast was Limited Physical Boost. This spell, which had been adjusted by Ernie, was far easier and

more sustainable than its standard counterpart. They had been exercising while using magic in order to train their mana reserves efficiently, faithfully following Ernesti's teachings. The result could be seen through the spar they were about to conduct.

When they started, Kid immediately made a powerful leap forward. His strengthened muscles carried his body a great distance, and he was quickly in range to strike with his weapon. It was the type of attack Kid was best at, making good use of his large sword's extra range. He had been taking regular lessons from Matthias for a long time, so this attack that made great use of both his range and skills was a serious threat.

Opposite him, Addy tried to fight back using the speed of her dual swords and the sheer number of moves she was able to make in relation to her opponent. She was also using Limited Physical Boost, so the slashes from her swords were like a storm as she slipped past Kid's large sword into close range. Kid checked her advance by cutting short his swing and drawing his weapon closer to his body, not minding how large his weapon was and how difficult a feat it was to pull off. However, Addy didn't back down; instead she never stopped repositioning herself to find more avenues to attack. The back-and-forth between the twins was so fierce any third party would doubt if this was actually just training, but they continued until their stamina and mana reserves ran dry.

Because they had been taught magic by Ernie, who was outside the realm of common sense to begin with, this training was normal to them. However, while this was usual for them, training swordsmanship while casting magic wasn't even taught in the elementary grades. If anyone were to see them training like that, the twins' common sense would be thrown into question.

"Jeez...I'm amazed at you two. What has Ernie been teaching you...?"

Just like Stefania was doing after spectating their fight.

"Uhh...just, like, magic and swordsmanship?" Both twins tilted their heads and answered in unison, causing Stefania to give a strained chuckle. That fight was in no way a product of "just learning some magic."

"I have no idea if I'd be able to handle you two in a fight..." Stefania added.

"Really? You've got the best grades out of all the students in the knight

curriculum, and you were even selected as the student council president. I'm pretty sure we're far from being a match for you, big sis."

But Stefania wasn't far off the mark. Learning how to fight with a sword while casting magic was taught at the middle school level at the earliest. If someone were to train for that while still in elementary school, the result would be obvious.

Stefania's grades were at the top of the knight curriculum. In addition, she was the daughter of a marquis, and because of her personality she had been appointed to the seat of student council president starting this year. Even someone like her couldn't help but feel terrified of her half-siblings' power. Unfortunately, the twins were so used to Ernesti that their senses had gone haywire. Stefania was troubled as to whether she should correct the flaw in their perception now before they got into trouble.

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At that time, the three of them were the only ones in the training area. Because they were so into their training and they continued to be distracted by small talk afterward, they had failed to pay attention to their surroundings. That was why they never noticed that there was someone hiding in the darkness near the entrance of the training area, with only a thin wall keeping them out of sight.

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It was during class, so most students were otherwise occupied. However, footsteps resounded loudly in the empty halls of a certain dorm.

The creator of these footsteps was very worked up, and they walked quickly to the room that was their destination. It was *his* room. He unlocked the door with a shaking hand before launching himself inside as if he were being chased. His was a single room that was slightly larger than average for a dorm room. The children of nobles were all given priority for single rooms like this when they had to live in the dorms; it was a sort of crime prevention measure.

The male student lay there dazed for a while with no sign of getting up. Eventually though, fierce emotion overtook him as he started kicking his furniture, making loud noises that reverberated through his surroundings.

“What the hell...that, no way...dammit...DAMMIT!!!”

The male student—Balthazar Serrati—cursed repeatedly in his infinite irritation. The reason he was in such a bad mood was what he had just witnessed: the training between his half-siblings.

Currently, Balthazar was in his first year of middle school. He had just started learning how to fight by combining his sword and magic, and the difficulty of the subject was pressuring him hard. But his half-siblings were already able to do such a thing as if it were natural. Their skill was overwhelming, and it was clear that they had far outstripped Balthazar. He was a haughty individual, so his illegitimate little brother being stronger with him was something he couldn’t stand. Discovering this not only rubbed him the wrong way, but it also made him realize that the twins’ mere existence was fatally threatening to his goal—a goal having to do with their home and family.

They belonged to the Serrati marquis family, which was one of the more powerful noble houses in Fremmevilla. The size of their territory was only middling, but the terrain of their territory was gentle and perfect for large-scale farming. Also, it was located in the eastern region of the country, so it was near the Great Bocuse Forest, meaning the threat of monsters in that region was high. Because of that, one of the largest knight orders in the country, the Order of the Crimson Rhino, was based in the territory to help it fight off monsters. All that meant the Serrati territory was also an important base near the front lines of battle. As a result, the area was extremely economically active. It housed a very important domestic trade route through which people and goods were constantly moving.

The Serrati marquis house, who were in charge of such an important territory, had three children. Arthos was the oldest son, and had been raised as the heir to the house. He was already employed as his father’s assistant for the management of their land. The oldest daughter Stefania was currently a second year middle schooler in Laihiala Knight Runner Academy, and the second son Balthazar was a first year middle schooler.

“At this rate... At this rate...if those little shits come back home...”

In Fremmevilla, noble families were customarily inherited by the oldest child.

Anyone from the second son on would have no house or land to inherit. In most cases they would split off to find their own way in life, which usually ended up being as a knight or a bureaucrat. In Balthazar's case, he never hesitated to aim for knighthood. This was because the Serrati territory was home to the famous Order of the Crimson Rhino. In this country of knights, leading a knight order to defend the people from the threat of monsters was seen as the most honorable thing to do as a noble. It was only natural for him to aim for such a position.

"If, by some chance, they come into contact with the Order of the Crimson Rhino...no..."

Knight orders in this country were not just decorations, and that wasn't limited to just the one in the Serrati house's territory. They were constantly fighting monsters, so they prized real skill, especially for those who would be looked to as leaders. Of course, just being able to fight well didn't automatically mean one could lead a knight order, but still, given that they were essentially an army, "the stronger the better" was the common sentiment.

Up until this point, Balthazar had been imagining himself as the leader of a knight order, serving by his older brother's side. He had never doubted that vision until the arrival of the twins cast a shadow over everything. They possessed high combat ability as well as noble blood, even if they were just the children of a mistress. In other words, they were in a prime position to obstruct his goals. Them stealing his rightful and honorable place was nothing other than a nightmare to Balthazar.

"Right... That's right...obstacles...need to be eliminated."

He racked his head, trying to figure out the cause: what had happened to make things go this bad? The answer he found was his own carelessness. He had assumed that nothing they did would amount to anything, since they were just illegitimate children from a mistress. Because of his naive and foolish thinking, coupled with his underestimation of them, he had let the twins be even after learning of the incident that had happened right after their enrollment. Too late, he realized that had been a mistake. At this point, it was a race against time. He needed to get rid of them as soon as possible, but the twins were strong. Challenging them to a fight head-on was not a good idea. He needed to figure out a way to neutralize their abilities in order to eliminate

them safely and efficiently.

Eventually, Balthazar rid himself of the impatience showing on his face.

He was no fool. In fact, his ruthless personality that did not flinch at sacrificing others allowed him to occasionally devise foul but truly effective plans. Balthazar's face, which was usually locked in a haughty smirk, now curved upward into a truly malicious full smile.

★★★

In between classes on a certain day, Batson Termonen was plodding down a hallway toward his next class. He was nonchalantly taking in his surroundings when suddenly, he spied a familiar figure—a familiar female figure that he had known since childhood.

"Oh, hey Addy. Who's that one with...you...?"

Before he even had the chance to tilt his head questioningly at her unusual presence here, Batson felt that something was off. Addy wasn't alone, she was walking with an unfamiliar student. On top of that, he could tell she was very stiff even from afar.

"Looks like it'd be better to pass this on..."

He wouldn't even think of raising a fuss just because Addy was walking with someone, but he was concerned since she was acting so strangely. In his eyes, she could've been caught up in some sort of trouble. Concerned for his childhood friend, he decided to be at least a little considerate of her.

With that decision made, Batson turned on his heel and headed for a certain small-statured friend who should have been in a nearby classroom.

★★★

"What is the meaning of this, big brother Balthazar?"

Adeltrude clenched her fists as she glared sharply all around her. Her looks were always a little sharp, but now she looked even sharper.

Before her eyes was Balthazar, his familiar smile plastered on his face like always. If it was just that, she'd be able to pass it off as the usual even if it was infuriating, but the problem was what was around them. There were three

people stationed behind Balthazar, and another four behind Addy for good measure. These unfamiliar boys surrounded her, trying to cut off her escape. The fact that they had appeared on Balthazar's signal indicated their allegiance.

Addy had been walking down a hallway by herself when Balthazar called out to her, bringing her to the empty area they were in now. While they didn't get along, Balthazar was still her family, so Addy had let her guard down, thinking that at most he wanted to take her to a place where he could shout at her in peace. However, by the time she realized the trouble she was in, she was already surrounded. No matter how she tried to view the situation, this wasn't going to be just a nice conversation.

"They're my friends. Don't worry, they're just here to help me teach some unreasonable brat a lesson in manners."

Balthazar's allies smiled faintly without saying anything.

"I'm in the middle of learning etiquette in class. I don't believe I should be troubling you all for this extra lesson."

"Classes aren't enough for some illegitimate whelp like you. Your big brother here is offering to teach you himself. Don't you think you should be prostrating yourself in gratitude?"

One of Balthazar's followers stepped forward from behind him.

"He's right. Just behave like a good little lady..."

Balthazar's side had the overwhelming numerical advantage, and they were facing a younger girl. But the boy, who didn't know Addy, was completely underestimating her. Having decided that she didn't want to play along anymore, Addy didn't wait for him to finish his sentence. She immediately drew the gunlike staff at her side. Without missing a beat, she cast Limited Physical Boost, and before the underling who was approaching her could react, she exploded into action and planted an elbow in his gut.

"Shut up!"

In order to leave, she first had to break through her surroundings. Having knocked out one of the underlings, she seized the opportunity and immediately took off running with her enhanced legs. Addy tried to build up momentum and

break through her encirclement as the underlings were just starting to react agitatedly to her unexpected movements. However...

“Spark Dart.”

That quiet utterance brought along with it a bolt of electricity that hit Addy in the back. She was unable to even scream as the wind was knocked out of her lungs in a sigh. Though it wasn’t fatal, Addy was shocked numb by the electricity hitting her directly, sending her into a somersault that ended with her slumped on the floor.

Grk...I failed... Crap, I can’t...stay...awake...

As her consciousness faded, what strangely remained in her memory was the sight of Balthazar, who had hit her with the electric spell. On his face wasn’t his usual smirk, but a far more sinister smile.

★★★

A while had passed since Addy had lost consciousness.

Unaware of what had happened, Kid was beset by worry and suspicion because she hadn’t come back even after class had started. He was just about to leave to find her when he was met with a completely unexpected visitor.

“Oh, so you were in class... That saves me the effort of trying to find you.”

It was Balthazar. Kid was surprised, as up until now Balthazar had only talked to him in private places where they wouldn’t stand out, since Kid was distancing himself from the main family. However, this time he was talking to him boldly in front of a large number of people. For a moment, Kid hesitated, wondering what to call him.

“Hello, sir. What business could you have with me?”

Kid couldn’t hide his confusion as he asked that question, to which Balthazar replied with his usual smile.

“I came to challenge you to a duel!”

The noisy space instantly fell silent for a moment before erupting in an irrepressible stir. The phrase, “a duel,” could be heard all throughout the classroom.

“What’re you saying, all of a sudden...?”

“Do you not understand? Hah! I bet you don’t. After all, I’ve been overlooking your eyesore of an existence up until now, so why do this? It’s because I can’t forgive you. That’s right: mistakes need to be corrected!”

Kid was baffled. He couldn’t make sense of anything Balthazar was saying or doing. After all, so much had happened without his knowledge. However, there was one thing he did understand.

“I don’t know what’s the meaning of this, but...a duel? Fine by me. I’ll take you on!”

Kid knew that he also hated Balthazar. His will to fight rose before any of his doubts or questions, and he reflexively accepted the invitation. Balthazar had challenged him head-on instead of flinging barbed words at him like he’d done up until now, so Kid no longer felt like acting polite in front of him.

“How vulgar...it makes me doubt your character. I’ll enjoy seeing how far that vigor will take you.”

At this point the onlookers weren’t just limited to the class. A crowd of rubbernecks had followed them as they left the building.

★★★

Laihiala Knight Runner Academy banned most fights between students. Knights were meant to protect people, so fighting among themselves was out of the question. There were many punishments for those who violated this rule, but the one exception was for duels.

Duels had rules. They had to be done one-on-one, needed consent from both parties, required a third party as a referee, required absolute obedience to the referee’s calls, and the winner would be decided when one side lost consciousness or admitted defeat, among other provisions. Also, combatants would be forced to use wooden weapons meant for practice, and emission-type magic was forbidden to ensure the safety of the audience. Basically, the combatants had to keep their fight to themselves.

Given its combat-oriented nature, the knight department was filled with hotheaded students. A fair number of those students chose to resolve their

disputes through duels, enough that the school maintained a location designated as a dueling arena.

Talk about Balthazar and Kid's duel spread like wildfire. It had been a while since the last one, and the direct delivery of the challenge generated further buzz. Many students, enough to pack the stands, had shown up at the arena to gawk.

Both sides agreed upon an unrelated student as a referee, who was currently reading the rules of the duel in a loud voice. Following procedure, both parties reaffirmed their consent to the duel. When they turned to face each other, Balthazar took something out of his breast pocket. Kid, seeing the object, froze.

That's...the hair ornament Addy was wearing this morning?! Why does he...no way...did this asshole...?!

Kid looked at Balthazar in shock, only to see a deeper smile than usual as their eyes met. Immediately, he realized what Balthazar's aim was. Why he was challenged to a duel, and why he had to be in full view of the public.

"You...what did you do to Addy..."

"Hm? I have no idea what you're talking about."

Balthazar's grin was so wide, it was like he could barely stop himself from laughing out loud. That was when Kid's suspicion changed to certainty.

"That reminds me of a certain rumor I've heard. Apparently you can already handle advanced spells even though you're only in elementary school! Why not show me one?"

Kid let out a low groan out of frustration. The reason Balthazar had made sure to say that out loud was clear. As proof, he was flashing Addy's hair ornament over and over as an implicit threat to tie Kid down as he spoke.

It was a while before Kid felt he could speak. "I can't...use anything like that..." he said, sounding as if he had to squeeze the air out of his lungs.

The audience seemed puzzled. He was one of the famous trio in the elementary grades, the ones who had been excused from classes and were already far ahead of the rest of the students. So the audience wondered why

Kid would say such a thing. They couldn't help but question if the rumors were actually false.

"What?! Is that so?! Hah! So the rumors were false? My word, how quickly your facade shatters! What happened to your vigor from before? Hah!"

If looks could kill, Balthazar would have been dead on the floor thanks to Kid's glare. However, Balthazar didn't seem to care one bit as he laughed his fill before making an announcement.

"Trying so hard to stand out that you would resort to spreading rumors... I am appalled. What an unruly fellow you turned out to be. Teaching a rotten underclassman a harsh lesson is a job for their seniors, isn't it? Now then, let's get started."

Balthazar readied his sword and staff while Kid silently attached the wooden practice sword to his Gandiva. At this point, what was about to happen wasn't a fight, but a public execution labeled as a duel only in name.

“What’s wrong? There’s a limit to how disappointing you can be! Not only can’t you use magic, but you’re terrible at the sword too?!”

As their swords clashed, Balthazar sneered. Kid wanted to give in to his anger and try to counterattack any way he could, but every once in a while Addy’s hair ornament would flash across his vision.

Around thirty minutes had passed since the start of the duel, and the situation was so one-sided it was obvious for all to see. On one hand, Kid’s movements were dull, and he had basically been kept on the defensive this entire time. Though he’d been able to counter a couple times, he completely lacked momentum. Disappointment ran through the crowd as they saw one of the rumored elite students being trounced so easily. They concluded that the rumors had been overblown, and were just rumors in the end; this was just an uppity underclassman getting a taste of reality. Watching a scene like that wasn’t fun, so some in the audience had already grown tired and left.

However, some of the students started to feel that something was wrong. Kid had been showered with so many blows, but he was still standing. *Has he not taken any damage at all?* they wondered. However, Balthazar was drunk on his absolutely advantageous position and hadn’t noticed. He was just enjoying being able to hit Kid as hard as he liked.

Since he couldn’t defeat Balthazar, Kid had no choice but to withstand his attacks. He had no idea how long this would go on for, but he single-mindedly waited for a chance to strike back. Kid wasn’t certain such a time would come, but he hoped it would. The friend Kid trusted most in the world wasn’t here. Given the fuss that had been kicked up, there was no way it wouldn’t have reached his ears. So, there was no way he wouldn’t be making a move.



I'm counting on you, my best friend...you're the one one I can rely on! Kid gritted his teeth and received the sword Balthazar swung with his own, even though he was unsteady on his feet.

★★★

At that time, Ernesti was walking quietly down a corridor. He was searching for Addy after having heard about the situation from his other childhood friend, Batson. However, because he had no leads, he was a little troubled.

That was when someone suddenly hugged him from behind. Though he was surprised, Ernie directed his gaze upward to find Stefania, who was already nuzzling Ernie's hair with a look of bliss on her face.

"Ahh, this smoothness and silkiness...I might get addicted."

Ernie took a moment to formulate his next sentence. "Uhhh...Stefania?"

"It's dis haiw's fault for being soooo siwkyyyy! You. Little. Imp. You!" While still nuzzling his hair, Stefania poked Ernie's cheek. Though he was exasperated at her usual behavior, he quickly realized that she might know something.

"This is perfect. Do you know where Addy is, Stefania?"

Stefania's expression changed from a full-faced smile of bliss to a subdued one at mach speed. Eventually, with some sadness, she met the eyes of a bewildered Ernie.

"Addy was called out by Balto."

"Balto...your younger brother, right? The one that...to Kid and Addy..."

It was rare for Ernie to hesitate when talking, but he did here. He had heard what kind of person Balthazar was, as well as how extremely he disliked Kid and Addy. It was clear from how the older boy had brought Addy somewhere that something was going to happen. That being the case, Ernie still wavered. After all, in the end this was a problem between the twins and their family. He couldn't decide how far it would be okay for him to stick his nose into the problem. However, all that was blown away by what Stefania said next.

"Also, Balto had quite a large number of people with him."

“I don’t really want to meddle in other people’s family business, but I have a feeling that this won’t turn into anything decent.”

Ernie wasn’t as calm inside as his words would suggest. Though he would have hesitated if this was just a sibling quarrel, things were different now that Balthazar had organized a group of conspirators. That meant that Addy was truly in danger.

“I’m not really in a position where I can ask this of you, but...please go and find Addy, Ernie.”

Ernie paused. “Are you sure? I’m warning you now, if something has happened to Addy, I don’t think I’ll be able to hold back. Even if he is your little brother.”

Though he normally looked calm and gentle, something dangerous flashed across Ernie’s eyes as he said that. Kid and Addy were his closest friends in this world. He had no intention of restraining himself if someone were to use numerical superiority to harm them. Seeing him quietly smoldering in anger like that, Stefania’s well-shaped eyebrows drooped.

“At least make sure he doesn’t die.”

“That’s really pragmatic of you.”

“It would have been fine if Balto had acted by himself. Well, actually it still wouldn’t be, but...I’d at least be able to stop him. But this time it’s different. I can’t let this slide. Not as the student council president, nor as an older sister.”

Stefania slowly enveloped Ernie in a hug as she whispered that to him. Ernie couldn’t see what expression she was making, so he just asked, “Can you tell me where he took Addy?”

★★★

Among the many buildings in Laihiala Knight Runner Academy’s campus, there were naturally some that weren’t used. Addy and Balthazar’s underlings were in an empty classroom of one such building.

At the moment, Addy had been placed on a chair with her arms and legs bound. She had yet to regain consciousness almost an hour after Balthazar’s

electric attack had stolen it from her. The four underlings that had encircled Addy earlier were arguing.

“Tch! This brat, how dare she!”

“Hey. She’s unconscious, so don’t get too crazy.”

The reason she was surrounded by so many guards regardless of if she was awake was in case she woke up again and decided to go wild. The one who was openly complaining, unable to hide his irritation, was the underling that Addy had elbowed in her attempt to break out of her encirclement. He had also been unconscious until just recently.

“What’s the big deal? She’s knocked out *and* tied up. There’s no need to be so scared, is there?”

“That’s big talk for someone who was done in with a single hit.”

“Agghh, dammit! It’s because I let my guard down!”

The guy grabbed Addy’s hair roughly, heedless of how she wasn’t awake. With a sadistic smile on his face, he raised his fist.

“Taking advantage of how I was going to go easy on you because you’re a little brat...I won’t be satisfied until I sock you one!”

Even the other underlings were disgusted by his behavior. What happened to him had nothing to do with going easy. He’d been caught completely off guard and had been downed in a single hit. Furthermore, if his punch were to wake Addy up, it would cause problems. Their goal was only to watch over her for a while, so keeping her asleep as long as possible was to their advantage. The moment another underling reached out to stop the first...

“Hello! Is there someone...there is.”

Suddenly, the door to the classroom behind them opened to reveal a figure. The underlings had let their guard down since almost no one passed through this place, so they were a bit late in responding. By the time they’d turned around in surprise, a silver bullet was already speeding toward them while drawing a strange staff.

The intruder—Ernesti—knew immediately that he’d hit the jackpot from not

only the presence of the underlings, but most importantly the sight of a bound Adeltrude. So, the only thing left to do was “clean up.” There was no hesitation as he drew his Winchester and cast the intermediate wind spell Aero Slug, launching two instances of the spell from either side of the group. The bullets of wind hit the two farthest enemies at the same time, sending them flying without even giving them the chance to scream.

Without bothering to check the results of his spell, Ernie activated Physical Boost and accelerated, closing in on the one who was about to punch Addy and slashing at him. Panicked, the guy desperately tried to intercept, but Ernie was overwhelmingly faster while in his strengthened state. During his dash, he deployed a Sonic Boom spell, and the shock wave sent the guy flying.

Seeing three of his friends being sent flying in a tailspin in the blink of an eye, the last underling abandoned any attempt to figure out what was happening. Unfortunately, in doing so he exposed a fatal opening, and his opponent wasn’t so kind as to let that go. The staff he reflexively grabbed shattered as the second Winchester struck at him from the side. That was the last thing he remembered.

Having instantly downed four underlings with the force of a storm, Ernie rushed to the bound Addy after making sure his enemies were actually knocked out. He cut away her bindings and checked that she wasn’t wounded. Addy had no real injuries and her breathing was calm; it seemed she had just lost consciousness. Once he confirmed that Addy was okay, Ernie breathed a sigh of relief. Then, he moved on to tying up the underlings instead. Luckily, they already had all the necessary tools he needed, though they had been meant for a different target. Once everyone’s hands and feet were bound, Ernie sent a glare toward the courtyard.

“Doesn’t seem like we have too much time.”

From the uproar he’d heard on the way here, Ernie had understood that something had happened. Addy had been captured while Balthazar appeared in front of Kid—the plan was very easy to infer. While he was worried for Kid, who was in the middle of the proverbial storm, Ernie didn’t think his friend would go down without a fight. He believed that as long as he hurried, he’d make it in time. That was why he wanted to run over as soon as possible, but...

Ernie looked down at the collapsed Addy, perplexed. Sadly, because she was taller than him, carrying her would take a lot of effort. Still, he couldn't just let her sleep here either. Ernie let out a groan before giving up and picking her up horizontally in his arms. He was terribly unbalanced, but he brute-forced through that problem using the magic he was so good at.

"Please let me be in time..."

With that, Ernie ran for the center of the hubbub in an attempt to reach Kid as fast as possible.

★★★

In the courtyard between classroom buildings atLaihiala Knight Runner Academy, also known as the Dueling Square, the two students continued to have it out. The fight had already stretched past an hour in length, and it had been completely one-sided almost the entire time, but there was no sign of a conclusion yet.

At this point, Balthazar finally started to feel that something was wrong. Thanks to his plan, Kid's movements were dull. Since the fight started, Balthazar's sword had connected with his opponent countless times. Even though it was wooden, it still should have done enough damage to render Kid unable to move. However, though Kid's movements were much duller now, it didn't seem like he'd taken that much damage. Though he wasn't proactively attacking because of the hostage, his eyes still held a strong, defiant fire in them. It was clear that he was trying for something.

What is with this toughness? Balthazar wondered. *Why won't he go down?! No way, does he intend to endure until Adeltrude escapes on her own? It's true, she did show some pretty good moves. It's not impossible. But...*

Balthazar once again chuckled nastily. Kid did not know that Addy was both tied up and being watched. *So what he's hoping for was never possible to begin with*, he thought.

Seeing Balthazar suddenly stop moving, Kid suspiciously kept his eyes on his opponent.

As Balthazar's mouth shifted into a terribly unnatural smile, he moved to

crush Kid's hopes with overflowing kindness.

"You trying to buy time, Archid?"

Archid gasped, but said nothing, so Balthazar continued.

"Let's see, you're expecting *that person* to come if you wait, aren't you? If that's the case, I have to tell you you're waiting for nothing, don't I? After all, I've tied her up."

The sound of Kid gnashing his teeth was loud enough for Balthazar to hear. His heart filled with joy, like mud slopping into a container.

"Well, I'm bored now. It's too bad, but let's put an end to this, why don't we?"

He deliberately flashed Addy's hair ornament as he readied his wooden sword once more.

Kid's expression froze. In truth, he wasn't doing as well as he seemed. He had been minimizing the damage using a certain trick, but the damage had definitely still been piling up. If he were to take a full-power hit on top of everything, it was doubtful he'd be able to slash his way through this.

Furthermore, Balthazar's gaze had been eloquently communicating his aim for a while now. The command was, "Don't dodge." He seemed to truly be trying to end things, so his next attack would probably be one with his entire might put behind it. In his current state, Kid didn't think he could keep going if he were to take it without dodging.

Both sides took their stances again with more intensity than before. Sensing that the resolution was finally at hand, the remaining audience held their breath. Abruptly, Balthazar tried to close the distance with a shout, but at nearly the same time an intruder appeared.

A figure leaped over the heads of the spectating audience to arrive at the front row. It was a pretty big jump, and if anyone cared to look closer they'd see the figure was carrying a girl. Regardless, the figure's landing was smooth and silent, as if they'd landed on something soft. The gazes of the audience gathered on the small figure who had just vaulted over them.

It was Ernie carrying Addy. Having confirmed that out of the corner of his eye, Balthazar's face warped with shock. *Addy should have been tied up and left with several people keeping watch. And he broke through all of them? What were my underlings doing? Most importantly, who is that silver-haired child who's holding Addy?* Such questions inundated his brain, but there was no one to answer them.

Ernie gently set Addy down. She had woken up as they were moving, so she stood up on her own, and after shooting Balthazar a glare, she turned to Kid. She gave him a thumbs up, which she then swiped across her neck in a very pointed motion which was coupled by a brutal smile.

Seeing that, Kid felt the tension leave his body as he was suddenly beset with an overwhelming desire to laugh. He quickly nodded back to Addy before speaking to Ernie, who was behind her: "You're late."

"Sorry about that. There are a lot of classrooms."

"The hell do you mean by that? Whatever, though."

With a laugh, Kid took up his sword once again. Now that there was no need to hold back, he finally had the chance to strike back that he'd been waiting for.

Balthazar wanted to just scream. Now that things had come this far, he had no choice but to recognize that things weren't going well for him. However, he decided to rethink the situation. It was true his trump card holding Kid back, Addy, was freed. But that didn't erase all the damage he'd inflicted on Kid up until now. As it stood, it was still possible for him to finish things now with a quick attack. Balthazar once again strengthened his grip and slashed at Kid with all his might.

Unfortunately for him, Kid's movements were now so different from before that he didn't even seem like the same person. With explosive momentum, he stepped in, and after an easy deflection of Balthazar's sword, he slipped into a shoulder tackle without missing a beat, sending Balthazar flying. For a moment, there was some distance between them.

Kid had expended a lot of mana in the fight up until now. However, he had trained harshly right alongside Ernie. He had more than enough mana left for a final bit of retaliation.

“Everything I owe you...I’m going to pay back with interest!”

With a deeply guttural cry, Kid activated the Physical Boost he learned from Ernie at full power. Raging power coursed through his entire body as he started running, his feet pounding the stone pavement so hard it seemed like it would crack.

In a panic, Balthazar tried to get up and take a stance with his weapon, but before he could, Kid’s wooden sword caught him in the gut, and he made a weird noise as the air was forced out of his lungs. Kid slammed his next attack into his opponent while his half-brother was still airborne from the previous blow. Being bombarded by a combo of attacks made with tremendous momentum, Balthazar’s body was forced into an unnatural pose while being kept in the air. Once he had started to rotate thanks to all the force influencing his body, Kid hit him with an all-out roundhouse kick to finish things off. This time, Balthazar’s body flew through the air in a tailspin, looking like a tangle of limbs before coming to a stop by falling flat on the ground.

Having done all that in the space between breaths, Kid took a deep breath as the referee finally came to his senses. Hurriedly, he rushed to Balthazar, but the boy was looking like a tattered rag, showing the whites of his eyes and foaming at the mouth, clearly unconscious. The outcome was unmistakable. So, the referee raised his arm and loudly pronounced Kid’s victory.

The duel had ended so abruptly, it was like the entire fight leading up to the conclusion was a lie, and the crowd couldn’t keep up.

The last move they saw Kid make was something Balthazar couldn’t hope to keep up with. It was truly the strength they’d heard of from the rumors. So what was all that pointless display up until then? The crowd of onlookers saw a girl running toward Kid. They weren’t fools. The moment the girl showed up, Kid changed. The circumstances didn’t need to be spelled out for them.

The gazes toward the fallen Balthazar chilled. To the students of the knight department, duels were a brute-force method of resolving problems, but the honor given to the winners was still a sacred thing. Trying to gain it through such dirty methods was a betrayal of everything a knight was meant to be. Balthazar’s underlings scooped him up in a panic and carried him to the school

infirmary while being exposed the entire time to the frosty glares of the surrounding students.

★★★

As one might have expected, Kid had sustained a severe beating. After raising his victory cry, he collapsed on the spot, and Addy rushed over to him.

“Kid! Hey, Kid! Are you okay?”

“I’m fine...well, I can’t really say that I guess. I really took some damage back there.”

“Whoa, your uniform is ruined! You should have just dodged that idiot’s attacks.”

“I couldn’t move that freely after being shown what he had.”

That seemed to have struck something in Addy. “Sorry! It’s...my fault, I let my guard down.”

Seeing Addy slump disconsolately with tears in her eyes, Kid laughed and put his hand on her head, mussing her hair.

“Don’t worry about it. That idiot’s the one at fault here. Thank you, too, Ernie. It was getting a bit dicey there.”

“I’m just glad I made it,” Ernie replied before adding, “More importantly...” Ernie had retrieved Addy’s hair ornament from Balthazar and now returned it to her. Then he asked, “It looked like you took a pretty big beating, but actually, it doesn’t seem you took that much damage.”

“Ah, it’s because that guy knew I couldn’t dodge, so he didn’t bother with any skills and just whaled on me,” Kid answered with a wry chuckle. Then he continued, “I activated Physical Boost for an instant on whichever body part he was about to hit, along with Hard Skin, in order to keep the damage down.”

“I see...you really pulled off a pretty dangerous stunt there,” Ernie commented.

“I only managed it because I didn’t have to think about anything else... Also, his idiocy played a huge part in saving me. If he went more all out and tried to aim at any critical points, I probably wouldn’t have lasted.”

“So in the end, the reason he lost was his own fault, because he just didn’t know how to close.” Ernie nodded in understanding as the onlookers who had watched the conclusion scattered, getting back to their own business. “Right then,” he continued, “I’ll take care of the cleanup for now, so Addy, you should take Kid to the infirmary.”

“Okay. Can you stand, Kid?”

“I’m fine. It was pretty much all blunt damage, so as long as I take it slow it won’t be a problem.” Kid stood up unsteadily before he and Addy started making their way to the school infirmary.

A little while after Ernie saw them off, he turned around. Behind him stood Stefania, alone.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this? The wounds your little brother received aren’t in any way light.”

There was a pause before Stefania replied. “You’re right. But Balto did enough to deserve it.” She shook her head with an expression that could even be described as refreshed. “That child is...truly, he takes after our mother in the worst ways... It was about time he got some comeuppance.”

“You really have it hard, don’t you...” Ernie thought back to Kid and Addy’s family circumstances, and it aroused a feeling in him that was hard to describe. He shook his head and changed tacks. “Could I ask you to take care of the cleanup here?”

“All right. I need to have a conversation with my family anyway.” Stefania nodded her assent and Ernie gave her a bow before departing. This duel disturbance ended up being a source of rumors for a subsection of interested students to whisper about Kid and the Serrati family.

★★★

A couple days had passed since the duel.

With his disgraceful behavior exposed, Balthazar had received stern reprimands from both the academy and his family, and after a discussion it was decided that he would be confined to his home for a while. The decision was made to have the knight order he so admired train him in an attempt to

straighten him out, but whether that would actually work was a question for the future. At any rate, it was one less source of trouble for Ernie and his friends, and they were thankful for it.

Now that classes were over for the day and peace had returned, Adeltrude found Ernie reading a book in the courtyard. He stood out. Though it was easy to lose him in a crowd because of his short stature, his silver hair was a good landmark in places that were sparsely populated. He was leaning against a tree, absorbed in reading the thick book he was always carrying around. There was no need for Adeltrude to ask; it was most likely a textbook relating to silhouette knights.

Addy walked up beside him, but Ernie didn't seem to notice. Once he got absorbed in a book, he became totally oblivious to the world around him. Slowly, Addy sat down next to him before starting to watch him read. His blue eyes, which were pointed down toward the page, were hemmed with long eyelashes, and his purplish-silver hair that framed the contours of his face caught the sunlight. His full lips were drawn tight in passionate concentration.

Ernie's as cute as ever! Addy grinned. She was about to embrace him like usual when suddenly a certain scene came unbidden to her mind, and she stopped. It was the memory of the duel that had happened just the other day.

Addy had been taken and bound by Balthazar, but saved by Ernie. During that time, he'd carried her in his arms horizontally, and he'd even charged into a crowd with everyone's eyes on him like that. She didn't mind much at the time because she was filled with anger, but later on she felt embarrassed every time it came up in her memory. It wasn't just embarrassment she felt, though, there was also the happiness that came from him coming for her, and the sensation of being carried. Just by being beside Ernie, it seemed like she would turn bright red.

Urghh, I keep remembering that time...

Addy was glad that Ernie hadn't noticed. A lot of emotions were jumbled up inside her, so she hesitated to grab onto him like she had always done up until now. However, she also hated that she hesitated, so she forced herself to grab anyway. Having been suddenly hugged, Ernie simply and calmly greeted Addy.

Strangely enough, since Ernie had been treated as a stuffed animal by not just Addy, but many people besides, for a long time now, he was used to being suddenly hugged. Not only that, but because Addy was the leading perpetrator of this, to Ernie this was just the usual. Still, he felt that something was off about Addy, so he tilted his head questioningly.

Meanwhile, Addy herself was puzzled by her overreaction. Normally she would immediately move to enjoy the smooth feeling of his hair, but because her heart started beating faster than it ever had the moment she hugged him, she was too distracted to do so. Instead, she buried her face into Ernie's hair so that he wouldn't notice how red she had instantly become.

Agghh jeez, what's wrong with me?! This is bad, I can't look up...

The option of getting away never even occurred to Addy, probably because she was so shaken. For a little while, Ernie looked at Addy quizzically, but after seeing how she wouldn't move he simply went back to his reading.

It's like I'm the only stupid one... Come on, at least react a little!

Addy's unreasonable anger actually only served to bring down her mood even more. She sullenly poked at Ernie's cheek.

"Mn, please stop poking me out of nowhere."

It didn't take long for Addy to say, "You really are just the cutest!"

Finally, Addy seemed to go back to her usual self. She stayed attached to Ernie as he felt even more comfy than usual, and this time she even started to stroke his head. Meanwhile, the other students in the courtyard would steal looks at them, and after seeing the black-haired and silver-haired pair of girls (?) frolicking together, their cheeks relaxed happily, though the subjects themselves hadn't noticed these gazes. Everyone's days were peaceful.

Part Two: Monster Attack Arc

Chapter Five: Shadow of a Giant Beast

In the past, humanity had made the western half of Setterlund, separated from the eastern half of the continent by the Auvinier mountain range, their sphere of influence. Everything east of the mountains was the territory of monsters, and was unexplored by humanity.

Once humanity became able to destroy monsters thanks to the power of silhouette knights, they finally started to spread east of the Auvinier mountain range. However, while their advance was both momentous and steady, they were suddenly forced to stop. The massive forest east of the mountains, the Great Bocuse Forest, was in its deepest parts home to monsters so powerful that not even hundreds of silhouette knights could match them. Having taken massive losses, humanity retreated to just outside of the forest.

There were plains at the foot of the Auvinier mountain range which promised to be excellent farming ground after some cultivation, so the humans stopped their advance along the border of the Great Bocuse Forest and formed a country using all the territory they'd taken up to that point. That country over time became the current Fremmevilla kingdom, and even now monsters would sometimes appear from the forest as if they'd just remembered there was an outside.

In order to prevent that, a large defensive structure was erected along the eastern border of the country. Fortresses were built along the verge of the forest, especially near the entrance (called the Monster Highway because it was a huge road for monsters!), and walls stretched between those checkpoints. Because it was physically impossible to surround the entire country with walls, this didn't stop monster appearances from anywhere other than the Monster Highway and a little beyond, but it had a good effect within its territory, even against large monsters. Thanks to all that effort, the country was fairly stable.

★★★

It happened during a certain quiet night.

Fort Balguerie was one of the fortresses on the border between Fremmevilla kingdom and the Great Bocuse Forest. Because it was a little removed from the Monster Highway, it was rare for it to see even mid-sized monsters, so it only housed a small squad of knight runners numbering ten in total.

That night, the soldiers who were on guard duty noticed how unusually quiet it was and found it creepy. The stars were blinking in the sky, and normally by this time there would at least be a howl or two from far-off animals. However, tonight was unnaturally quiet, with no sign of any animals in the area. It was as if they had all run away. It was definitely strange, but nothing had actually happened yet. The guards felt puzzled, but they simply continued their patrol.

The silence didn't last long. The sound of trees being snapped and crushed in succession came rolling in. It was clear that something was approaching—but there was no need to ponder what it was. There was only one thing in the world that fit the bill: monsters. The guards didn't hesitate to sound the alarm.

"What, a fucking monster in the middle of the night?!"

"What does it want in a place as remote as this?! It's not like we're on the Monster Highway!"

As the emergency alarm rang, the knights inside the fort hurried out. The interior of the fort suddenly came alive as everyone hastily took to their stations. Meanwhile, the sound of trees falling continued and had by this point reached the area right in front of them. The knight runners on night shift jumped into their silhouette knights one after the other. The silhouette knights garrisoned at this fort were of the model officially adopted by the kingdom of Fremmevilla, the Kaldatoah. Being woken up from dormancy, the intakes of their ether reactors roared as a low rumbling resounded through the area.

After flying through their startup checks, the silhouette knights hurriedly grabbed their gear before reinforcing the front gates.

As soon as they did, the source of the strange noise that had been trampling over the trees showed itself. The beast that appeared resembled a small mountain or gigantic boulder, only it moved. It had an angular carapace that looked like a porcupine's back for how filled with spikes it was, wrapped around

a body that was tough in its own right. In addition to that, it had thick limbs and a head that lined up closely with the edges of its shell. If a comparison had to be made, it most closely resembled a tortoise. However, this monster was over eighty meters long and fifty meters tall.

From the top of the gates, a guard gulped. He only knew of what was in front of him from books. It was a behemoth, a monster of the worst kind. It was basically a walking fortress, with incredible strength and toughness as its trademarks. This monster's greatest ability was "strengthening." Its body was so huge that it was basically impossible to support on its own, so it achieved that by strengthening itself to insane levels with magic. That also meant it was capable of faster movement than its looks would suggest. Then you had to consider its shell, which sported fearsome durability from the skeleton all the way to each individual plate. The creature's main form of attack, a tackle, was capable of tearing down entire castle walls. Its heart was of appropriate size for its body, and was capable of outputting more mana than the reactors of a hundred silhouette knights. This made tearing down its iron defenses even tougher, since its infinite toughness came from magic. It was basically an impregnable fortress-monster with disgusting amounts of toughness. Such was a behemoth.

"Classification confirmed...the...the monster is a behemoth! It's a behemoth!!!"

A guard screamed his report, but before the knight runners could understand what he'd said, the behemoth slammed the outer walls of the fort with a devastating tackle. No one could guess what the monster might be thinking, but the fort was in its path, so it charged into it. Using its incredible mass and momentum, the behemoth took advantage of its fearsome toughness and prized shell, turning them into a battering ram. The firm gates made of stone and steel were easily broken, spreading debris all over the area like a landslide had occurred. The knight runners who had been moving to intercept froze up, their minds momentarily blank with shock.

With the report from one of the guards and the sight of both the monster and the broken wall in front of them, the knight runners' expressions were dyed with shock and fear. Even on the Monster Highway, a monster as huge as this

was rarely seen, so they never would have expected a division-class monster to appear in such a remote place. A division-class monster was just as its name suggested: a monster that would require an entire division (roughly three hundred units) of silhouette knights to defeat. The fort was only manned by a company-sized (nine units) complement of silhouette knights, along with a captain unit to make ten. That force was more than enough to defeat duel-class monsters (which a single silhouette knight could match), but it was far too little to deal with a division-class monster.

At this point, trying to fight was just suicide. Even so, the knight runners couldn't retreat. This behemoth was for some unknown reason heading straight for Fremmevillan territory. If they didn't report this situation before the behemoth made any more headway, the knights couldn't imagine how much damage it would cause within the kingdom's borders. With the forces currently stationed at Fort Balguerie, it was impossible to bring down the behemoth even if heaven and earth were to overturn themselves. However, they could at least buy a little time or possibly discover a weak point. The knight runners resolved themselves and took their stand against the monster.

The behemoth used the momentum from its tackle to move inside the fort as it blew apart the walls. With an explosive roar that raised clouds of dust, it shook the entire fort.

The squad of Kaldatoahs had been lying in wait with their Culverin-type silhouette arms at the ready, pointed at the behemoth. They fed mana into these strangely shaped weapons that vaguely resembled javelins and the spell inside the Emblem Graph activated. The overspell inside—a spell requiring too much mana and with a script too complicated for a human to ever use—shot a lance of fire out at its target. The spears of flame from each of the silhouette knights struck the target one after the other with explosive sound and force, raising pillars of fire into the air. The behemoth endured those explosive lances, which would have felled a more mediocre monster, without seeming to feel any pain at all. However, the knight runners had expected that. All the Kaldatoahs hefted their Culverins and continued to fire without rest. Eventually, all the attacks created enough raging fire and smoke to hide even the behemoth's massive body.

Silhouette arms boasted great power, but they also expended a lot of mana. Each Kaldatoah continued to fire their Culverins until they reached the limits of their mana pools, when the fusillade finally ended. Their ether reactors then kicked into high gear to try to replace the mana that had been expended, and the roar of the machines sucking in nearby ether raised a notch.

The entrance to the fort was now engulfed with even more intense inferno after being pounded with so many Culverin shots. Because of the roaring fire and smoke, the knight runners lost sight of the behemoth. Even though there were only ten of them, they had poured all the mana available to them into their attack. The knights figured they had to have at least damaged the monster a little; not even a division-class monster could withstand all that fire. But just as that thought crossed their minds, they once again heard a bellow that shook heaven and earth. This wild shout was so great it even carried physical force with it, enough that the fire was scattered and extinguished, revealing the behemoth within. Contrary to the knights' expectations, it seemed to have taken no damage at all.

The behemoth ran toward the Kaldatoahs with more speed and force that

seemed possible for its size and weight. It was so fast, the nearest Kaldatoahs couldn't dodge. There was no way for a silhouette knight to withstand a tackle with all the behemoth's mass behind it. Their steel armor instantly caved, their limbs twisted into unusable angles, and they were sent flying while scattering pieces of glittering crystal from gaps in their now defunct armor. Given their state, it was probably safe to assume that the knight runners inside weren't unscathed either.

The rest of the Kaldatoahs that weren't hit by the charge hurriedly spread out and created some distance between them and the behemoth. Meanwhile, the behemoth continued to advance, causing rumbling that could easily be mistaken for a real earthquake. Another Kaldatoah resisted fiercely, launching as many fiery projectiles as it could, but the beast still sent it flying.

Magic attacks weren't working. Having realized that, several knight units moved to flank the behemoth and drew their swords. However, the behemoth's shell was just as terrifyingly tough as its reputation suggested, so their slashes had no effect. On top of being covered all over in that shell, it moved at unimaginable speeds. A mere ten silhouette knights couldn't even buy time as they were easily driven to near extinction. The remaining knight runners felt indescribable terror run down their backs. The reputation of division-class monsters was not an embellishment.

The captain of the unit, who was one of the few surviving members, quickly came to a decision.

"Auro! Benjamin! Claes! You guys alive?!"

After a moment came the reply, "Yes!"

The behemoth, with the momentum from its charge, next slammed into the fort itself in its rampage. The stone fort was quickly crumbling before their very eyes, and didn't seem like it would hold much longer.

"Auro, go find any survivors and get them out of here. Run to Fort Carriere! Benjamin, you need to contact the closest city on its path, Jantunen! Claes, you get to the capital! Keep running as fast as you can, until your crystal tissue shatters, you hear me?! They need to know!"

The captain's unit swiveled its head around to look at all his subordinates.

“As for everyone else...sorry, you drew the short straw.”

The three who had been called on were comparatively younger to the rest of the unit. It was clear why they’d been chosen to leave. Unfortunately, they weren’t allowed to argue or hesitate. The most important point was for them to live and pass on the information as fast as possible. A grim expression flashed across their faces before they were filled with a sense of resolve and duty.

“Go!” the captain shouted.

“Yes!”

The Kaldatoahs with the younger knight runners inside set about their orders without hesitation. The captain made sure that happened through his unit’s holomonitor, his mouth turning upward into a slight smile.

“Okay you lot, getting crushed to pieces in a cramped space is no joke! We’re going to abandon the fort and try to delay it on an open field!”

“You got it! We won’t let that thing into our country!”

“Let’s show that tortoise bastard a thing or two!”

Only five Kaldatoahs were left to escape the fortress and face the behemoth. It was an utterly hopeless fight, but they did not falter. After destroying the fort as it pleased, the behemoth resumed its invasion as the silhouette knights attempted to slow it with well-aimed attacks. They couldn’t do anything to it by attacking recklessly from afar, so naturally they had to approach and focus on its head or legs before pulling back. As they repeated this hit-and-run tactic, the behemoth became fed up and retaliated. However, the team braved those counterattacks and continued their fight.

Still, there was a limit to how much power a silhouette knight was able to exert.

The ether reactor installed in a silhouette knight was almost a perpetual motion machine. As long as there was ether around it, it would churn out mana indefinitely. However, there was a limit to how much it could take in at once. In this battle, the mana expenditure of the silhouette knights exceeded their reactors’ output, so the stored mana in their mana pool was being steadily drained. Not only that, but silhouette knights had to be piloted by humans—an

extremely limited species. Having emptied its mana pool, a Kaldatoah slowed down, allowing it to be tackled and sent flying by the behemoth. One knight runner's concentration faltered due to fatigue, causing him to miss his timing to escape, and thus he was struck by a swing of the Behemoth's tail and sent flying in little pieces. The group was slowly losing members unit by unit.

Even so, they had challenged a division-class monster with only five silhouette knights, succeeding in buying a couple hours that were more precious than gold. It wasn't going too far to say they earned a victory through sheer tenacity.

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Naturally, the last one remaining was the captain, as he was the most experienced. There were countless nicks and scratches on his unit, and it was missing an arm due to a close call with the behemoth's tail. Because of wear and damage, the Kaldatoah's crystal tissue was crumbling in places, and the remaining mana in his mana pool was low as well. At this point, he couldn't even run away easily.

Breathing heavily, the captain muttered to himself, "The chicks must've gotten away by now... You tortoise bastard, next time you won't be facing half-assed knights like us, but a real knight order. You better be ready."

Well, if I can't escape... With that thought, the captain "encouraged" his unit, forcing it into a run. He never even thought of saving himself. Instead, he used the rest of his mana to close in on the behemoth. It was totally a suicidal charge, but ironically the captain's movements were sharper than they had ever been. He locked his unit's remaining left arm and the sword it was holding in place as he struck out with all his unit's mass and speed toward the giant monster's face.

It was possible that the monster knew of the concepts of respect and honor.

As the behemoth settled its sights on its last hindrance of an enemy, it opened its mouth wide and sucked in a breath. It was launching a special attack, one that it had yet to show them. A beat later, it unleashed a magical breath attack that was like a violent tornado, which hit the captain's unit almost instantly. The intense air current gouged out a nearby forest, mowing down many trees. The captain and his unit, having taken the attack head-on, were

sent flying, crystals and pieces of armor scattering across a huge area as the silhouette knight fell inside the forest.

The behemoth let out a low cry. The knight runners had hit it with countless attacks in their delaying action. And finally, the captain's last attack left a mark on its face. This scratch had narrowly missed the beast's eye. If the captain's unit had just been a little less damaged, it might have been able to hit the mark. For a while after, the behemoth simply stood on the spot. Once it confirmed that there would be no more hindrances, it resumed walking. Its eyes were impassive as its heavy footsteps reverberated through the earth.

The greatest monster-related disaster the kingdom of Fremmevilla had ever faced started quietly. What was its goal? Right in the path of the monster was central Fremmevilla's largest city, Jantunen.

Chapter 6: Let’s Go on a Field Exercise

The year was 1277 O.C.

Ernesti Echevialier was not yet twelve, and he had entered the academy’s middle school along with his childhood friends, the twins Archid and Adeltrude Alter. Their mutual childhood friend, the dwarf Batson Termonen, had spent all this time in the blacksmithing curriculum, but recently he’d been influenced by Ernie and had started showing interest in the craft of knightsmithing. He could often be seen talking to Ernie about silhouette knights and their design.

And as for Ernesti, the child who right after enrolling in Laihiala Knight Runner Academy had forced himself into a class completely unrelated to his course of study because he was after knowledge on silhouette knights... Now that three years had passed, he was satisfied after taking all the classes he wanted out of the blacksmithing department—and now he was intruding on high school classes in the knight runner department instead.

The knight runner department was the namesake of Laihiala Knight Runner Academy as well as its leading department. Students with good ability who finished the knight curriculum up to the middle school level would then go to the knight runner curriculum in high school. However, the knight runner department was not comprised of just graduates from the middle school knight department. A pilot—or knight runner—alone could not make a silhouette knight move. Silhouette knights were, in the end, machines, so there needed to be people to maintain the unit as well.

For that purpose, knight runners learned piloting techniques while blacksmiths learned how to manufacture and repair the outer skin and inner skeleton of a silhouette knight. Meanwhile, alchemists learned how to produce and maintain crystal tissue, and engravers learned how to maintain silhouette arms. All these topics which had been separate through middle school would be unified and aggregated in high school.

With that background, the teaching style of the knight runner department was very practical. By getting hands-on practice piloting the silhouette knights

owned by the academy, each student would gain experience and skills applicable to their trade. Laihiala Knight Runner Academy, and by extension the knight runner department, owned a total of twenty silhouette knights. In terms of numbers, that was slightly more than two companies, which would be slightly more than a midsize fort. Still, all these units were the previous generation's model, the Solodreah, so they were second-rate in terms of combat strength.

On top of having seen continuous use and repair over long years, each silhouette knight had been used for training by many successive generations of students, so the wear and tear was intense. It was so severe, the prevailing sentiment was that the toughest job in the knight runner curriculum went to those behind the scenes, as they labored over worn-out units that required frequent maintenance. Because it was so hard, most blacksmiths and alchemists that graduated the knight runner course already had the skills to be employed on the front line. Or so went the general consensus.

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Today, as usual in Laihiala Knight Runner Academy, there were silhouette knights in the training area meant for holding drills.

The ones fighting in the center of this stone building shaped like an arena were a red unit and white unit. Both mechs were equipped with blunted blades for use in sparring, and they were taking full advantage of that to have a fierce exchange of blows. The silhouette knights owned by the academy had especially thick armor on the chest, where the cockpit was. This was because the academy placed utmost importance on the survival of the pilot. Even so, the danger would be extreme in an all-out fight between silhouette knights, so mock battles were always structured in a gamelike format using training weapons. The use of real weapons was only ever allowed when doing live combat training against monsters.

The walls surrounding the maneuvering ground were also equipped with spectator seating, and various people were present watching the clashing silhouette knights. Just fighting wasn't enough for their training; they needed to be able to analyze and dissect fights as well. One person was recording the battle so that research could be done on the knight runners' piloting skills.

Another was estimating the damage done so that parts for the repair could be ordered. Yet another was examining the effectiveness of the silhouette arms.

Of course, almost all the people present were high school students. Still, there was someone who was extremely out of place, someone much smaller than the others. This figure wasn't just small, they were adorable enough to be mistaken as female. Of course, this figure was Ernesti. Because he was so short, he had to position himself at the front so no one would block his vision, and he was staring fixedly at the silhouette knights, enraptured.

Naturally, he had brute-forced his way into being excused from the class in the knight curriculum that he should have been taking in this time slot. Pretty much everything he did was absurd, but the way he did it all through proper procedure showed that he was strangely scrupulous.

At first, Ernie was allowed entry since people regarded him like a mascot given how cute he looked. He himself claimed to only be there to observe, after all. But eventually, he started to observe not only the combat but also the maintenance, and not just observe, but gradually speak up more and more. He became able to converse about the subject easily with current students, so it seemed his three years of laying the groundwork weren't for show.

After finally getting past classroom learning and gaining real experience and knowledge, Ernie wanted to dance like he'd never danced before. While he greedily participated in all sorts of classes, the one that most drew his interest was the combat training. It was because he could see silhouette knights—giant robots—fight in front of his eyes, and the sight brought out indescribable emotions in him. Huge humanoid weapons modeled after armored knights were clanging as their limbs moved and they slashed at each other or launched furious gouts of magic. He stared fixedly at them, so as not to let a single motion escape him. Such was his overflowing passion as he watched the mock battle.

As an aside, the sight of a boy with such beauty that he could be mistaken for a girl looking up at his admired silhouette knights with his cheeks flushed may or may not have led the people around him into worlds of perverted thoughts.

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“Ah, crap! Looks like Dee still can’t win...” Helvi Olbarri, a student in the knight runner department, sighed as she recorded the mock battle. The wind blowing through the area rustled her short, unruly hair.

The outcome of the battle happening in front of them was already clear. The red knight’s position was bad. Though it put on an aggressive stance using its twin blades, the red knight had yet to get into an attacking flow and was unable to break down the white knight’s defenses.

“Hey Ernie, what do you think of this battle?” Helvi asked Ernie, who was plopped down next to her, as she stared down at the files in her hands. Until now, neither she nor Ernie had stopped paying attention to the battle even once.

“The speed of Guaire’s swordsmanship has slowed from before. Because of that, he’s let several opportunities to get in an effective hit pass by him.”

That got Helvi to pause and give it some thought. “I see. Now that you mention it, he’s having a tougher time attacking this round. I just thought the knight runner was having a bad day, but I wonder what it really is.”

“The movement of its right arm is a little dull. I think it could be from replacing either the joint or the crystal tissue.”

Helvi took out the maintenance records for Guaire, the red knight unit, and checked over it. Sure enough, the crystal tissue in its right arm had been completely replaced that very morning because of wear and tear. The reason it was stiff was most likely because it hadn’t been properly broken in after that. Helvi knew that the Guaire wasn’t moving as well as usual, but she hadn’t been able to notice the state of its right arm. She reflexively groaned. As he watched the training, there were times when Ernie’s passion and meticulous sense of detail would go above and beyond the current students. Helvi could not figure out why he was so passionate though; it was a mystery.

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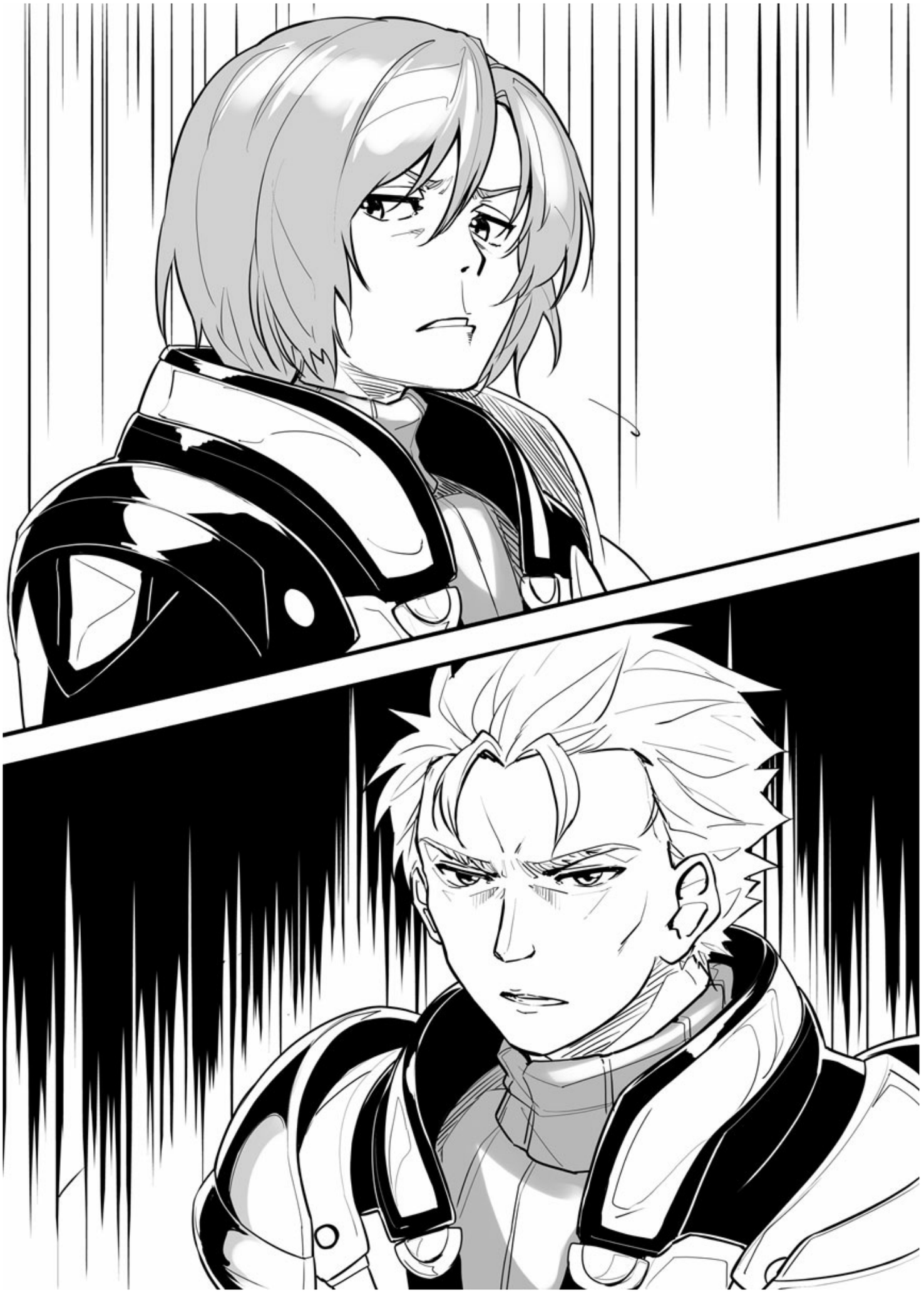
The white unit that faced off against Guaire in the training ring, Earlcumber, swatted its opponent’s attack aside and stabbed its own sword at Guaire’s chest. The sound of a trumpet echoed through the area, signaling the end of the battle. The professor handed down his ruling, and the mock battle ended in

Earlcumber’s win. It seemed Guaire could not overcome its disadvantageous state.

The silhouette knights that had just been fighting entered the maintenance workshop that was placed next to the maneuvering ground, and the knight runners disembarked.

The white mech Earlcumber’s knight runner was named Edgar C. Blanche. He had an imposing figure and seemed very tough. Just as his looks suggested, his personality was unaffected and sincere, and he was among the top knight runners in the class in terms of ability.

The red mech Guaire’s knight runner was named Dietrich Künitz. Opposite of Edgar, he was a tall, thin man with gentle features and blond hair. He was also quite skilled, but his high-strung nature tended to be his downfall, as even the slightest of disruptions could put him off his rhythm, resulting in an uneven record and accompanying hardship. His face was currently clouded with irritation, most likely because he’d just lost.



The second he got down from his mech, he started to argue with the maintenance team. It seemed the argument was about the cause of his loss this time, but he was just looking to push the blame onto someone else rather than actually trying to find a cause, so there was no point in paying attention to it. Unable to watch silently, Helvi interrupted them. She explained about the disorder in Guaire's right arm that Ernie had mentioned to her before in an attempt to put an end to the unproductive fight. However, that only caused Dietrich's face to light up in a cynical smile. Meanwhile, the blacksmith in charge of the maintenance team had a bitter look on his face.

"Ahh, no wonder why I thought I couldn't move that well today," Dietrich groused. "Jeez, do the people in the maintenance team only know how to do a half-assed job?"

He left unsaid the implication that it wasn't his fault he lost, but Edgar stepped in to warn him with a stern look on his face.

"Dee, that's going too far. Even if you felt there was something wrong with Guaire's arm, there are ways to fight while covering for it. Losing because of it might be understandable, but I couldn't feel any sort of ingenuity from your fighting today. It's not good to push all the responsibility onto the maintenance team."

Having been confronted head-on with a sound argument, Dietrich's cynical smile immediately warped into an expression of displeasure.

"What a thing to say from someone who picked up a win today because of that mistake."

"The contents of a mock battle are more important than the outcome. I'm just saying you should take the necessary time to reflect on yourself."

"Is that so? Then you should try fighting with a handicap next time!"

Seemingly fed up, Dietrich spat out a throwaway line before stomping off. The maintenance team members, who were left behind, all shrugged their shoulders to each other as if this was a regular occurrence. Ernie, who had been watching all this from the side, also had a hard-to-describe look on his face. Sensing that something was up, Helvi patted Ernie on the head. That was when

the academy's chime rang from the clock tower. The class was over, and it was time to prepare for the next one. With his enjoyable observational study time concluded, Ernie gave Helvi a bow with a slightly dissatisfied expression before hurrying back to the knight department.

★★★

"Field exercise?"

Upon leaving the knight runner department and returning to his classroom in the knight department's middle school section, Ernie learned about the field exercise from a classmate. Ernie had not heard of it before, but it seemed like a sort of school event. Judging from the fact that it was all his classmates were talking about, it appeared he was the one who was late to the party. It seemed he'd been negligent in this respect ever since he started visiting the knight runner department.

"Sorry, but I don't really understand what's happening. If possible, I'd appreciate it if you'd tell me what a field exercise is."

Ernie sounded troubled, so after exchanging glances, his classmates quickly started to explain. Either they simply enjoyed talking to Ernie, or they were happy to be able to teach him something, but in any case, they each provided their own separate and disparate explanations.

It was a lot of work to summarize all the main points, but they would be as follows:

・It was a joint expedition involving every student across all three grades of middle school in the knight department, done in order to have them gain real life experience fighting monsters.

・Their destination would be near Jantunen, a forested mountainous area populated by a lot of relatively small monsters.

・One of the main objectives was for those in the first year of middle school to learn basic outdoor survival techniques, such as setting up camp.

・Just in case, they would be accompanied by a guard consisting of some silhouette knights from the school's knight runner department.

“I see. And it’s happening in two weeks?” Ernie asked to confirm.

“Seriously though, you didn’t know already?”

“Of course he didn’t. These days he’s been spending aaallll of his time over at the high school section, hasn’t he? He doesn’t come back at aaaallll!”

Though Kid’s exasperation was understandable, Ernie couldn’t help but tilt his head quizzically seeing how upset Addy seemed to be. He had been dropping by the knight runner department not just during class, but also after class and whenever he had free time. As a result, he was spending less and less time training with Kid and Addy.

“Addy?” Ernie questioned. “Um...you seem to be a little upset. What’s wrong?”

“Well, I wonder? I’m not upset at *all*. Isn’t it just your imagination?” Addy asserted strongly with her arms crossed. But the pose she took was basically telling the world how upset she was.

“I really don’t think it is. Did I do something wrong?”

“Oh *of course* not. You haven’t done *anything*. After all, you weren’t even here!”

To Ernie, this was the height of feeling helpless. At a complete loss, he made eye contact with Kid.

With an expression that screamed, “Oh fine,” he tried to forcibly change the subject. “So, we’re supposed to form teams in this field exercise. What’re you planning to do, Ernie?”

“Ahhh, well...” He paused and glanced over at Addy, who couldn’t fully hide her curiosity. “As long as we don’t have any other obligations, we should just group together. From what I’ve heard, we first-years are given only the most basic tasks, so it should be all right to just do whatever.”

“I see...so we’ll be together during that time...” Suddenly, Addy was sounding much happier. She quickly circled behind Ernie and wrapped her arms around him like usual.

I don’t think I’ll ever understand a girl’s heart, no matter what age I am, Ernie

mused. Seeing her like that sent a shiver down his spine, given his memories of his previous life.

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Around two weeks later, Ernesti and gang were heading out for their field exercise under some auspicious weather.

Large stagecoaches were lined up in front of Laihiala Knight Runner Academy, and the middle school students were following the instructions of their teachers, who led them to their assigned transports.

“Be careful!”

Batson, who belonged to the Blacksmithing department, wouldn’t participate in this field exercise. While accepting his rather unmotivated goodbye, the trio from the knight department entered their stagecoach.

“Ernie! Ernie! Over here!”

“You don’t need to hurry me; the carriage won’t run away.”

Their destination, the place where they would hold this field exercise, was a wooded region by the name of Croquet Forest. The area was both forested and slightly mountainous, and was populated by a lot of relatively weak monsters. The reason they had gone out of their way to choose such a faraway place that would require travel by carriage was because the monsters there were of low strength and the campground provided everything the students would need, making Croquet Forest and its terrain a perfect candidate. Their planned path would have them first stop by Jantunen, which was near the forest, before moving on to just outside the forest itself after restocking on supplies in town.

Soon enough, the students had all filed into their coaches, and the line started to head off. The great crowd of stagecoaches formed a long line down the road as they proceeded.

Guarding this line of carriages was a group of ten silhouette knights, evenly spaced throughout the group. These units all belonged to and were piloted by knight runners from the high school division. Included in those ten units were a red unit and a white unit—Guaire and Earlcumber.

The mechs used by the academy were all hand-me-downs originally used by the army, but after many years of use by students and maintenance likewise performed by students, their outer appearances now differed greatly, becoming odd and very affected by students' tastes. They were all fiercely individual machines, heavily self-assertive and filled with modifications that toed the line of acceptability. Examples included a mech with meaninglessly complicated patterns etched on the armor, a mech with an excessively large ornament on the head, and a mech where the connections between armor plates were made recklessly complex.

A large number of knight department students were participating in this field exercise. Since they were in middle school, they were still underage kids, but they were all aiming to become knights. They would probably be fine being attacked by monsters to some extent. In terms of the field exercise, it would be a problem for the academy if the students fell into confusion just by being attacked by some small monsters. However, even though they would be within Fremmevilla kingdom's borders, monsters ranging from only a few meters to over a dozen meters in size could be found in the mountains and forests, and it wasn't impossible for them to suddenly appear on the road. The silhouette knights were accompanying them as a precaution for that.

"Good grief. I thought we'd be able to fight actual monsters outside, but all we've got is a boring journey" Dietrich Künitz complained loudly from the pilot's seat in Guaire.

He was right. Even though this was a measure against the unexpected, no large problems ever occurred on the way. At least in name, this was also treated as training for the knight runners, specifically training to march long distances. However, it had become a journey devoid of motivation or tension in any of its participants.

"Come on, Dee. I get how you feel, but you shouldn't say that out loud."

This time, Helvi Olbarri wasn't participating as a record keeper, but as a knight runner. She was piloting her silhouette knight, Trandorquess, as she scolded Dietrich. The cockpit of a silhouette knight was equipped with speaking tubes, so as long as the pilot didn't close them, whatever they said inside could be heard by everyone around them. This effect was even more pronounced

because there were measures to enhance the voice inside to beat out the running noise of a silhouette knight. It wouldn't be strange if what Dietrich had said had carried over to the middle school students' ears.

"Both of you, even if there's nothing going on right now, this is still training. Be serious."

Earlcumber came up from behind Trandorquess and Guaire, coming into lockstep beside them as its pilot, Edgar C. Blanche, spoke.

"Well well, as expected from the knight runner valedictorian. Everything you say is a cut above."

"Dee, did you not just hear what I said?"

"Ahh, you two restrain yourselves. The others can hear you."

Helvi's words got Guaire and Earlcumber to shut up and rejoin the line. While controlling Trandorquess, she worried over the uncertain looking future.

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The knight runners weren't the only ones who had too much time on their hands.

"I get that there's no other option, but man, I'm way too bored."

They had spent about half a day being tossed around inside a carriage, and frankly Kid was getting fed up. It wasn't just Kid, though, the other students around them also felt the same way. It would take them four days to reach their destination, and in the meanwhile they had nothing to do but sit in a carriage, so the students naturally ended up with far too much time and far too little to do. Small talk was an option, but given how they weren't even allowed to move around to burn off energy, it was inevitable that they would quickly become bored.

"Then why don't you try looking at the scenery, Kid?" Ernie suggested. "That won't bore you."

"No, you're the only one who could be satisfied with that. Actually, I'm amazed you aren't tired of it by now. How long have you just been staring outside?"

Kid fixed Ernie with an exasperated look. Ernie turned away from the window and plopped back down into his seat. His figure as he tilted his head in thought was adorable, and for a moment, the mood around him softened.

“Then would you like to read one of the books I brought? I believe it would serve to kill time, at least.”

“A book...? I’d, like, rather move my body, though. Well, whatever. What kind of book is it?”

“*Introduction to Alchemy*, volume one.”

“What? Isn’t that a textbook? If I had to kill time with that I’d rather sleep.”

“Sure, but there really is nothing else to do here. You should take a page from Addy’s book and sleep. That might be best.”

Kid looked suspiciously at Addy, who was sleeping with a truly blissful look on her face. Her peaceful sleeping expression certainly made it seem like she wasn’t bored, in a sense, so Kid couldn’t help but look to the heavens, hoping for inspiration. Suddenly, it seemed something came to his mind.

“Well, I guess that would at least...stave off boredom?”

The pair climbed up onto the roof of the stagecoach. The roof was being used to carry the students’ luggage as well as supplies for the trip. Unlike the interior, there was no seating on the roof, but it wasn’t especially hard just to ride on top.

“The scenery is better from up here.”

It was a sunny day, and being on the roof while the carriages traveled along the road under this bright blue sky made for a very relaxed atmosphere. The wind blowing across the road tickled Ernie’s silver hair. As soon as he took up a position on the roof, he entered scenery-watching mode.

“Ahhh, and I’m still bored in the end. Well, I guess it’s at least better than being inside that cramped carriage.”

Kid’s attitude was pretty offhanded. To him, if there wouldn’t be anything to do anyway, he might as well spend the time in the open air.

“Ah, so this is where you two were.”

That was when Addy popped up from inside the carriage.

“So you were awake, Addy.”

“Yeah, since you two disappeared at some point.”

With that, she crept up to Ernie and immediately repurposed his lap as a pillow as she sank back into sleep.

“The sun is warm... This is a nicer sleeping spot.”

“It’s fine to sleep, but why do you have to use my lap as a pillow?”

“Because it’s better.”

Ernie was astounded by that reasoning, but Addy had already drifted off. Giving up, he started to read while taking in the scenery. Kid pondered a variety of things for a while, but eventually it became clear that he was fed up with that, as he instead took a nap using some luggage as a pillow.

Their journey proceeded peacefully.

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Like that, they spent three days being tossed around in a carriage. Then, the group from the knight department of Laihiala Knight Runner Academy finally arrived at Jantunen, the largest city in central Fremmevilla.

There was a reason Jantunen had become one of the few large cities in the country. It was in the perfect location to be a stopping point on the trade route between the country’s breadbasket in the east and the western side of the country which also held the trade route over the Auvinier mountains to the countries in the west. On top of that, because it was in such an important spot on the road, it boasted the second strongest defenses in the country, only second to the capital. The city was surrounded by sturdy walls which were in turn ringed by a moat. And that wasn’t all, the city hosted a huge knight order, which had at maximum an entire brigade of silhouette knights (roughly a hundred units). That number might have been a little too much even for such an important base, but it was so high because it was expected for them to be deployed to cover the road and its surroundings. In practice, almost a third of the silhouette knights were always out on patrol or combat missions.

The group from Laihiala Knight Runner Academy arrived at Jantunen a little into the afternoon.

The walls surrounding Jantunen were so large they overpowered the surrounding scenery. In this age, where long-distance travel in small groups was extremely difficult thanks to the existence of monsters, this was the first large city other than Laihiala that many of the students were seeing, and they were filled with interest at the stunning cityscape.

“Those walls are amazing, aren’t they? I wonder what they were thinking they’d have to fight.”

“Isn’t it just the monsters that currently exist? Or rather, the monsters that existed during the founding of the country? Apparently there used to be much more ferocious ones back then.”

“I see... Makes sense the walls would be so thick then.”

Once they saw the gates that led into what lay behind the walls, the expectations of the students soared. However, their carriages didn’t pass through the gates. Instead, they gathered in a clearing just outside.

“Awww, what? We aren’t going into Jantunen?”

“From what they told us beforehand, we’re just stopping here to refill on supplies.”

It was possible to leave the carriages and take a break, but once they finished resupplying the students would have to pack in so the journey could resume. The students, who had hoped that their boring journey would finally end, raised voices of complaint. While glaring at the gigantic gates, the twins griped as much as they could.

“What the heck, that’s such a letdown. Why couldn’t they at least let us see the inside of the city?!” Addy grumbled

Kid agreed. “Right? I wanted to take a look around...”

“No, that’s not the point of this trip...” Ernie pointed out.

“You don’t want to take a look, Ernie?” Kid looked at him curiously.

“Sure, I’m interested. But more than that I think the prospect of trying to

corral this many students on a sightseeing trip would just be terrifying.”

Saying that, Ernie looked askance at the piles of supplies that were currently being loaded onto the carriages. The resupply had probably been arranged with the merchants beforehand, and they had been waiting by the gates to hand over the goods.

Soon enough, the short break ended, and the group once again set off. Filled with students still dripping with lingering curiosity for the city of Jantunen, the carriages took off toward Croquet Forest.

Croquet Forest lay one more day's travel from Jantunen. They were no longer on the highway that led to the eastern border of the country, so they spent the entire day on almost completely unpaved roads, being jostled around torturously. Ahead of them yawned the entrance to a dense forest.

Immediately after the carriages entered the forest, they halted in a sparsely covered clearing. This was where the school had students stop and make camp every year during this field exercise.

"Okay! Once everything is unloaded, each group should pitch their tents first! Once that's done, we'll be having dinner."

With that order from the instructor in charge, the students started to set up their tents. As an aside, during the journey the students all slept in the carriages. Even though they were traveling down an open road, monsters could still appear at any time, so they had to be ready to move at any time. Given that the plan was to stay in this spot for several days, the school couldn't very well ask the students to spend all that time in the carriages. That was what the tents were for.

The upperclassmen already had experience doing this, so they all set up their tents with practiced movements. Students of the knight curriculum had a lot of occasion to pitch tents, even outside of excursions like this one. This was because knights would need to know how to set up camp during marches, among other situations. One of the features of the knight department was that it taught not just swordsmanship and magic, but skills like these as well.

However, it did not come easy for the first-year middle schoolers. Though they had received instruction and had time to practice doing this before the field exercise, without real experience they couldn't be called good at it, even as pure flattery. Despite getting help from the teachers, some teams still fell behind schedule, and in the end dinner had to be delayed.

With all the tents lined up, the forest entrance looked just like a regular campsite. There were bonfires going, making this the only spot in the dim forest that was bright. Incidentally, the lesson plan included having the second-years and above take turns keeping watch. There was no way the teachers alone could take care of such a large group, so the students had to guard themselves,

and this doubled as training.

Ernie and his group had finished setting up their tent earlier than the others. Part of it was because he understood the steps very well, but part of it was also because the twins were blessed with good stature for their age, which came in handy in situations like this. From there, the twins moved to help other teams that were lost while Ernie walked by himself to the edges of the campsite.

We've completed our assignment, so this isn't me slacking off! Hmm... Oh, there it is!

Next to the middle schoolers' campsite was the bivouac belonging to the knight runners from high school and their silhouette knights. Because their footsteps and operating noises would do nothing but disturb everyone's sleep if the silhouette knights were to actively patrol, they were kept on standby in case of emergencies.

The ten silhouette knights were lined up on one knee. It was hard to properly see them all, lit by the bonfires and spreading their shadows in the dead of night as they were, but the sight of them was even more impactful than during the day. A normal person might have felt intimidated, but Ernie looked over these silently arrayed steel giants with a full-faced smile.

Ah, giant robots are sooo good! This is the oasis for my heart. Every household needs one of these.

No such terrifying household existed in this world, but unfortunately no one was around to offer a retort to what Ernie whispered in his heart.

★★★

"Hey, you th—silver...? Is that Ernesti?"

After a while spent like that, a voice came from behind Ernie, who was immersed in his inexplicable feeling of solace. He turned around to find the pilot of Earlcumber, Edgar.

"Good evening, Sir Edgar. I've come to visit."

"So it really was Ernesti. Why're you...no, there's no point in asking I suppose."

Ernie was already famous in the knight runner department, as was the reason for his extremely offbeat actions.

“Is it your turn to be on standby, sir?”

In the flickering light of a bonfire, Ernie’s question elicited a different kind of strained chuckle from Edgar as he shook his head.



“No, the order was just decided earlier... Well, basically Dee was unwilling.”

“Sir Dietrich?”

“Yeah. Put simply, he complained loudly that being on alert was too much of a bother. Despite the fact that ensuring the safety of our juniors is an honorable mission for us as knight runners of Laihiala academy’s high school. He’s as moody as always.”

Even if he complained selfishly, he’d still be forced to attend to his duties, so making a fuss was essentially useless. However, it was just like Dietrich to not care about details like that.

“I got tired of listening to him complain, so I came to visit this guy for a change of pace.”

At that moment, the pair looked up. What was illuminated in the light of a bonfire was a giant knight clad in pure white armor, the silhouette knight Earlcumber. There was no special customization done to it, so it remained faithful to the original specs. The unit was also tuned to be as solid and sturdy as possible, and though it did not excel at any one thing, it handled well and had extremely stable controls. It always responded well to the instructions of Edgar, who boasted the best skills among the academy’s knight runners, and their combination was well known throughout the academy as the strongest.

“Do you also like silhouette knights, sir?”

“Hm? Like... This guy is a weapon as well as my partner, after all. Being with him calms me down. In times such as this where I’m feeling irritable or tired or something similar, I often come to visit.” Edgar scratched at his head bashfully as he commented, “I guess it’s out of character for me...”

“No, I think it’s wonderful that you have a partner you can trust.”

“You love silhouette knights if I recall, Ernesti. Right, if you keep pouring in effort then one day you’ll also gain your own partner, I’m sure of it.” Edgar paused as something came to mind suddenly. “Ah, we’ve been standing around talking for too long. Go back before curfew is up for the first-years.”

With that, the two exchanged goodbyes and returned from whence they

came.

After seeing off that head of shining silver as it vanished into the darkness, Edgar muttered to himself, “Now then, Dee should have calmed down by now.” He psyched himself up before heading back, as if he were heading into a battlefield.

★★★

The sun had set fully, and the first-years who had finished their late dinner entered each of their tents in the darkness. There was nothing much for the first-years to do during the night, and they were tired from hurriedly setting up their tents and moving around earlier, so shortly after they had wrapped themselves up in their blankets, they were asleep. It wasn’t long before something happened, though.

A long howl reverberated from the forest. It sounded like a wolf, but once one voice was raised, many more answered in kind, coming from all over the forest. The upperclassmen who were doing their jobs as sentries were instantly wary of something emerging from the forest. Howls were a common occurrence, so many quickly lost interest. However, some did not. For the first-years who were attending their first field exercise, the echoing howls reinforced what kind of situation they were in, though it was a bit late for that. They weren’t safe in a town, or in a carriage where they could quickly run. They were sleeping in tents right in front of a forest filled with monsters. No matter how low the danger level of Croquet Forest was, or if there were other students standing watch, their location wasn’t totally safe. Because of how safely they’d traveled to this place, the first-years had started to take this lightly at some point, but they promptly tensed at the first howl. Their exhausted sleepiness instantly receded, and now they were all wide awake.

In Ernie’s group’s tent, Kid shook his head as he stayed in bed. Though his reaction was much less extreme, he still felt some unease, and it didn’t seem like he’d be able to go back to sleep any time soon.

I thought I was tougher than this, Kid pondered. *I guess I can still get pretty nervous.*

Inside the tent, illuminated only faintly by the light of a bonfire coming

through the flap, a restless mood prevailed. Suddenly wondering if Ernie, who was sleeping beside him, was also feeling insecure, Kid whispered to him.

“Hey, Ernie, do you have a...hey.”

However, Ernie was already asleep. It wasn’t as if he wasn’t worried at all about this situation, but as a warrior programmer who had fought through hell on the front lines in his past life, he knew full well how important it was to always rest when he could, and he had gained a strange skill to be able to sleep in any situation.

Wow, Ernie’s amazing, Kid mused. *I’ve always thought that, but he’s really got nerves of steel.*

Addy, however, turned around at Kid’s voice since she too was unable to sleep, and she immediately noticed that Ernie was sleeping.

“Mrr, that’s not fair.”

Kid wasn’t sure what exactly wasn’t fair, but Addy had already crawled over and latched onto Ernie. She was using him as a makeshift body pillow. Given that someone had grabbed onto him from out of nowhere, even Ernie would wake up. But as soon as he realized it was just Addy, he patted her on the head once and went back to sleep. That must have reassured her, as after a while Addy also followed him into dreamland, and the sounds of her steady breathing could be heard. Seeing that, Kid started to feel foolish for not being able to sleep, and he couldn’t help but give a pained chuckle.

I feel like an idiot for being the only one that’s nervous... he thought.

After being able to look at the situation in a more relaxed manner, he soon also fell asleep.

★★★

The next morning, the students woke up a little after sunrise.

Many of the students lacked sleep, so the mood that morning was decidedly listless. Meanwhile, Ernie’s group was well rested and fully alert. Students being unable to sleep during the field exercise was a common occurrence, and having them experience this sort of tension that couldn’t be felt in a town was also one

of the objectives of this field exercise. However, the teachers had no intention of forcing the first-years who had yet to build up much stamina to do more than they could handle, so their workload was relatively light. After having a simple breakfast consisting mainly of preserved rations, the students followed their teachers' instructions and split into their respective years.

After a simple briefing from an instructor, the second-year students and above headed deeper into the forest in teams. They would be doing real battle with the monsters that lived there, and having each team hunt a certain number of them was the main goal of this field exercise. Meanwhile, the first-years would spend their time near the edge of the forest at first, where combat encounters could occur but weren't guaranteed.

Taking their first steps into the forest, the first-years were definitely nervous in a different way than their upperclassmen. Eventually, the clinking sounds of the armor they wore faded into the distance, and the forest became quiet again.

Like that, the knight department students started the long first day of an experience they would never forget for their entire lives.

Chapter 7: Let's Fight Some Monsters

Leaving behind the shrill sound peculiar to magic as it flew through the air, an Aero Ripper spell assaulted a staccato lizard. The blade of compressed air sliced off through the thin and frail neck of the staccato lizard, killing it without even giving it the chance to let out some death throes.

"The lizards that slipped past are coming! Front line, ready your shields!" An elegant female voice shouted orders, and students in light armor wielding bows and staves fell back so that students in heavy armor could come to the front. They lined up in a horizontal formation and took a stance with their shields, ready to push back the horde of oncoming monsters. The monsters that their magic and arrows couldn't finish off crashed violently against the shield wall of the students' front line. The monsters attacked with their fangs and claws, but everything was turned aside by the shields. Meanwhile, the students fought back with their swords, and in a flash, many of the monsters were killed.

However, the monsters had overwhelming numbers, so they were able to swarm past the students' defenses to breach through to the rear of their formation. Before even confirming whether or not their formation had been breached, the lightly armored students in the back reacted, attempting to destroy the monsters who had gotten past the front line. In the end, the number of monsters who managed to get past them was very few.

The middle school upperclassmen, who according to the original plan should have entered Croquet Forest separated into groups, had now gathered together in a large-scale formation. With all of them united, the formation they had adopted was one that emphasized defense. In front of them were a massive swarm of monsters that were rushing forth out of the deeper forest like a tsunami. The students took the force of the monsters' charge head-on, and so began the upperclassmen's frenzied fight.

Though they had felled an innumerable number of monsters, the frightening fact was that they had only taken care of a fraction of the total. The group expected a ferocious clash, but many of the monsters parted around them or simply forced their way through their formation before flooding toward the

forest's entrance.

"At this rate, the first-years at the entrance of the forest will...! We need to warn them!"

The female student who had been handing out orders realized the danger and was going to try to warn the underclassmen of the impending peril, but then the older students were faced by their own large threat.

"Oh no! It's a macehead ogre! A macehead ogre is coming this way!" The student who had witnessed the monster let out a scream.

The staccato lizards and sabercats that they had been fighting up until now were not that large, and though their numbers were troublesome, the students were handling them well with their current formation. However, things were different with a macehead ogre on the field. As their name suggested, macehead ogres were basically giant monkeys that had short and gnarled horns growing out of their heads and came up to about three meters in height. Normally, it was a powerful monster that would require several people fighting together to bring down. It wasn't something they could deal with properly while still fighting a bunch of smaller monsters.

The female student gasped in surprise. "Staves in the second rank, ready! If it gets close you won't be able to deal with it!"

Staves poked out from between the shields of the students who were acting as a wall, activating various spells. They assaulted the monsters with spells ranging from explosive fire, to wind, to lightning.

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A few hours before the incident, the middle school upperclassmen who had split up to enter Croquet Forest were walking merrily forward. They did not let their guard down as they ventured deep into the forest, and thus gradually they started to feel as if something was wrong. Normally, they would have encountered monsters several times by now with how deep they'd gotten. However, they had not had to fight once this entire day. There had been no news about monsters disappearing from Croquet Forest either.

Confused, they wandered around in the forest a while before trying to seek

out other groups in hopes of gaining more information. However, every single one of them had the same thing to say: there were no monsters. There wasn't even a single lizard, let alone a cat. The fact that something that should have been there was missing was definitely abnormal. After some discussion, the students decided to return to base camp for the moment to report what they had noticed.

It happened just as the students were about to move out. Monsters started to appear sporadically from deep inside the forest. To the students, this was kind of an anticlimax to what they thought would be a more interesting problem, but they still took up arms to defeat them.

One monster, two monsters, five...ten...

Once their numbers broke into the triple digits, the students' expressions stiffened. And once they saw the horde so massive they couldn't get a read on the numbers that were running toward them from deeper in the forest, they finally realized that the situation was the exact opposite of what they'd expected.

The one silver lining was that all the students had coincidentally already gathered together, so they were a large group. Since they trained daily to become knights, the students immediately organized themselves into a formation to intercept the incoming onslaught. In anticipation of them being deployed in a knight order, they had been given training in group combat, and now that training was bearing fruit. That was how the group of students clashed with the monsters, leading to the current situation.

Already, the number of defeated macehead ogres had climbed to ten.

The students' strategy of prioritizing immobilizing the monsters had worked, and they were somehow able to get through their predicament without taking any casualties in the melee. Deciding that their losses would only mount if they stayed here, the students started to slowly retreat back to the forest's entrance.

Luckily for them, they were led by the student council president: Stefania Serrati. Also, because they had been assigned to take action in smaller groups, each member had already been assigned a role, which allowed them to equip

themselves accordingly. Taking action in a large group formation was just an extension of this, so each student was already in a role and well equipped for it, making for a smooth adaptation to their circumstances. However, the one problem was that when actually acting in an organized unit like this, there needed to be a leader, which they didn't have. It was great that the students had already split their roles and could act in those roles, but without leadership making decisions and moving them in accordance to the bigger picture, their large numbers would be wasted.

That was why no one objected to Stefania taking the leadership role, as she was in the highest year and had the title of student council president as well. She also had the highest grades in her year, so she was very well trusted by her peers. Though this was a makeshift group with an improvised leadership structure, her orders were precise, and the students had been able to avoid any major losses so far. However...

This is bad, Stefania worried to herself. *I don't know why they're so desperate to come at us... How long can we withstand this pressure?*

While Stefania was earnestly doing her best to lead everyone, she could not help but feel anxious on the inside. At the moment, the students still had leeway in their stamina and mana reserves. However, if they were to keep being attacked like this, she knew they would eventually be overwhelmed.

And, she thought, *there's no way we can stop all the monsters. Those children behind us...please, stay safe!*

The situation was not improving, but they still resisted valiantly.

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As the upperclassmen were putting up a good fight deep in the forest, the first-years training near the forest's edge were also being attacked by monsters.

A scream came from the student who had moved farthest into the forest. Several staccato lizards had suddenly appeared and attacked, biting into the student. Staccato lizards didn't have the strength to inflict a fatal wound with just a single bite, but it was still dangerous to be attacked by many of them at once. Realizing that, the teachers quickly jumped in to help, attacking the monsters who had accosted their student.

The teachers weren't to blame for this, but their actions ended up backfiring. It would have been fine if these few monsters were the only ones that appeared, but immediately more of them emerged from deeper in the forest. Having lost their chance to fall back, the teachers were forced to continue battling. There was no worry that the teachers would fall in combat, at least not right away, but they were now locked in combat and had no time to pacify the students behind them, who were already half in a panic. The teacher whose job it was to calm them was busy fighting, so they weren't receiving proper instruction.

The students frantically waved their staves and fired magic. Their spells, which hadn't been properly aimed, did not achieve their intended effect. In fact, they were close to committing friendly fire. Some students had drawn their swords, and the panic of the group was only increasing. Compared to the upperclassmen, who had been equipped in preparation for battle and had spent much longer training for it, the first years were all woefully unprepared.

"Aero Slug, Canister Shot!"

Suddenly, someone jumped over the confused group of panicking first-years. Silver hair caught the sunlight, burning the color into the memories of the confused students. He twisted his body in midair and landed, unleashing a hail of wind bullets. Canister Shot was what he had named a method of firing many spells at once, like a shotgun.

Multiple thunderous roars resounded in succession as the bullets landed all at once. The missiles of condensed air, having been shot out like a curtain of fire, plowed through monsters as well as earth, throwing everything into the air.

This ruthless magical carpet bombing had greatly reduced the number of monsters in the center, and now two more students appeared on each side of the group. One charged into the horde of monsters, making a mowing sweep with the bastard sword in his hands. The sword, swung with reinforced power thanks to Physical Boost, bisected many monsters all at once. The student kept his momentum from the swing, coming full circle as he pulled another weapon from his waist and pointed it at the remaining monsters.

"Too naive! Sonic Boom!"

The weapon—gunlike staff Gandiva, created a void in front of it. The sudden appearance of this vacuum caused the air around it to rush inside, creating a magic shock wave which hit the monsters. All of the ones outside the range of the bastard sword were hit by this shock wave, which launched them into the air, bodies bent at unnatural angles.

On the other side, the other student had gunstaves in both hands pointing at different targets as she ran.

“Riot Sparrow!”

A thunderous roar and flash of light immediately followed as lightning struck, hitting a group of monsters that had clumped up. They let out strained death cries as their muscles spasmed, but the girl didn’t even spare them a glance as she stuck her gunstaves into their scabbards to attach the blades that were inside to them. With her combined arms in both hands, she ran forth and cut through monsters as she passed by. Her thin swords were strengthened with magic, so they cut through the monsters easily.

Just three students, attacking like an incoming storm front, had greatly reduced the size of the monster horde. The pressure the swarm applied to the students lessened, creating a moment of leeway. The students, seeing the “battle” in front of them that was basically just the monsters getting trampled over, froze more out of shock than confusion.

“Everyone, draw your staves!”

A voice shouted from above the student’s heads. It was coming from the small-statured student who was standing at the front lines. His voice sounded young, like the sweet singing of a baby bird, but there was an indescribable force to his voice. The other students felt this and hurried to attend to his orders.

“Gather together in close formation. Teacher!” Ernie called.

With that, the teachers who had been just as shocked as the students finally came to.

“I’ll leave the leadership to you. Let’s retreat, but make sure we don’t show any openings. We three will reinforce the outer perimeter.”

The teachers hurriedly started giving out orders. The students came into close formation, strengthening their defenses. It would lower the combat strength of each individual, and the first-years' equipment wasn't up to par, but the only chance for them to stand against the monsters was to concentrate what firepower they had. Though there would still be some problems, the teachers who were leading them should have been able to compensate.

While glaring at the monsters who were once again coming from deeper in the forest, Ernesti slowly took a stance with his Winchester while Kid and Addy lined up at his sides. Kid had his bastard sword in one hand, resting it on his shoulder, while Addy was still holding her twin swords in a relaxed position. They looked at the mass of monsters pushing toward them fearlessly.

"Hey, hey! That's an amazing amount of monsters there. They're still coming in droves! Looks like we'll be able to rampage as much as we like," Kid shouted, his speech slurring into a pattern not unlike a common street punk.

"He he, I won't hold back!" Addy shouted.

Hearing their shouts, Ernie made sure to reprimand them. "I don't mind that you like fighting so much, you two, but make sure you protect the other students."

"Awwww, but won't they be able to handle themselves...or not..." Addy was in the middle of complaining, but she trailed off. This was because Ernie had turned around to look at her with a very harsh expression, which was strikingly different from how he normally was.

"If all you want to do is go on a rampage, there's no need for you to do it here, you know?"

"Urk... O-Okay, I get it! I'll make sure to help everyone!"

Meanwhile, Kid had quickly given up on this point, taking up a pose with his hands in the air.

"Luckily, we're still basically at the entrance of the forest. If we retreat, we'll be back at camp almost immediately. If we can meet up with the silhouette knights there, this should become much easier. But until then..."

As he spoke, Ernie was quickly launching Aero Slug spells. The monsters that

had been trying to attack him as he was having a conversation took the magic head-on and were blown away.

“We need to protect them.”

With a strong sense of resolve, Ernie’s Winchesters danced through the air, launching another mass of spells.

★★★

While the middle-school students were out in the forest, the knight runners from high school were released from their guard duty and were allowed to hold training exercises. They couldn’t afford to put strain on their silhouette knights, which were needed to escort the middle schoolers, so the knight runners were training in person.

It happened while Edgar was in the middle of doing practice swings with his sword. He heard sounds that normally should not happen during the course of training.

“Hey, doesn’t the forest seem too noisy?”

“Hm?”

The other students around him responded by concentrating on what they could hear, though they were dubious. It was clear that noises that had not been there before were now coming from the forest. They quickly realized what the noise was.

“Those are explosions... Magic?!”

“Seems like they’ve run into some sort of trouble... Everyone, that’s it for training! Knight runners, get ready to start up your silhouette knights. I’m curious what’s going on in the forest, so we’re going on a scouting run!”

The base became much more lively as the knightsmiths who had been doing maintenance stepped away from their charges. One after the other, the knight runners jumped into their mechs and skipped through the normal full checklist as they hurried to start up their machines. Suddenly, the area was filled with the sounds of activating ether reactors. Of course, not all the silhouette knights started up; only half the complement, five silhouette knights, headed for the

forest.

“Hey, look at that...”

However, things were much worse than they’d expected. They didn’t even need to actually enter the forest before they saw the overflowing horde of monsters running out of the forest. The teeming mass, with numbers greater than any the knight runners had ever seen before, raised cries as they thrashed about.

“Wh-What the hell?!”

“A monster rampage? Aren’t the kiddies in danger?!”

The knight runners hurriedly drew their swords and stepped into the forest. They didn’t need to walk far before they met up with the first-years. This was all thanks to Ernie’s quick wit, which had allowed them to immediately retreat.

The first-years were clumped up, launching magic toward the horde. The edges of the monster swarm, which pushed forward from deep in the forest, were hit by this magic as they approached. In order to reinforce the younger students, Edgar quickly brought Earlcumber to the forefront. The first-years had been fighting with tense expressions, but at the sight of a silhouette knight scattering corpses from the mass of monsters, they finally breathed a sigh of relief.

The trust placed in silhouette knights, the strongest weapons available to humans, was immense. Their strength, which allowed them to cleave through many monsters on their own, meant that their mere presence brought a lot of relief, especially in situations like this, where people were being attacked by monsters.

Then, having reached base camp, the first-years hardened their defenses around the pickets that had been set up around the perimeter.

While the silhouette knights concentrated on defense, the teachers and other knight runners were discussing what to do next. The first-years were already well protected, so there was no need to worry about them. The biggest problem at the moment were the upperclassmen still deep in the forest.

“Do we know where the second and third-years went?”

“It’s hard to say. Since they went into the forest for training, they should have spread all throughout. On top of that, there’s no guarantee they’d even be at any of the training sites we planned.”

The teachers looked over the planned routes for each team of upperclassmen before groaning with glum faces. Everyone would have loved to strike out immediately to save the students, but the number of silhouette knights available was limited. In order to save the rest of the middle schoolers, the silhouette knights first needed to know where to go, and there were just too many options. Croquet Forest was large, and searching willy-nilly could very well just make things worse. Still, they didn’t have the leeway to think about it forever.

As the teachers furrowed their brows in consternation, Ernesti popped up out of nowhere. “Where are the places that are relatively easier for people to gather at?”

“Hm? Ah...if that’s what you want, then here.” The teacher was puzzled by Ernie’s sudden question, but he answered anyway by pointing to a spot on the map. Normally a first-year wouldn’t be able to contribute anything, but with his incredible performance earlier, no one was willing to dismiss him out of hand.

“Look at how big this horde of monsters is. Wouldn’t my seniors have thought to group together to fight in this situation? Then they would naturally go to where it’s easiest for a large group of people to act.”

“Hm...you have a point.”

“Also, silhouette knights will find it hard to act if there are too many trees in the area. So it’s best for us as well to start our search by checking the open areas, and expand from there.”

A red line stretched from the camp to the large clearing on the map, marking a path of advance. It was a straight shot from the entrance of the forest to the area in question.

“Also, using this path you’ll be able to intercept any monsters coming toward us on the way. If there’s anybody locked in battle, you should be able to tell by the sound.”

Because the situation required haste, Ernie's suggestion was immediately accepted, and a squad was formed to go rescue the upperclassmen. Because the base camp also needed to be defended, once again only half the total number of silhouette knights, five units, would be sent.

Edgar, the pilot of the pure-white silhouette knight Earlcumber, was the first to volunteer for this squad. He wasted no time in trying to jump into Earlcumber, but a voice stopped him. When he turned around, he saw Ernie.

"May I accompany you?"

"Why?"

"My friends have family still in the forest. They're worried, so if possible I'd like to participate in the search."

For a moment, Edgar worried over the decision. It would be dangerous, but considering Ernie's strength, it wouldn't be a problem. Also, he was able to put forth a very logical idea in the meeting earlier, so chances were high he'd have something to contribute to the search. With that in mind, Edgar accepted Ernie's request.

Ernie got on top of Earlcumber's palm, and the silhouette knight stood up. Helvi in her Trandorquess and three other silhouette knights made up the rest of the squad, and they entered the forest with heavy footsteps.

★★★

"Anyone who's out of mana should help carry the wounded! Front line, switch with the line on standby! Just a little more, we just need to hold on a little more!"

The second and third-year middle schoolers had run through a good chunk of their mana reserves, and their breathing was ragged. While trying to force their breathing to calm down, the students had to beat back the endlessly oncoming waves of monsters. While protecting the wounded students, the squad of upperclassmen continued to retreat through the forest.

Several hours had already passed since the start of battle, and their withdrawal had revealed a harsh truth. Though each individual monster wasn't much, the small monsters came in dreadful numbers which sapped the

students' stamina. Unfortunately, they could do nothing about that. Also, each time a macehead ogre popped up, it cost them a lot of their precious mana. A little while ago, a bunch of the students had finally gotten so low on mana they could no longer cast spells, which allowed a macehead ogre to approach and wreak havoc, causing many casualties. While they regrouped and reorganized their squad, it was found that almost half of them were either out of mana or wounded, so they were now just barely holding on. They could still hold the front line because they had saved as much stamina as they could and were switching out the front line at intervals, but it wouldn't stay that way forever. They were close to the base camp now though, and the hope that came from knowing safety was just a step away was what kept them going.

However, reality is a cruel mistress.

Two macehead ogres appeared in front of them. The monsters were so enraged, it seemed that they could foam at the mouth, and they charged straight at the group of upperclassmen. The students' intercepting fire was now clearly more sporadic than before, and it was nowhere near enough to stop the ogres. The expressions of the students in the front line warped. They had taken over ten casualties when the last macehead ogre attacked, and it was a huge blow. Now, there were two of them at once, and if the students tried to face them, that could easily lead to the collapse of the entire group if it was handled badly.

All that was apparent to Stefania, who was leading the group. For a while now she had been standing in the front line as well shooting magic instead of just giving orders. She had been considering every option available to them as she fought, but no matter how hard she thought she couldn't come up with a way to break through the situation. The students in the group were close to their limits, both in stamina as well as mana. Even if they pushed themselves and defeated these macehead ogres, such recklessness would only further decrease their resources.

The macehead ogres, who boasted toughness commensurate to their builds, paid no heed to the students' final resistance as they closed in. In fact, because of the spells that *had* hit them, they were even further enraged.

"It's no use..."

It was unclear which student had muttered that line. The macehead ogres reached the group of students and raised their fists before swinging them down at the heads of those on the front line. Though they knew any resistance was futile, the only thing they could do was try to defend themselves with their shields.

That was exactly why, when a violent bursting sound came from above their heads, they couldn't immediately identify what had happened.

They didn't notice the Piercing Lances fired from behind them leaving trails of fire as they flew forward with fearsome accuracy. They didn't notice that all of them hit one of the macehead ogres in its raised arm. The Piercing Lances then exploded one after the other in accordance with the script, completely destroying the arm they had sunk into. By the time the front line noticed what was going on, the macehead ogre was running away, screaming at the top of its lungs.

Right afterward, something happened that further exceeded their ability to understand. The spells weren't the only things that had flown over. The one who fired those spells—Ernesti, had become a silver bullet as he flew forth. That wording was only half metaphor, as he had used an Aero Thrust spell mid-jump to propel himself forward like a bullet. Using his midair momentum, he flew toward the macehead ogre that had lost its arm and was running away. He passed by the ogre, cutting it on the way past using a Sonic Blade-enhanced sword. In the blink of an eye, the macehead ogre's head flew through the air as its large body slumped to the ground.

Ernie landed, his momentum digging furrows into the ground as he turned around to face the second macehead ogre, pointing his other Winchester at it. A Fireball formed at its tip, then flew toward its target. This happened over and over in quick succession, and as the blasts of fire assaulted the macehead ogre, they exploded up such a storm that the ground itself shook. With half its body burnt and charred, the other macehead ogre fainted, falling to the ground.

"N-Now! Finish it off!"

Though she was surprised by Ernie's sudden arrival, Stefania did not miss the chance that was presented to her. The students hurriedly carried out her orders

and finished off the macehead ogre.

“Ernie...”

“Sorry to keep you waiting, student council president. I’ve brought some powerful helpers with me.”

Ernie didn’t even need to point them out, as they came pounding forward from behind with heavy, reverberating footsteps. The silhouette knights quickly got out ahead of the upperclassmen, taking a formation so as to protect them.

The giant knights, each over ten meters tall, swung their large steel swords, easily overpowering the mass of monsters and sending them flying. Humanity’s strongest weapons showed their overwhelming might here. Seeing the powerful silhouette knights, the students exploded into cheers. To them, who were basically at their limit already, there could not be a more reassuring rescue. Finally, they were safe.

“My word...to think that it really was the right move to bring Ernesti with us,” Edgar grumbled as he put the surrounding monsters to the sword from inside Earlcumber.

They had followed Ernie’s advice and advanced down toward the open area, resulting in them finding the upperclassmen quite easily. It was all because the middle schoolers had gathered on their own and were already in the midst of retreating. However, by the time Edgar had reached them, they were exhausted enough to allow a macehead ogre to close in, putting them in an incredibly dangerous spot. Silhouette knights were able to dispatch such monsters easily, but the ogres were too close to the group of students. If the mechs had tried to use their silhouette arms to shoot the monsters, then the students would have been caught up in the fire as well.

Though they had the strength necessary to save the students, there was nothing the silhouette knights could have done about that situation. At the moment that Edgar was about to gnash his teeth in frustration, Ernie had jumped out of Earlcumber’s hand. With fearsome speed, Ernie had struck a blow that killed one of the macehead ogres as Edgar could only watch. *That puts us in a tough spot. We’ll take a hit to our reputation at this rate*, he thought as he couldn’t hold in a sigh.

Under the escort of the silhouette knights, who had quite literally come in at the last moment, the group of upperclassmen continued their withdrawal. Though there were many wounded, no one was left behind as they finally made it back to base camp.

★★★

Let us rewind time to a little after the knight department students of Laihiala Knight Runner Academy had departed Jantunen for Croquet Forest.

Like ships passing in the night, a single silhouette knight arrived in Jantunen from the eastern gate. The knight runner must have been in a great hurry, as he was haggard and exhausted, but as he approached, the knight who was guarding the gate walked toward him nevertheless. The knight was surprised at this sudden event, but as he listened to what the knight runner had to say, his face turned pale and he ran off at full speed to make a report.

“Is that... Is that true?!”

After hearing the report from his subordinate, the face of the captain of the guardian knight order of Jantunen, Phillip Halhaagen, changed color. His vice-captain Gottfried Hyvärinen, who had been with him in his captain’s office, kept his stoic look, but his face had also turned pale. This was a testament to the impact of what had been reported to them.

“It is, sir! Owing to an attack from a division-class monster, a behemoth, Fort Balguerie has fallen. The garrison there is also most likely decimated. The Behemoth then continued into the country, and is heading west. It’s expected that eventually, it will approach Jantunen!”

A sudden invasion by a division-class monster. This situation, which could only be described as a nightmare, threatened to give Phillip a headache. However, this was no time for the leader of a knight order to have his head in the clouds. The silver lining was that because of the efforts of the knight runner who had reported to them, they had some time before the behemoth appeared. In situations like this, time was of the utmost importance.

“Gaghh... Hurry, recall all the knights who are currently deployed near Jantunen! It’s an emergency, this takes priority over any and all ongoing missions!”

The subordinate who had reported to him repeated the order to show that he had understood it before snapping a salute and running back the way he came. After that, as if chasing after him, Phillip and Gottfried left the captain's office and headed for the meeting room.

"A behemoth... No matter how well equipped Jantunen is, it can't stand up to the power of a division-class. Only the capital has the strength to do that."

"The distinction between classes is only for reference. All it says is that it's a monster that can easily be defeated with a division's worth of silhouette knights. With our current complement, we should be able to kill it as long as we're prepared for some losses."

While walking quickly, Phillip clenched his fists. "I know. Of course I know! The problem is the scope of those losses! There's no point in victory if all one hundred of our proud knights fall while trying to achieve it! Who will protect Jantunen then?!"

Gottfried fell silent at that. Of course he didn't wish for the knight order to collapse or be destroyed. However, the behemoth had already taken down one fort. If it were to continue on to Jantunen, it would result in massive tragedy, and the flow of goods within the country would also take a huge hit. If the flow of supplies to the country's borders were to stop, then most likely some forts would fall as a result of this chain reaction. It wouldn't be too far to say that the fate of the nation was at stake. There was a need to take down the behemoth as early as possible, even if it meant having to trade in an entire knight order for it. And advising their captain on anything when he was in need was the perennial duty of all vice-captains.

Phillip paused for a moment before continuing, "No, I suppose now isn't the time to be saying that anymore, is it? If we don't stop it here then in the worst case the entire country could fall. We need to send a messenger to the capital. Jantunen will need replacements for us after we're destroyed..."

Phillip's face was twisted with irritation at the situation, but all Gottfried could do was nod.

By the time Phillip and Gottfriend entered the meeting room, the other knights who were at headquarters had already gathered. None of them could hide their nervousness over this sudden situation.

The knights who were deployed had received their orders to convene, but while that was happening, those already present needed to understand the current situation. A map was quickly brought over, and they got started plotting out the behemoth's route. The knight runner who had brought them the report didn't know the behemoth's exact location. Given the behemoth's speed and the terrain, they were able to approximate a land route and figure out where it should be generally. But, they still needed to decide on a spot for the knights to intercept it.

"The way it came...considering the geographical factors around Fort Balguerie, we believe its most likely route from there was to circle around Degbell mountain and go through the forested area at its foot."

"There's no way it doesn't go through Jantunen with this route... Where do you predict it is currently?"

At that question, the knight pointed to the map. "It's most likely past the Crepel plains and is somewhere near Croquet Forest."

"Croquet Forest? Grr, it's closer than I expected. At this rate we'll have to intercept it right next to Jantunen..."

At that moment, a single knight in the back raised his voice with a panicked tone. "Did you say...Croquet Forest?!"

"What's wrong? Did something happen there?"

No one there wanted to hear any more bad news, but they needed to understand every point of possible concern. With everyone's eyes on him, the knight continued, his face pale.

"Right now, students from Laihiala are having a field exercise there!"

"Wha—?!"

The other knights were all lost for words. It wasn't just Jantunen that was in danger, but the treasure of the nation: its people. And children at that. There

were even people present that had family in Laihiala's knight department. A portion of them, panicking, ran up to Phillip.

"We need to head to Croquet Forest immediately!"

"Our first priority needs to be rescuing the children, no matter what!"

With his problems piling up, Phillip was at his wit's end. However, he only worried for a moment. There was a duty he needed to prioritize. Phillip responded, "We'll send a messenger. However, we can't afford to deploy the knight order yet. It will have to wait until we've gathered the numbers."

"Captain! I can't believe you! You can't seriously be planning to let those children die, can you?!"

"Of course not!" Phillip gave the knight a sharp rebuke after he had approached, the color on his face changing. Phillip couldn't stop the frustration from welling up in his voice.

"Of course I want to go help them, but we're already at our limit just dealing with the behemoth!" He took a deep breath before continuing, "We can't hope for more. If we panic and deploy recklessly without gathering enough forces first, then we'll simply exhaust our resources for nothing. In the worst case, it might make us unable to deal with the behemoth itself. Don't mistake our priorities! Our goal is only to kill the behemoth. By doing that, we protect Jantunen, and thus the kingdom of Fremmevilla!"

The knights, who had been whipped up into an excited chatter, fell silent. They knew what their captain said was right. They had always known they didn't have a choice.

Phillip gave them a moment before he continued, "Right now, the only thing we can do is hope their luck and wits carry them through..." He looked off into the distance, toward the seemingly endlessly expanding Croquet Forest, so dark the trees seemed almost black.

★★★

Back at the base camp of the students from Laihiala Knight Runner Academy's knight department, near the entrance of Croquet Forest...

Now that the middle school upperclassmen had all completed their retreat, the high school knight runners reinforced the simple pickets set up at the perimeter of the camp in their silhouette knights, creating a defensive line.

Most of the monsters coming from the forest were only about a meter in size, with the largest being up to three meters. Their power level was completely different from a silhouette knight that was ten meters tall. The swarming monsters were easily swept away by single swings of a silhouette knight's sword. However, because silhouette knights were so much larger, they couldn't help but let some stragglers through. Because such stragglers were able to approach and push against the fence, students were still tasked with the defense alongside the silhouette knights to plug up the holes.

From the monsters' perspective, the silhouette knights were a threat, and they were hard to miss. Not wanting to clash with them head-on, at some point the flow of monsters started to split, weaving around the base camp. Because many of the middle school section's upperclassmen were wounded and their combat strength was stretched thin, this was a stroke of luck to the knight department students.

The sun passed its zenith and as it set in between the mountains, its crimson glow dyeing the sky red, the onslaught of monsters finally ended. The students initially maintained their vigilance even after the flow of monsters stopped, but soon enough they felt the danger had passed and released the tension in their bodies.

"Finally, there don't seem to be any more monsters..."

Stefania Serrati was bone-tired, and the sigh she let out showed it. In the end, she had safely led the other students all the way through this incident. When they regrouped in camp, the teachers were around to help, but they had decided that things would be less confusing if she continued acting as commander since she had done so from the beginning. Part of the reason she had accepted was because she was also the type to not be able to sit still.

"Kid, Addy...Ernie."

With their alert status winding down, Stefania went around the camp expressing her appreciation to the students who were now resting. In the

middle of this, she found some people she knew well, and she called out to them as she let out another sigh of relief.

“Ah, big sis...are you hurt? I heard you guys had it rough out there!” responded Addy.

Stefania shook her head. “As you can see, I’m fine. More importantly, I saw you all being so reckless out there.” Her expression was somewhat exasperated as she said that.

As they retreated to base camp, the upperclassmen’s strength had fallen quite a lot due to injury and exhaustion. In their state, it would have been difficult to defend against the monsters that had slipped past the silhouette knights, but they had managed to hold on thanks to Ernie and his friends buying time.

“You say that, but we were the only ones able to fight at that time,” Kid defended. “Being a little reckless is only natural.”

Stefania paused for a moment, but she countered by saying, “I’m pretty sure three people doing the work of an entire squadron is pushing it more than just ‘a little,’ but...well, whatever. More importantly...Ernie!”

Stefania approached Ernie, who was behind the other two, and wrapped him up in a huge hug. He didn’t even have the chance to resist, and as he reacted in surprise, Stefania nuzzled his soft and fluffy hair with great delight.

“Aaaaahhh, thiiis is so soooooothing! WIth you here, Ernie, I can still fight!”

Stefania... Ernie thought to say something, but then decided, *Oh fine, whatever. Things were really hard for her this time, so I guess I can put up with it as a favor. If I’m the only sacrifice needed for her to cheer up then I guess it’s a cheap price to pay.*

While Stefania did as she pleased, messing with his hair and poking his cheeks and the like, Ernie made sure to go with the flow, not putting up more of a fight than was necessary. From behind them, Addy seemed to writhe in dissatisfaction, but didn’t actually try to stop what was happening.

★★★

After Stefania spent some time enjoying Ernie like that, a voice came hesitantly from behind them.

“U-Ummm...student council president...”

Another student, who seemed to be here to retrieve Stefania, seemed more than a little creeped out by her actions and her wide grin. While she had just been commanding the upperclassmen with a dignified air, she was now attached to a first-year underclassman with a sloppy expression on her face. It was only natural for him to react that way.

“What is it?”

“We need to plan our next steps, so the teachers wanted me to get you...”

“I understand. Sorry, you three. Let’s talk again later. I need to go.”

While it was too late now for a multitude of things, Stefania didn’t seem to mind what had happened as she quickly slipped into student council president mode. Feeling somewhat astounded at that sight, the trio saw her off while waving goodbye.

Now then, Ernie thought, *it seems we’ve gotten through the danger for the foreseeable future, so I wonder what happens next?*

They had gotten through the attack by the swarm of monsters. However, Ernie could not bring himself to consider the matter settled. He looked back toward Croquet Forest. It was getting darker as the sun set, as if rejecting his observation.

Ernie did not know what was still lurking in its depths.

★★★

“So? Are we seriously not moving until tomorrow?”

After that, the teachers proposed several plans of action, and it seemed they spent a long time arguing about it. This was only natural, as none of them had access to the entire picture. By the time supper rolled around, they had decided to communicate their plans to everyone for the moment. Dinner was a combination of rations and a simple soup made from wild plants. While sipping on the soup, Ernie and the others reviewed their situation.

“Yes, we have a lot of wounded, but luckily none are fatal,” Ernie explained. “At worst, it’s some broken bones. More important are the number of students who are suffering from mana exhaustion. There are a lot of them, and it hurts to lose combatants, meager though they may be. Apparently the teachers decided that it’s too dangerous for us to force a march.”

“But isn’t it dangerous to be resting here too?” Addy asked.

“The horses become unable to function since they can’t see in the dark. It seems the teachers judged that rather than pushing everyone through their exhaustion and going for a dangerous carriage ride where we might be attacked, it was safer to remain here in camp where there’s light and the area is defensible. Also, it’s hard to imagine that another horde of monsters of the same size will come at us again.”

“I see...that’s pretty optimistic of them!” Addy responded once again.

Now it was Kid’s turn to speak. “Rather than optimistic, it’s more like since every option’s gonna be a gamble, they just picked the one that seems least dangerous, right? Even if something comes in the night, it’ll be easier for us to deal with it here since we’re defended by silhouette knights.”

What they could do right now was get enough rest so that they would be able to respond appropriately if danger were to come. In the end, they themselves were the only things they could rely on. After dinner, they somehow managed to rest even though they couldn’t quite rid themselves of their tension. Once dawn was upon them, they would be able to head to Jantunen. That was what gave them hope.

★★★

However, the teachers and students alike had failed to explore an avenue of thought. What was the reason all those monsters went berserk?

Similarly, they failed to notice just how desperate all the monsters coming their way seemed to be. It was as if the creatures were being chased by something, and were all headed west as fast as possible.

The group had their first chance to regret this failure in the dead of night, just after sunrise.

★★★

Dawn broke, and red sunlight was slowly creeping over the mountains. A student who was on last watch bit back the yawn associated with the sleepiness assaulting him. The surroundings were quiet. Since there were so many monsters in yesterday's great migration, there might not have been many left in Croquet Forest. Things were so quiet it was almost as if the forest were dead.

Suddenly, that quiet was broken. The sentries could hear a strange sound coming from the forest. It was the sound of trees snapping and falling. Another sound, as if something heavy was falling, repeated at even intervals. It didn't take long for the sentries to realize what it meant. Immediately, they rang the alarm bell with all their might.

"This is bad! It's a big one! A big one is coming!"

The sudden clangorous ringing of the bell roused everyone from their sleep, regardless of whether they were teacher or student. It was already tough for them to truly relax, so everyone got up and was able to act quickly. The high school knight runners, who had pushed aside their weariness to stay on standby this entire time, quickly jumped into their silhouette knights. They had been kept warmed up so they would be able to immediately reinforce the line at the forest's entrance.

Steadily, the sound of falling trees and footsteps that shook the ground got clearer. It was clear something extremely large was coming their way.

"Hey now, isn't whatever that is clearly bad news?"

It needn't have been said that everyone was feeling a clear sense of danger—more danger than they had ever felt before. In this mood, stretched taut with tension, everyone's gaze was drawn to the entrance of the forest.

Up until now, no monster larger than duel class had ever been found in Croquet Forest. It was because the forest only hosted small monsters that it had been chosen as the location for the field exercise. However, the footsteps that reverberated through the area told of something much, much bigger.

A large monster, something that shouldn't have existed in Croquet Forest. A sudden attack by a swarm of small monsters yesterday at noon. So numerous

that it might have contained all the monsters in the forest. If the invasion of the large monster was the cause...

Finally, trees near the entrance of the forest fell, and in the dim light of dawn, the group finally laid eyes on the monster. It had a body wrapped completely in a shell so spiky it was like a mound of needles. It was so large it made silhouette knights, humanity's strongest weapons, look like children's toys. They could have mistaken it for a small mountain. Its eyes, so surprisingly small compared to its gigantic body, glared contemptuously at the scene before it.

Everyone withered in the face of its imposing form, cowed. The behemoth—the gigantic monster that had breached the border the other day—was already almost at Jantunen.

★★★

A strange quiet settled over the camp. Neither the monster that appeared nor the humans in the camp made any noise; instead they simply faced off.

All the students from Laihiala were overpowered mentally by the sight of the behemoth's giant form, and became unable to move. Even elite knights of the past who had guarded the border couldn't help but be stupefied for a moment when they once encountered a behemoth. It would have been cruel to expect students in their teens to do better.

This period, in which everything seemed frozen, was broken when the behemoth moved. It was probably due to the difference in composure. After looking around the area, the behemoth opened its large mouth and let out a roar. At its level, rather than sound, the roar could more accurately be described as a shock wave made by oscillating the air. The thunderous noise let out by the behemoth and its absurd lung capacity made the ground shake and burst the nearby trees. The silhouette knights that had come forward to help defend against the monster were forced to back up, unable to withstand the pressure assaulting them. Even the students, who should have been pretty far away, had to ball up and cover their ears lest the shock wave rob them of consciousness.

The roar also broke the humans out of the shock that bound them. Once they started to move, they immediately accelerated to a pace that made the earlier

stillness seem like a lie. As if they had been repelled by something, everyone ran from the monster. However, it wasn't because they'd come back to their senses, but because their panic and fear were so great it overrode everything else and sent them into a frenzy. At this point, the teachers could not control their charges; all that was happening were people trying to put as much distance as they could between them and the behemoth.

Let us assume that running was indeed the best choice of action in this situation. However, the way they went about it was still bad. There was a limit on how far human legs could take them, and if they wanted to run farther, they should have chosen to do so in the carriages instead. The students were so ruled by fear, though, that such a thought never even occurred to them. They simply scattered, running every which way.

Just as they split up to run in all directions, explosions suddenly cut off their escape. No matter how afraid they were, nobody would run straight into an explosion. So, for a moment, the students stopped.

As if they had aimed for just such an opportunity, a figure appeared in front of them. "It's dangerous to scatter! Everyone, to the carriages!"

The ones who had launched Fireballs to stop the students from scattering were a group of students who had kept their calm, led by Ernie. Like a group of beaters on a hunt, they drew the attention of the scattered students and led them toward the gathering point at the carriages. Though the students were far from calm, they had regained enough composure to acknowledge words. Now, they made for the carriages as a unit in order to get away from the behemoth.

The middle school students weren't the only ones sent into a panic by the behemoth's intimidating presence, the high school knight runners were too. Not only that, but because in their case they had the extra strength of their silhouette knights, the threat of the behemoth was even more serious to them. The knight runners held too much power in their hands to flee recklessly, but at the same time, the enemy was far too powerful for them to combat.

"Don't stop! Move iiiiit!"

Driven into a corner, the knight runners had frozen in the face of this powerful enemy. But among them, Edgar was the first to start moving. Whether

they ran or fought, they couldn't afford to simply stand still in front of the behemoth. That would be suicide.

Seeing that the behemoth would finally start its charge, the knight runners hurriedly moved to evade. The giant beast's charge was so violent it had no equal, and anything, even a silhouette knight, would be unable to survive in decent shape if caught up in it. Shivers ran through the knight runners. Just how could they fight such a destructive monster? They were rapidly losing the will to fight.

However, among them, only one person saw that the middle schoolers and the carriages they were running to were right in the path of the behemoth. That person, Edgar, managed to resist the fear inside him and find the resolve to act.

"We will draw the behemoth's attention! Everyone, help me!"

"E-Edgar?! Do you really understand what you're saying?! That's a behemoth! It could kill us all with just one of its legs!"

"But at this rate, it will wipe out all our juniors there! No, that's not all...after the carriages, it will eventually attack Jantunen!"

Helvi, who had reacted emotionally, knew that. Even if they ran away now, they had nowhere to run to. She knew that they would just be allowing more casualties to happen. She gnashed her teeth so hard it seemed like her molars might break.

"So we...have no choice but to do it, huh...?!"

"We are knights. We have learned the ways of the sword to protect the people, and we ride silhouette knights to protect the country. If we run away here without doing anything, we will not achieve any of that!" With that, Edgar equipped his Earlcumber with his silhouette arms. HIs ether reactor was already going at full speed, and he fed mana into his weapons to activate them, causing the entire silhouette knight to glow faintly.

"I don't want to die for nothing either, but for now we need to do everything we can to distract the behemoth!"

"Aggh, there's no other choice then!"

Edgar also did not want the fleeting momentum he had built up for himself to wane. Earlcumber ran forward in the front of the pack, aiming for one of the behemoth's legs.

"Everyone, draw your staves! We'll retreat while drawing its attention with spell fire!" Edgar shouted, depressing a trigger on his controls.

Having received the will of its pilot, Earlcumber sent mana to its Arquebus-type silhouette arms. This long-handled, cylindrical staff-looking weapon developed a bright glow at its tip before it released a flash of electricity at the behemoth.

It didn't seem like the lightning attack had any effect. Part of that was due to how huge the behemoth was, but also because the lightning spread along its shell and ran into the ground, so it didn't reach any of the behemoth's internal organs.

Edgar and the three silhouette knights accompanying him all had different silhouette arms equipped, and they ran alongside the behemoth as they bombarded it with overspells. It was hard to say that any of them had much effect, but they still managed to draw the behemoth's attention toward them. Realizing it was being attacked, the behemoth turned its head to glare balefully at the silhouette knights who were even now launching magic at it.

"No way...it's not working at all?"

"It doesn't matter! Don't stop, we need to run! It's fine as long as we can buy some time!"

Realizing that they had the behemoth's attention, the knight runners immediately started to retreat, attempting to draw it away from the middle schoolers.

★★★

While the high schoolers were challenging the behemoth in their silhouette knights, the middle school students were desperately boarding the carriages as fast as they could.

Though each carriage set off as it reached its max occupancy, because there were so many people to load, only about half of them had been able to get

away at this point.

There really are so many people... Ernie thought tensely. *We still need time, but right now we have no choice but to rely on our seniors' efforts...*

Ernie was last in line among the students, and he was watching the heartbreaking fight between the behemoth and the silhouette knights. Not even overspells—spells with such powerful output that they were impossible for humans to cast themselves—could get past its extremely tough shell. There was no sign that it was damaged at all. Before such a large beast, even silhouette knights, which were the best technology humanity had to offer, were basically powerless. And a single human was capable of even less.

Ernie's grim expression only got deeper. From his point of view, the high school knight runners were at an overwhelming, no, hopeless disadvantage in their fight. After all, their attacks were doing nothing. They were currently leading the behemoth around because they were mainly focusing on evading, but considering how large the behemoth was, a single hit would render a silhouette knight inoperable. If the exhaustion of the knight runners were to build up—it was hard to imagine a good outcome.

I will make sure everyone gets away. So please, sirs...don't die! Ernie prayed.

★★★

If the behemoth were to charge with enough momentum, not even a silhouette knight's speed would guarantee it could get away. Because of that, every time the creature targeted someone, the knights concentrated fire on it from the opposite side, distracting it and buying time. Their attacks weren't damaging the monster at all, but just the fact that it was getting attacked seemed to be enough to irritate the behemoth.

"Ha ha ha! Come on you, big lug! Your huge body means nothing if you can't even attack!" Dietrich howled. Because he had previously been cowed by its gigantic form and frozen up, he felt a need to vocalize how superior his position was now. It was a method for him to boost his own morale. However, because their plan was going so well, the knight runners had actually let their guard down.

Could this thing just be a huge slowpoke, and not actually be that scary? they

had started to think. In actuality, if the behemoth were to connect with one of its charging attacks, it would quite easily completely destroy a silhouette knight, but it was currently being led around by the nose, which clouded the high schoolers' judgment.

Just like that, for the next while the silhouette knights did well in buying time. Suddenly, the behemoth, which had been chasing a mech that was running as it attacked, slowed down. Seeing this change in the behemoth, which had up until now been running haphazardly at them, the knight runners all felt extreme suspicion. The behemoth sucked in a large breath. Its lung capacity, which matched its large frame, allowed it to inhale an extraordinary amount of air.

Right afterward, a breath attack roared out of the monster's mouth, creating an intense tornado. This was a ranged attack using magic, so the knight runners, who had only seen the behemoth charge and thought it couldn't do anything else, weren't able to react to this sudden magic attack. The tornado traveled in a straight line, its wildly raging winds capturing any units that failed to get out of its way. These violent atmospheric eddies would not brook any resistance, sweeping all away with overwhelming pressure. The silhouette knights caught by it had their armor crushed and the crystal tissue supporting their bodies destroyed.

Silhouette knights, which were basically each a ten-meter-tall lump of metal, were easily flung into the air, only to smash into the ground at high speed. The impact from the fall destroyed limbs which couldn't withstand such force, and arms and legs were sent flying off in different directions. Because silhouette knights resembled humans so closely, seeing them scattered over an area like that would stay in the minds of onlookers.

"Eep! Urk—waaggh!"

Dietrich witnessed the sight at close range. He saw how the friends he had studied with in high school looked now with their silhouette knights so abruptly destroyed. All that could leave his mouth was a taut scream.

The next moment, the mech in front of Dietrich disappeared with the sound of something cutting through the air. For an instant, he couldn't understand what had happened, but the cause was immediately apparent once he shifted

his gaze a little.

The behemoth had landed a strike with its tail. Once Dietrich and the other silhouette knight had stopped moving, the behemoth's tail, backed up by plenty of centrifugal force, had smashed into the unit in front of him. There was no way for the mech to withstand this, and so it was broken and sent flying. Dietrich had survived only by a small stroke of luck, as he had been just a slight bit too far away. If he had been even a couple steps closer, then he would have been hit by the tail too and met the same fate.

In the blink of an eye, two units had been easily shattered, as if they were made out of clay. The knight runners, who had up until now been warming to the idea that they might be able to fight the behemoth somehow, now realized that everything they had assumed was wrong. The behemoth turned to face the remaining knight runners. Being shown the sight of silhouette knights so easily pulverized, they realized that they were its next targets.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

"Waaaaaaaaggghhhh!"

Two types of screams mixed together. The former was from Dietrich, who was screaming due to fear of the monster in front of him. The latter was Edgar, who was letting out a war cry to rouse himself and conquer his own fear.

Dammit! Edgar cursed internally, *Why did I let my guard down?! The behemoth is a division-class monster...I should have already known it wasn't something we would be able to handle so easily!*

Edgar couldn't forgive himself for momentarily letting his guard down, which from his point of view had caused the loss of his friends. His rage spurred him on much more than his fear stopped him.

"Everyone, avoid its front! Prioritize evasion over everything else! Just a little more...just hang on a little more!"

At any rate, since they were already battling the behemoth, they couldn't afford to show it their backs so carelessly, lest it kill them all. Edgar's voice, which had lost none of its vigor, roused the other knight runners to respond even though their voices were shaky with fear. They all started to desperately

dodge all the behemoth's attacks. At this point, they had no choice but to hang on until everyone else was out of danger.

★★★

Because of the sheer violence of the behemoth's magic, the high school knight runners were put into an extremely tight spot.

Ernie and the others had seen off the rest of the middle school students and had jumped onto the last carriage themselves. He was currently looking out of the back of the carriage, watching the fight as they gradually got farther and farther away. Because of the behemoth's earlier magic attack, things weren't looking good for the high schoolers. They had completely let the chance to run get away from them. It was unclear whether they would be able to get away safely now, even after Ernie and the others left. In the back of Ernie's mind, he was replaying the conversation he had with Edgar yesterday. All Ernie could do now was cheer Edgar on, even though he knew his voice wouldn't reach Edgar.

That was when a red shadow flitted across Ernie's peripheral vision. He quickly turned, and upon confirming the identity of the shadow his expression was colored with shock. The red shadow—it was the silhouette knight Guaire.

No way, Ernie thought as he turned back. He could see that the other units were still fighting the behemoth. In other words, Guaire had abandoned the other students and run off by himself. The moment he realized that, Ernie found himself jumping out of the carriage. This action was so sudden that the others had no chance to stop him. Instantly, his form disappeared into the forest, and they could no longer see him. Silhouette knights moved fast, so Ernie, without thinking of the consequences, had to shoot off like a bullet with all the speed he could muster to chase after Guaire.

★★★

Sunlight filtered through the trees, making for a bright forest as the red silhouette knight ran.

The forest around it was utterly quiet, and nothing else was near. However, the red unit ran with single-minded speed, as if something was chasing it. In truth, the red silhouette knight—Guaire—and its knight runner, Dietrich Künitz, had been completely driven into a corner. What spurred Dietrich to flee was

pure fear. The sight of the behemoth killing his school friends in their silhouette knights had stuck in his mind. Unable to even look back, Dietrich desperately drove Guaire on. Even though he wasn’t running with his own legs, the fear he felt accelerated his breathing and constricted his lungs.



All knight runners, including him, placed absolute trust in their machines. Of course, there were monsters that exceeded a silhouette knight's ability to fight alone, so no one thought of their machines as invincible. However, even with all that, an enemy that they were completely unable to affect that could in turn pulverize them so completely in one blow was far beyond the pale of what he was prepared for. As a result, Dietrich had fallen into a state of panic and absolute fear, and so he chose the path of survival no matter how it would shame him—even at the expense of his remaining friends.

Unfortunately, the goddess of fate would not let Dietrich run so easily.

Suddenly, Guaire slowed. Dietrich was anything but calm, but even so he was able to immediately think of the cause. He had been running full tilt on top of the fighting he'd been doing before that. Not only that, but he had been running in such a reckless and inefficient way, it was as if his daily training had had no effect at all. Of course what awaited him was a dry mana pool. He had run out of batteries, so to speak.

The fear of not being able to move assaulted Dietrich, but he could do nothing about the situation. He was forced to have Guaire stop and take a parked position so that he could recover the reserves in his mana pool. After confirming that he wasn't being pursued by the behemoth, at least for the moment, he breathed a small sigh of relief as he tried to calm down his rapid breathing.

Once he stopped, what struck him after he regained some measure of calm was an intense feeling of regret and guilt. Shaking his head, he tried to rid himself of those thoughts, but in this place and unable to move, the same thoughts bubbled up within Dietrich over and over, chasing him relentlessly.

That's right, I abandoned my friends and ran.

Letting the friends with whom you've fought side by side die is the most shameful thing you can do as a knight.

So...so what! If I stayed, I would have died for nothing! I just made the choice that would let me survive. There's nothing in the knight's code that tells you to die uselessly!

Dietrich was desperately denying what was nothing other than his own inner voice—his conscience that was laying accusation after accusation down upon him. His breathing, which had calmed down, was now elevated again. His hands tensed, clutching the controls in front of him so tightly they turned white. Dietrich's eyes were wide open, but he didn't notice the state of his hands as he produced a waterfall of sweat trying to argue with himself.

★★★

Dietrich, being tossed around by his own thoughts, suddenly heard something and came back to his senses. It was the sharp sound of compressed air being released. This transitioned into the sound of metal scraping together, and suddenly his field of view widened all at once. It was so sudden that Dietrich couldn't keep up.

The cockpit of a silhouette knight, located behind its torso armor, used compressed air pressure to open and close. This hatch had suddenly opened. Of course, Dietrich hadn't done such a thing; he had no reason to. But the only way to open the cockpit from the outside required a complex manipulation of levers, and this feature was only there in case some malfunction happened that prevented the hatch from being opened from the inside. Logically, that meant someone had opened it from outside.

As if to prove such a hypothesis, a figure jumped in from the outside. It was small, and had purplish-silver hair that dazzled in the light. Dietrich, still dazed, turned to face the figure. Meanwhile the figure, Ernesti, gave him a cool smile.

"I finally caught up with you, sir." Ernie's tone was casual, as if he'd come to deliver something Dietrich had forgotten. With his head tilted, the boy continued. "I'll get straight to the point. You ran from the battle, didn't you, sir?"

To Ernie, this question was just for confirmation, but when Dietrich heard it he twitched and shook. His junior in school had suddenly appeared, only to point words at him that stabbed him deep in his heart. This once again exacerbated his excited condition.

With a sharp breath, Dietrich started to defend himself. "Grk...agghh... Tha—dammit... Th-That's right! I ran, so what?! One more or fewer combatant

wouldn't have mattered there! So why do I have to stay just to die for nothing?! The knight's code doesn't demand that you throw away your life so cheaply!"

Frothy spittle flew from his mouth, but Dietrich didn't care as he repeated himself. It wasn't an answer to Ernie's question, but something he was trying to tell himself. In response to Dietrich's agitated manner, Ernie simply smiled quietly and nodded.

"Good."

That got Dietrich to pause. "What?"

The unexpected response had taken him by surprise, so he looked up. *Good?* Dietrich thought to himself. *Did I say anything that would make him at all happy?*

"If that's the case, I'll be able to borrow Guaire from you without worrying," Ernie said nonchalantly. Before Dietrich could understand the meaning of what he just heard, Ernie had drawn his Winchester. This was the last thing Dietrich saw before he lost consciousness.

★★★

After putting Dietrich to sleep with a single Air Bullet, Ernie nodded in satisfaction, sporting a somewhat relieved expression. There was a lot about Dietrich's circumstances he could empathize with, but in short: he was angry.

After collecting himself, Ernie gave the cockpit around him a once-over. While silhouette knights were ten-meter-tall giants, due to the skeletal structure and all the parts stuffed inside, the cockpit was small and cluttered. The most outstanding feature was the seat in the middle, from which extended two armrests that also contained a control yoke on either side. There were also stirrups under the seat, and knight runners were expected to control their machines by manipulating the yokes with either hand and the stirrups with their feet. While thinking back to what the textbook taught him about the functions of the cockpit, he went over the steps needed to pilot the machine in his head.

Next, he needed to move Dietrich's unconscious body. As Ernie unfastened the seat belt, he suddenly realized something.

“If I leave his body out in the forest unconscious, wouldn’t he get attacked and killed by a beast or something?”

It was true that he was angry at Dietrich, who had fled by himself, but there was no way he could bring himself to put Dietrich’s life in danger. After some deliberation, Ernie turned his eyes to the space behind the pilot seat. Normally, a silhouette knight’s cockpit was packed with survival equipment and supplies such as blankets, rations, and first aid kits. This was a precaution in case a knight runner were to ever get separated during a deployment and need to spend a few days alone. In most cases, these supplies would be stored behind the seat so that they wouldn’t get in the way.

“Well, it seems kind of like a waste, but this is the only available space.”

Ernie carelessly removed the supplies and tossed them outside. Then, after confirming there was enough space inside, he took Dietrich, who was still in his seat, and packed him back there instead. Dietrich ended up in a pose that might have been hard on a human, but Ernie knew he couldn’t afford to mind that.

After “packing away” Dietrich, Ernie once again turned back to the pilot’s seat. Unfortunately, the seat was sized for a high school student, so he wasn’t nearly large enough to sit in the seat and reach both the control yokes and stirrups at once. Of course, there was no such convenient function as an adjustable seat like on Earth.

However, Ernie had already expected this to be the case, so it wasn’t like he had come here without a plan. Slowly, he cut into the consoles that were on either side of the seat, destroying the outer shell. He was not taking his frustrations out on it. Instead, he pulled up some silver wiring—called silver nerves—from under the destroyed consoles that connected to the control yokes. He wrapped these wires around his Winchesters before sitting in the pilot seat and buckling himself in with the seat belt. His Winchesters were made with white mistoe, which was very conductive to mana. By connecting them directly to the silver nerves, Ernie had turned them into a simple input-output terminal.

“I’ve never had a chance to test this, so there’s no other choice but to make it work.”

The silver nerves transmitted the commands of the script along with mana. Normally, a silhouette knight's controls were tied to the yokes and stirrups, which were translated through the script. However, the magius engine that was a silhouette knight's control system was really just a massive script used to direct the mech's body. In other words, if taken to the extreme, it was possible to move the silhouette knight without using the physical controls as long as the user could manipulate the script.

Still, this method completely relied on the engine's script, so it was hard for the operator to get a feel for the controls if they needed to pilot in this way. That was why the yokes and stirrups existed: to take some of the burden off of the pilot and make controlling the unit easier. Using one's limbs to physically input controls and depress triggers was much easier to intuitively understand, and meanwhile the script would supply more detailed inputs using limited functions within it. This setup could be called a half-thought control scheme. By combining physical inputs with the magius engine, it was possible to balance both ease of control and freedom of movement, which is what resulted in the current control scheme of silhouette knights.

Ernie's problem when it came to controlling silhouette knights was first and foremost a physical one. It was near impossible for him to operate all the physical controls. So, he just had to take care of everything in the script. That would mean processing the massive script normally done through the magius engine with his own magius circuit—which was far from a sane idea, but Ernie's processing abilities were already basically inhuman. It wasn't a bad bet.

With a deep breath, Ernie calmed himself down. Then, he closed his eyes and concentrated.

Through his Winchesters that were connected to the silver nerves, he accessed the magius engine. Normally, knight runners would only answer queries made by the magius engine. It had not been expected for a knight runner to connect to the magius engine directly, but anticlimactically, it was easy to construct a bypass connection. Ernie submerged his consciousness into the unit, steadily reading and processing the script that had accumulated in the magius engine.

Ernie was now absorbed in analyzing the script. A magic circle had overlaid

reality in his eyes, deploying across his vision. In his mind, he reached out to trace the magic circle as he read its contents. The symbol-code and shape was different from what he was used to, but the feeling of the stream of information coming into him was nostalgic. Unwittingly, the corners of Ernie's mouth twisted upward into a smile.

"Now then...it's time to show my stuff as a professional programmer."

With lightning speed, Ernie began to dismantle the script's kernel. He started off by comparing the scripts he'd learned up until now with the scripts stored in the magius engine.

"Commence pattern analysis... Searching for similar scripts... Physical Boost, amplifier script..."

The scripts within the engine were mostly analogous to ones Ernie already knew, and were easily understood and memorized. From there, he extrapolated their meaning from their arrangement. The more he learned, the faster he understood the inner workings of the machine he was in.

"The biggest root is...the Physical Boost, I think? It's true that crystal tissue mimics the function of human muscle. So of course it would be treated as something similar for movement..."

Using the foundational script as a base, Ernie started to unravel and understand each other aspect of the system. The control sections for each part of the mech formed a delicately connected diagram. From Ernie's point of view, the air in front of him was already filled with magic circles.

"Control of crystal tissue movement... Map its location. Turn every part into a separate module and link them. Control output... So this is the ether reactor's input and output..."

Guaire, which had been on one knee in a parked position, trembled slightly. The tip of one of its fingers moved somewhat, and its crystal eyes that had until then not been able to focus now started to properly take in its surroundings.

"In order to move it, I need to...link the Physical Boost spell I've been using with the silhouette knight's movement script. I'll convert the movement parameters to match the silhouette knight, and start moving after reverting all

input-output controls to default settings...”

Mana created by the ether reactor, with script commands from the cockpit layered on top, was relayed through the silver nerves that ran throughout the unit’s body. The silhouette knight acted faithfully to the orders given to it by the script, expending mana stored in its crystal tissue to expand and contract said tissue. Slowly, the mech stood up, trembling like a newborn fawn.

“Movement parameter conversion complete. Starting movement... Adjusting variables for output control, mana pool is sufficient. Now then, for the first step...”

While forcibly maintaining balance with an awkward stance, Guaire started walking, swaying side to side as it took one step at a time. The way it moved was reminiscent of the walking dead, and it was just as slow.

“Movement disparity feedback...commencing optimization...”

Ernie reflected on the information he gained from actual movement to scan Guaire’s crystal tissue as he moved to find any unnecessary action. Then, he applied patch after patch to the script. Though vestiges of the original script remained, thanks to Ernie’s debugging efforts happening at the speed of thought, the script was being optimized to the limit in a short amount of time. Within the span of a few steps, Guaire’s movements had become so smooth they even looked graceful.

By then, half an hour had passed since Ernie had first accessed Guaire’s magius engine. This magic weapon, a silhouette knight—the crystallization of human intelligence—had completely come under Ernie’s control.

Obeying Ernie’s thoughts, Guaire moved freely. There was no delay because of needing to use a physical control device, and no excess to the code thanks to obfuscation of functions or anything like that. The machine moved as fast as its pilot thought; Ernie had realized complete direct control of a silhouette knight.

Nevertheless, this was an emergency. While Ernie was busy mastering Guaire's controls, the high school knight runners were fighting on the verge of death. There was no time to lose, so Ernie gave his commands to Guaire. Receiving its pilot's thoughts, Guaire dashed off at ferocious speeds, as if it was making up for lost time.

Still...

As Guaire ran, Ernie's expression changed from one of tension to a smile. What he was feeling at this time wasn't impatience or pressure. It was simple: Ernie was piloting a giant robot. This robot was moving as Ernie wished, and was running with great speed.

Ernie had had no time to think while he was chasing down Guaire, and while he was accessing and fiddling with its magius engine, his mind was filled with other things. Now though, he had actually started moving and had some time to himself. So, he had started to reflect calmly on the meaning of his actions.

It...feels wrong to be having so much fun, Ernie thought. However, he couldn't stop the emotion welling up within him.

"Ah... Aaahh—aaahhh! I'm finally...*finally* riding a robot! A robot! And it's running!"

The shaking that fed back into the pilot's seat with every pump of Guaire's legs matched with the scenery that was flying by at scary speeds across the holomonitor inside the cockpit. It wouldn't be going too far to say that that, along with the feeling of inertia Ernie was experiencing in the cockpit and everything else about his situation, brought him the utmost happiness. It was doubtful there was anyone who could stop him from making the smiling expression on his face, one that was full of absolute joy. Ernie had forgotten that what awaited him ahead was a battle against a gigantic monster without equal as he immersed himself in the joy of moving a silhouette knight.

Like that, with Ernie forgetting his original purpose with every step and Dietrich in the back passed out and foaming at the mouth, Guaire ran toward the battle at an abnormal speed.

Chapter 8: Decisive Battle: Emperor of Land

The number of trees steadily increased on these open plains until eventually, they were thick enough to be called a forest.

In the middle of the area was a stone-paved road that made a beeline east. It was the largest eastbound road in Fremmevilla, named the East Fremmevilla Highway. Out of all the country's roads, only the West Fremmevilla Highway that connected Konkaanen to Jantunen, and the East Fremmevilla Highway that led from Jantunen to the country's eastern border, were specially paved with stone. These roads had a long history, and they were paved to help ease the flow of supplies way back when the forts along the border were being built. Even during the present, they were a great help in transporting goods through the country, and were doing great work as arteries for the nation.

Normally the road would be lively with the carriages of merchants and escorting silhouette knights, but at the moment it was empty and gave off a deserted feeling. It might have been because of the rampage of so many monsters, or it could have been because of the rumor going around merchant circles of a large monster sighting.

A silence had settled along the road that made everything seem tense. Suddenly though, things got noisy.

It was the sound of hooves brought about by a caravan of dozens of carriages. They were the carriages full of students from Laihiala Knight Runner Academy that had escaped from Croquet Forest. Thanks to the desperate efforts of the high school knight runners to delay the behemoth, they had narrowly managed to escape from the clutches of the gigantic beast. When they had first started running, they had gone at maximum speed, but that had naturally exhausted the horses, so now they were moving at a slower pace than normal. Even so, they had already gotten about halfway to Jantunen.

Inside the carriages, the students were sitting, seemingly exhausted. Having gotten this far, there no longer seemed to be any monsters chasing after them. So, they had managed to calm down a fair bit as they escaped, but the worry

that had settled deep in their chests didn't seem like it would go away any time soon.

"I wonder if Ernie is all right...?"

In the midst of such a heavy atmosphere, Kid and Addy gazed out the rear of their carriage in the back of the line vacantly. When they had escaped Croquet Forest, Ernesti had jumped out of the carriage and bolted into the forest. It was so sudden they had had no time to stop him, and by the time they thought to chase after him, he had already disappeared from sight.

After a while, Kid said, "Hey, there *is* the possibility..." He had been sort of absentminded this entire time, and he had muttered that line in a subdued tone as if he'd just happened to think about it.

That caused Addy to tilt her head questioningly.

"Don't you think he went and stole a silhouette knight?"

Addy reflexively opened her mouth to say, "No way," but then she stopped herself and fell into thought. In the back of her mind, she could easily see that happening. Thinking with common sense, there should be no way that Ernie, who was not even in the knight runner department, could pilot a silhouette knight. However, he of all people might have learned on his own. It wouldn't have been strange if he actually had—and in fact, he was able to pilot one. That being the case, it wasn't hard to imagine that he would take that silhouette knight and charge right at the behemoth. In fact, if he was in a silhouette knight it could practically be guaranteed.

"Ahh..." Addy started. "Yeah, I can kinda...really see that happening. Ernie would definitely do it."

"Well, anyway, there's no need to worry. Worst comes to worst, he'd be able to get away with that speed of his."

Ernie could exhibit fearsome speed by using the spell he had personally invented and named: Aero Thrust. The twins couldn't think of anyone who could catch him when he could go faster than a wolf in an all-out sprint, or go at the same speed on land as a bird did in the sky. He would probably be able to get away even from such a giant monster as long as escaping was all he was

doing. Having run their imaginations that far, the twins looked at each other and grinned.

It was just at that time that Ernie had stolen Guaire, and exactly as they'd predicted he was heading straight for the behemoth. But, for better or for worse, they had no way of knowing that.

★★★

The teachers, who were riding in the carriage at the front of the line and looking back over the rest of the caravan, suddenly had their attention drawn to behind them.

From far ahead of the caravan, in the direction of their destination, something was raising a cloud of dust and coming their way. Before long came the accompanying sounds that were decidedly not horse hooves. The source of that was quickly apparent. It was a group of giants marching forth in neat and orderly lines—the giants being the standard model of silhouette knight adopted by the country, the Kaldatoah. No citizen of Fremmevilla would fail to recognize a Kaldatoah, and the meaning of their presence was likewise unmistakable.

After a moment spent in awe, one of the teachers shouted, "It's the guardian knight order from Jantunen!"

This shout quickly spread down the line of carriages. One by one, students' heads poked out of these carriages to confirm the rumors, and one by one, their faces lit up with joy and hope.

The marching expedition here consisted of a large main force with over ninety silhouette knights, more than two full battalions. Behind them were their supply corps and field maintenance unit. This represented most of Jantunen's defensive strength, which was the most that could be gathered less than a day after the messenger from Fort Balguerie had arrived.

Because Kaldatoahs were the nationally adopted standard mass-produced unit, none of them were really decorated or had any personality to them. However, through long years of use, maintenance, and polish, these units exhibited their own kind of impact. The national flag of Fremmevilla kingdom and the crest of Jantunen displayed on their shoulders showed their pride as the land's guardians.

The students from Laihiala now felt completely safe. No matter how large the monster behind them was, this army of guardian knights would destroy it. That was how much power and trust was placed in these mechs.

The knight order also felt relief when they found the carriages, though it was of a different sort. They had hurried to deploy as quickly as possible, but they had prepared themselves for the event that the students from Laihiala had already been entirely decimated. Now, from a quick glance, they could see that at least the majority of them had escaped safely. In addition, they had brought the knight runners information on the behemoth's location, among other essential knowledge.

"I see... So the knight runners from the high school are..."

They were the reason that the rest of the students from Laihiala were able to get away. Many of the knight runners in Jantunen's guardian knight order were graduates from Laihiala Knight Runner Academy, so they were greatly moved by the great display of knightly courage that their juniors had shown them. At the same time, they renewed their own resolve.

"Please be at ease. We will make sure to kill that monster, both to protect this country and to make it so the sacrifices already made won't be meaningless."

The knights of Jantunen's guardian knight order carved this determination deep in their hearts and set off to Croquet Forest with renewed vigor. Meanwhile, it had only been half a day since the students from Laihiala first encountered that giant monster. With a fight against a behemoth in front of them, tensions rose in the knight order with each step.

★★★

The red silhouette knight, Guaire, ran through the dense forest with surprising speed. It was going around twice as fast as when it had run away.

Because he was controlling the mech directly through the script, Ernie was in a state where he was totally directly connected to the magius engine—and its entire system. His thoughts directly changed the unit's script, allowing him to command the unit with no input lag at all. By its nature, though, a silhouette knight's crystal tissue had a much higher output and reaction speed than a living thing's natural muscles, so the crystal tissue had always been capable of

carrying out orders without delay. As a result, Guaire was able to move and react at nearly double the speed of a normal silhouette knight.

As Guaire ran forward in perfect form, the sound of rumbling earth became audible from ahead. In turn, the sounds of raging winds also started to be mixed in, along with explosions and what sounded like lightning strikes. Expecting to come upon the behemoth within another few minutes, Ernie's mouth subconsciously curved into a smile. As the honest joy he was feeling welled up within him, unable to be suppressed, he charged into what would be his first battle in a silhouette knight.

★★★

The heavy sound of clashing metal reverberated through the area as a giant flew through the air. The mech, having bounced off after a failed charge on the behemoth, had so much momentum it didn't stop at flying; it rolled along the ground after it landed too. There was no time for the others to check on the knight runner's safety, but given how its torso was squashed with its arms bent out of place, it was hard to imagine the knight runner was okay.

"Dammit!"

After the middle school students had escaped, the high school knight runners continued fighting. It wasn't what they wanted to do, but they were unable to get away themselves. The fight had dragged on, and while the knight runners could not hide the exhaustion they were feeling, the behemoth lived up to its title as a walking fortress; it didn't seem to have slowed down at all. That, on top of the original overwhelming difference in power, meant that the gap between the two sides was widening every moment that passed.

In the face of force that not even a border guard knight order could withstand, the high school units fell one by one, and now there were only three still standing.

Edgar and Earlcumber were distracted for a moment by the ally that was sent flying, and the behemoth took advantage of that to attack him with its tail. Instinctually, Edgar knew he couldn't dodge the tail and its whiplike movement, so he had Earlcumber back up as far as possible while swinging the shield in its left hand, succeeding in escaping from danger by parrying that one attack. It

was a stunt only made possible by a combination of Earlcumber's abilities and the skill of Edgar, who was at the top of the high school in skill. Still, the tip of the tail grazed his mech. Just that was enough to rip the shield out of Earlcumber's hand and send it flying. While bracing against the shock wave so that he wouldn't inadvertently stagger, Edgar created some distance from the behemoth.

It took my shield! This is bad; we're steadily getting cornered! Edgar reacted internally.

Still, Earlcumber was still in working order. But while it was fine, the other two silhouette knights were nearing their limits both in terms of remaining mana pool and damage sustained. They were at the point where they could shut down at any moment. Edgar couldn't get rid of the image of the worst-case scenario in his head. *How much longer can we hold out? At worst, we could be wiped out in less than five minutes...*

Entirely uncaring of their state, the behemoth, which was still full of vigor and strength, unleashed another breath tornado. It had done this so many times already the knight runners had lost count, and this time as well the attack's violent whirling winds swept over a wide area, forcing the silhouette knights to dodge by a great distance or be caught in the cyclone.

"Please...Trandorquess...mooooove!!!"

Helvi, realizing that the behemoth had aimed the tornado at her, screamed while trying to get out of the way. All the damage and exhaustion she'd accumulated up to this point made it so that while Trandorquess managed to escape a direct hit by squeezing out the last of its power, the violent air currents still damaged its frame greatly.

"Helviiiii! Dammit, come on, make it in time!!!"

While shouting, Edgar fired his Arquebus-type silhouette arms in an attempt to distract the behemoth, which had started to charge toward the fallen Trandorquess. It was a faint hope, and his desperate attacks proved futile as they did nothing but bounce off the monster's shell, and the behemoth's attention stayed on the prey in front of it. The behemoth ran, picking up speed, quickly approaching Trandorquess as it tried desperately to stand up.

And, at the exact moment when Helvi had prepared herself to be the next victim, and even Edgar had given up...

“Aha ha ha ha ha ha! Mwa ha ha ha ha ha! There it is—I fooounnd yoouuu!”

Guaire made its reappearance on the battlefield accompanied by mad laughter. As it cleared the forest, the first thing it saw was a fallen silhouette knight and a behemoth about to run it over.

Guaire instantly put on even more speed, becoming something like a red bullet as it rushed at the behemoth’s left eye. As Guaire ran, it drew its sword. Slashing with it had never even crossed the mind of Guaire’s pilot; he chose to stab instead. This attack would concentrate all its momentum into a single point, and at one of the few weak spots of the monster hailed as a moving fortress: its eye.

While displaying speed that no normal silhouette knight could ever hope to reach, Guaire’s movements were the picture of precision.

But before Guaire’s sword reached its target, the behemoth noticed the red shadow. And as soon as it noticed, the behemoth reflexively turned its head. Guaire was already close enough that the creature couldn’t avoid the blow, and Guaire’s sword accurately homed in on the behemoth’s eye. Stabbing forward as if drawn to the eye, the sword clashed with the monster’s carapace.

It was a mere coincidence.

The shell that was there to protect the behemoth’s eye had a small crack in it. It was from a certain knight, who had exchanged his life to put it there, half a month ago.

If it had taken the blow from the side, the behemoth’s shell might have turned the thrust aside. However, because it had turned its head, the sword happened to hit the crack head-on—and pierced through.

Guaire had thrust at twice the speed of a normal silhouette knight, putting all its weight as a lump of metal behind the strike. While emitting a screeching sound of metal scraping together and spreading sparks everywhere, the sword pierced into the behemoth’s eye. Ernie thought that this killer attack that had concentrated all its power into a single point would allow him to drive in the

entire blade, but suddenly his sword snapped in half with a loud noise.

This all-or-nothing attack had indeed robbed the behemoth of one of its eyes, but it was unable to pierce through the skull behind it, and the sword was unable to withstand the clash between it and the monster's cranium, so it fractured.

Realizing that the sword had broken, Ernie immediately let go of the weapon and jumped through the air, avoiding a collision. The behemoth had kept its charging momentum, and its gigantic body grazed Guaire as it passed. Flying high through the air while flipping gracefully, the red mech landed safely on both feet. From there, it continued on to do two backflips to create some distance from the behemoth before finally stopping.

The behemoth let out a roar louder and angrier than it had ever done before, so loud it seemed it could crush the very earth. Blood fountained freely from its ruined left eye, and something it had never felt before was running through it. Behemoths boasted the highest defensive abilities of any monster by a wide margin, and it was rare for one to be hurt by an attack. Because of that, the impact of the loss of half its vision and the sharp pain accompanying that loss was immeasurable.

The behemoth's remaining eye grew bloodshot as it ran amok trying to find the hated enemy that had stolen its left eye. Everything else in the area had fallen out of the behemoth's notice. It only wanted one thing: to chase after the red humanoid form that its left eye had last seen.

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Regardless of the fact that they were still in battle, the high school knight runners stood agape, flabbergasted by the sight that they had just seen. Their minds had yet to catch up with the situation. Guaire, who was thought to have fled, had come back running at unthinkable speed, pierced through the shell of the behemoth—which had proved an impossible feat for everyone else so far—and destroyed one of its eyes.

Now, the giant beast let out a furious roar as it faced the red silhouette knight. From any perspective, it looked as if Guaire was the only thing in its sights. It seemed to have completely forgotten about Edgar and the rest.

“That’s right, Helvi!”

The behemoth being distracted was a stroke of luck, and Earlcumber rushed to its fallen friend. Having surpassed its operational limits due to damage from its fall, it seemed a miracle that Trandorquess was still able to walk at all. Even so, Edgar breathed a sigh of relief seeing that Helvi was still alive.

Then, sensing a severe tremor, Edgar had Earlcumber brace itself. When he looked, he saw the behemoth attacking Guaire with an angry howl. Regardless of its lost eye, the behemoth was moving even more fiercely than before. However, Guaire’s movements outpaced it. Edgar doubted his own eyes. The Guaire he knew had never shown it could move like that.

It was truly doubtful whether Dietrich was piloting it, but Edgar didn’t have the leeway to care about that. If Guaire was able to survive the behemoth’s furious attacks, then he would have the time to save his heavily wounded friends.

Sorry, Dee. Please hold on for just a little bit! Edgar prayed in his heart.

Turning his back on the red silhouette knight that was dancing with a humongous beast, the other knight runners withdrew from the battlefield while supporting each other.

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Edgar did not know that it was Ernesti who was piloting Guaire. And he didn’t know the situation inside the cockpit either. While watching the giant form of the behemoth rush at him from the holomonitor inside Guaire, Ernie felt nothing but delight and joy.

“That’s a behemoth. A monster. And this is battle. This is...battle! With! A! Silhouette! Knight!”

His face bloomed into a savage smile.

His surprise attack had borne fruit. However, the wounded giant beast had only gotten even more thirsty for Ernie’s blood as it charged at him, even as it was increasingly covered in its own. With its imposing form, which looked like nothing but a mountain, and a desire to kill so strong it seemed to bend the space around it, it charged at Guaire with lethal power. Even a hardened

veteran knight would feel fear at such a sight, but the only thing Ernie felt was wild joy on the edge of insanity.

“Now, come on...comeoncomeoncomeon...”

Piloting a giant robot to fight a huge enemy...was there any mecha otaku who wouldn’t dream of that? Who wouldn’t wish for that? Being presented with the opportunity to live his dream, Ernie did not wither or shy away. Not even a little bit. He was, in fact, filled with perfect happiness. His joy ran through his veins while he moved as it dictated. Though, it only had one order...

“Now, come on! Forward! Advance!”

Having lowered its stance a little, Guaire kicked off the ground with enough force to gouge out earth and send clods flying. Of course, it ran toward the behemoth.

In the blink of an eye, both parties closed in on each other. In an instant, given their relative speeds, Guaire suddenly disappeared from the behemoth’s sight. Having lost one eye, the behemoth could not figure out what had happened, so it simply continued to rush at where Guaire used to be. Of all things, Guaire had jumped right before they clashed, getting high enough to kick off of the behemoth’s supremely spiky shell to clear it. The behemoth, with its field of view narrowed thanks to its missing eye, could not perceive that. While pulling off an agile midair flip, Ernie ran his already seething mind as fast as he could.

“Ahh...aahhh! Simply amazing! Its entire body is covered by that shell, with almost no gaps. Truly, an invincible set of armor! It’s so hard that it’s impossible to cut through with just a little run-up, and even magic is useless. So, it’s time for rule number one for destroying a giant weapon!”

While spouting nonsense and rubbish in his state of maximum excitement, Ernie smoothly touched down, killing the impact from landing with Guaire’s legs before drawing the mech’s spare sword.

“The staples for a giant’s weak points are its legs, and then its joints. So this is the first place I should aim for!”

With a nimble run-up, Guaire stabbed its sword with fearsome accuracy through a gap in the monster’s carapace, right into the knee joint of one of its

back legs. The sharp stab had definitely made its way into the meat, but judging from the feedback, the beast's body was much harder than Ernie had expected. Realizing that, Ernie immediately withdrew the sword and retreated some distance with Guaire.

"Hmm...it barely went in at all! Leaving the shell aside...could it be that its entire body is actually hard?"

Not even Ernie could have predicted this, but the effect of a behemoth's superior Physical Burst stretched even to its internals, giving them formidable toughness. Considering that a behemoth was large enough to require magic to strengthen its legs just so they could support its massive weight, this was only natural. Still, fighting against it was nothing but a nightmare.

Having suddenly taken damage to a hind leg, the behemoth's rage grew even further as it turned around. Just its movement from spinning threatened to crush Guaire in the event the mech was even grazed. Taking some distance, Ernie once again darted out of the behemoth's field of view. Meanwhile, he thought back to the attack he'd just made.

"True, I wasn't able to destroy its limbs. But...it *was* still more effective than attacking the shell..."

Ernie let out a happy giggle, which was for some reason adorable. The only adorable thing about him in this moment, actually. He had found a way to break the deadlock. It wouldn't be easy, but that just showed how annoyingly tough the enemy was.

"This seems like it'll become a war of attrition... Well, that's fine with me. I don't hate that sort of thing."

Even when faced with a giant beast burning with extreme fury, Ernie laughed joyfully and easily as he charged forth in his red silhouette knight. The fight had just begun.

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Mm...ughh...? Eventually, *he* regained consciousness.

The first thing he saw was a dimly lit space. As his hazy consciousness cleared up and things came into focus, the first thing that jumped out at him was the

pain in his body because of the unnatural position he was in.

“Grk...th-this is...”

With a groan, he somehow fixed the pose he was in using what space he had in his cramped area. Then, a unique pressure assaulted him, pushing him into the wall he was facing.

He mumbled a scream as best he could, as the g-forces finally cleared up his mind completely. The pressure earlier was actually inertia—a familiar sensation that he regularly felt while inside a silhouette knight. However, the inertia that he just experienced was much more intense than anything he’d felt in his memory. Still, that meant that he was in the cockpit of a silhouette knight. With that thought, he—Dietrich Künitz—finally remembered the last thing he’d seen. *That’s right,* he thought, *my small junior appeared in front of me, and then—*

In a panic, he forced himself into a new position, poking his head up from behind the pilot’s seat. When he did, the first thing he saw was the giant form of the behemoth taking up pretty much the entirety of the holomonitor.

“MnmogyaaaAAAAAAAAHHHHH?!”

Reflexively, he let out a scream like a strangled chicken, but who could blame him for that? After all, the moment he’d regained consciousness, he was confronted with a giant monster’s face right in front of his eyes. With that sudden loud scream from behind his seat, not even Ernie could escape being surprised and making a piloting mistake.

“Oh, crap! Whoop! Hup!”

Guaire’s stance had faltered, but Ernie forcefully corrected it, just barely avoiding having Guaire crash into the charging behemoth’s left side. Instead, Guaire jumped back, created some distance, and succeeded in regrouping before the behemoth turned around. Meanwhile, Ernie glanced back behind him.

“Uhhh, good morning, sir. We’re currently in a do-or-die situation, so if possible I’d like you to remain quiet.”

The content of his words ran completely counter to his calm tone, and Dietrich did not shut his mouth. What Ernie had said was quite rude, but all that

was in Dietrich's mind was that he should have run away, yet now he was right back in the thick of things.

"Y-You! How could you do this?! Are you insane?! No...in the first place, why are you fighting?!"

Following that, he continued to fire questions in rapid succession, but he was forced to quiet down once Guaire began running again.

The behemoth's evil countenance filled the holomonitor. It was radiating malevolence even more than before Dietrich ran, and that aura didn't tell of an intent to merely sweep away anyone obstructing it. Instead, the giant beast was thrashing around, seething with anger and a real intent to kill. Guaire moved at a speed that even he, as its original knight runner, had never experienced, dodging the humongous attacking beast by a hair's breadth. This situation, in which he would normally have died several times over, made Dietrich want to toss aside shame and reputation and just cry. However, while he desperately ground his teeth in an attempt to hold his own voice down, the whites of his eyes were nearly showing; he was just barely resisting fainting again. After all, if he were to do something uncalled for again and Ernie were to make a mistake, they could immediately die.

What the hell...is this?! Dietrich thought, panicking. *What's going on?! Is this my punishment for running away alone before?*

He had no way of knowing, but all the other silhouette knights had either been destroyed or withdrawn, so Guaire was the only one here. In a bout of irony, this was the exact opposite situation from when he had first run away. Furthermore, as long as Ernie was controlling the unit and fighting, he could not run away again.

I'm fated to never be able to run... he lamented. *What is he even planning to do with me that he needed to take me with him? Is he telling me to witness this fight to the end? Me, who threw away my friends?!*

Dietrich could never even have imagined that he had been brought along just because Ernie couldn't bear to leave him in the woods. Meanwhile, the giant knight and giant beast continued to fight, heedless of his bewilderment.

Because of the behemoth's incredible strength, each attack smashed the

ground, and its destructive tornado breaths mowed through many trees, sending them flying. Each one of these would have been fatal if they even grazed Guaire, but it—and the small boy who was its pilot—joyfully weaved through all of it, and even managed to make counterattacks aimed at the giant beast's limbs.

When he had first woken up, Dietrich's fear had caused him to lose his cool, but eventually he settled down and regained some calm. Along with that came a big question, different from all the ones he'd had before. It was hard to believe, but despite being mainly on the defense, Guaire and the boy piloting it were managing to resist the giant beast. It was precisely because Dietrich was Guaire's original knight runner that he knew how hard to believe all this was. Guaire as a unit didn't boast such high performance. All the training units owned by Laihiala Knight Runner Academy were originally secondhand models from the previous generation. That was clear from the fact that none of the other high schoolers' silhouette knights could rival the behemoth.

As for what was different...it was of course, the knight runner. The current pilot was a small-statured first-year middle schooler that sometimes popped up in the knight runner department. Even Dietrich knew him. Normally, it would have been unbelievable that such a small boy had such piloting skills. However, he was staring that fact right in the face as Ernie actually fought the giant beast evenly.

He's amazing... was Dietrich's honest impression. *No, that doesn't cut it. He's clearly strange! But I... In order for us to survive, there's no other choice but to have him continue fighting!*

Though for a while he had sunken into the depths of despair, Dietrich started to feel hope after seeing the scene in front of him. At the same time, he felt a vivid yearning to have the same heart as the young boy in front of him, as he himself had been stricken and crushed by his own weakness.

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To Dietrich, it looked like Ernie and Guaire were fighting safely, but actually they didn't have that much leeway. They were gradually being pressured by two big problems.

One was Guaire's remaining mana pool. Normally, a silhouette knight could battle at full power for around an hour. More than that, and it wouldn't be able to resupply mana fast enough, causing it to be unable to manifest all its power. Guaire had at this point been fighting for around two hours. This was, of course, twice its normal operational limit. On top of that, it had been maneuvering at great speeds this entire time and was still going.

One of the reasons for this was that Ernie was able to control the silhouette knight very precisely thanks to his complete understanding of its systems. Thanks to his optimization of the script, he had minimized the silhouette knight's running cost. He had also further curtailed mana usage by limiting the use of crystal tissue that wasn't actively needed. On top of that, Ernie had made sure not to be constantly operating Guaire at full blast. He had finely adjusted his movements so that he could take small, minute breathers every once in a while. Ever since he had committed to a war of attrition, he had started to conserve his resources as much as possible, though it looked like he was fighting hard.

Still, this strategy wasn't perfect. At this point, Guaire's mana pool was at best maybe half full. If Ernie were to continue fighting at this pace, he could at best fight for another two hours.

The second reason was the wear on Guaire's weapon.

As a result of attacking the behemoth over the span of two hours, Guaire's sword was chipped and on the verge of falling apart. It was already hard to actually deal damage, but now attacks that had barely worked before no longer did anything. In terms of weapons, Guaire still had its silhouette arms, but the one it had equipped—Shotel—wasn't suited for a concentrated attack on one point, so it wasn't worth using in this situation.

At one point, Ernie considered trying to form an overspell himself, but as one might expect, it would have been near impossible to weave a spell while piloting a silhouette knight, let alone a tactical-class spell. So, he gave up on that. Ernie's will to fight hadn't waned at all, but he also couldn't think of a way to overcome his lack of attack options.

If I knew it would turn out like this, I'd have come back so packed with swords

I'd look like a hedgehog.

Even with that childish thought, Ernie did not change his strategy. He couldn't. He had no other choice but to focus on dodging with Guaire until he found some method to win.

Dietrich had also noticed that while they were fighting, Ernie started to counterattack less and less frequently. It wasn't a bad idea to focus on evasion if simple survival was the only goal, but then they'd eventually lose in a match of stamina. If the plan was to eventually withdraw, then it would most likely be necessary to attack the behemoth's legs while opportunities still presented themselves to shave off as much of its mobility as possible. On top of that, with Ernesti's skills it should have easily been possible to retaliate. Even so, for a while now he had let several opportunities for that go.

Why won't you retaliate...?! Dietrich shouted in his mind. *If you just keep running like this it'll eventually catch up with us!*

Unable to do anything but watch, his impatience and anxiousness continued to intensify. Silhouette knights were not weapons that were able to fight indefinitely. He, as a knight runner, knew that very well. That was why he was so irritated, and why he waited for a lull to present itself so he could pose a question.

"H-Hey, Ernesti...you haven't been counterattacking for a while now. Is there some sort of problem?!"

While feeling a little surprised at Dietrich's sudden question since he'd been quiet up until now, Ernie started to explain their current situation.

"The behemoth is too tough, so my sword's all worn out already. At this point, attacking with it won't do anything."

Dietrich looked down at the sword in question, displayed in the corner of the holomonitor. Ernie was right, it was heavily chipped and completely dull. *Gnrrr*, Dietrich groaned to himself.

We need...we need a weapon of some sort... He wracked his brain as hard as he could. *Getting killed after coming this far wouldn't be funny!*

He desperately looked for anything that could become a weapon through the

holomonitor. Ernie was the one in control of Guaire, but there was still something Dietrich could do. Finally, he had actively returned to the fight. Though he himself hadn't noticed, something had changed greatly inside of him. Unexpectedly, his efforts produced great fruit. Ernie had also been scoping out the surroundings while he fought, but he had most of his attention on avoiding the behemoth's attacks, so he simply wasn't able to pay too much attention. That was why Dietrich had noticed *that* before Ernie did. The moment he found it, he completely forgot about the situation they were in and shouted.

"There's a fallen silhouette knight! Pick up its weapon!"

For a single instant, Ernie shifted his gaze to the area pointed out to him, and he found a high schooler's fallen silhouette knight. Immediately picking up on Dietrich's intentions, Ernie had Guaire accelerate while dodging the behemoth's latest attack. With a stance so low it was like Guaire was scraping the ground, the red silhouette knight ran at top speed. The crash of the downed silhouette knight had plowed a furrow in the ground, and Guaire maintained its low stance until it grabbed and drew the downed unit's sword. Because the knight runners in the high school department mostly attacked using silhouette arms, the sword was basically new. The bold, fearless smile returned to Ernie's face.

"Thank you very much, sir. This was the one problem I couldn't do anything about."

"Y-You don't need to thank me. With this, you can fight the behemoth again, right?!"

Ernie immediately turned to face the behemoth again, and once again he took stock of the situation. The behemoth's legs had sustained a countless number of nicks and gashes, some of which were still bleeding. That blood showed that the behemoth's damage was not light.

"Now then, we have less than half our starting mana left. If we don't at least manage to take out one leg, it doesn't seem like we'll be able to get away."

Taking a stance with the new sword, Guaire resumed its attacks. Thanks to the behemoth's prided size and build, it was impossible for it to pull off fine or detailed moves. As things currently stood, Guaire had made precision and

speed its weapons, so the matchup was abysmal for the monster.

With its seemingly infinite stamina, the behemoth single-mindedly thrashed around, but none of its attacks landed. On the other hand, each one of Guaire's attacks was able to leave a wound, and the damage to the behemoth's legs was getting increasingly impossible to ignore. Every little bit helped in this case, and with so many cuts piled up the effects had compounded into something great. Bleeding from its missing eye and all four of its legs, even the behemoth, a monster hailed as a moving fortress, started to slow down.

Then, once again, Dietrich was the first to notice it.

Hearing a cry of astonishment come from behind, Ernie quickly looked around. Behind him were a large number of silhouette knights. There was no way he could mistake them, even with just a glance. They were Kaldatoahs, silhouette knights synonymous with the kingdom of Fremmevilla itself. They had deployed so as to surround Guaire and the behemoth. Confirming their numbers and the flags they were flying, Ernie immediately divined their identities.

"Kaldatoahs?!" Dietrich yelped. "Ah, those...those flags...they're Jantunen's guardian knight order! I see, so they finally came to rescue us!"

So this is where they appear...it was a little faster than I expected. I thought I would've met up with the seniors who retreated again first.

Ernie quickly pondered what to do next. Guaire had enough mana left to fight, but it was still less than thirty percent. Truly, there wasn't much leeway. Now that the knight order was here, there was no need to buy time, so the "correct" answer was to meekly let them take over. With their numbers, they would easily be able to make up for the firepower Guaire lacked while alone. Now, instead of buying time, they could finally look to defeat this huge beast.

Meanwhile, the gigantic beast paid no attention at all to what was happening around it. It was still persistently locked on to Guaire. Easily sidestepping its attacks, Ernie got the behemoth to put its back to the robots of the knight order. Once it did, Ernie had Guaire slip into the blind spot created by its missing left eye and joined up with the knight order's formation. Once they confirmed that Guaire had joined them, the knight order units all opened up

with their silhouette arms at once.

The massive beast was still only paying attention to the red humanoid it hated so much though. At last, the battle had reached its final stage.

Rewinding time back to a little before the battle moved on to its final stage...

Several mounted horses were running, not on the East Fremmevilla Highway with its stone pavement, but next to the road in the forest. These riders were scouts belonging to Jantunen's guardian knight order. Their goal was to range ahead of the main force, scout out Croquet Forest, and confirm the location and status of their target, the behemoth.

After a while running beside the road like that, the density of the trees had increased substantially. They had entered the forest in earnest now. The place known as Croquet Forest could be reached in half a day with a carriage going along the road, but the trip was even shorter for single riders on horses. Because the behemoth had gotten closer to the road since its run-in with the students, the recon squad didn't need much time to finish their scouting run and return to the main force.

"I see, so it's already basically under our noses... I'm just glad that the behemoth won't get onto the road."

After listening to the scout's report, the captain of Jantunen's guardian knight order, Phillip Halhaagen, groaned. He had been prepared to have to fight the behemoth on the road, but it seemed he wouldn't have to. After hearing the other report from the scout, his expression grew more grim, though.

"So we've managed to take three of the student units into custody, but one is still locked in combat..."

The silhouette knights that had been able to withdraw thanks to Guaire's intervention had been taken into protective custody by the knight order when they made it out to the road. Out of the three, Trandorquess and one other mech had suffered great damage and wear to the point that they were barely operational, so they had been moved to the back of the formation to receive repairs. The remaining unit, Earlcumber, was relatively undamaged, so it had been added to the line after some light repairs.

The remaining unit was Guaire. The red silhouette knight spotted by the scouts was engaging in battle with a speed much higher than the average silhouette knight, so they were troubled as to how to report such an anomaly. In the end, they simply relayed the giant beast's location and the fact that

Guaire was fighting it.

Using that information, Phillip and Gottfried planned a strategy, which was then communicated throughout the knight order. Their plan went thusly: First, they would split into company-sized groups of nine units to surround their target. According to the information they'd gleaned from students who had actually fought, the students had judged close combat to be dangerous, so they had attacked in waves with their silhouette arms from afar, aiming to deal what little damage they could.

The knights knew the behemoth would retaliate using tackles or its breath attack, and they were never expecting to kill it while taking no casualties. At worst, they planned to use whichever squad it targeted as bait to stall it while the rest brought it down—the knights of the order marched into the forest literally ready to die.

The huge beast's roar shook the trees.

While the members of the knight order were deploying to surround it, the massive beast writhed around, spinning in a circle while thrashing about, so it basically stayed in the same place. The knight runners found such actions somewhat strange, but once they discovered the reason for it, they all became lost for words. What they saw was a red silhouette knight running around at speeds that were utterly unbelievable as the behemoth persistently chased it, letting out rage-filled roars as it bled from one eye.

"Wh-What the hell is this..."

The massive beast's attacks, every one of which could bury a silhouette knight in one hit, were being trifled with by the red unit—Guaire—using pure speed. It was doubtful if even the most skilled pilot in the knight order, their captain, could pull off such a feat. The knight runners couldn't stop themselves from voicing their wonder. The reason the giant beast hadn't been moving was because it had been fixated on the red unit, and they understood that now. Because it was so focused on the enemy in front of it, the behemoth hadn't realized what situation it was in.

And that created the perfect opportunity for them.

Suddenly, the red unit noticed the presence of the knight order and stopped.

The next moment, it led the behemoth so that the giant beast turned its back to the knight order, before slipping past the side of the behemoth and running to join up with the other silhouette knights. Instantly understanding the red unit's intentions, Phillip gave his order to his army.

"I thank you, red knight! Don't let this chance go! Everyone, ready your Culverins!" Phillip raised his sword high as he shouted his order.

Having received the command loud and clear, the Kaldatoahs took a stance with their Culverin-type silhouette arms. The plan was to volley fire while having the monster surrounded. They were trying to bury it under sheer weight of fire.

Without dropping its tremendous speed, the red unit reached the knight order's line and proceeded to weave its way through to the back. As if they were switching out, Phillip stepped forward and brought down his sword.

"All units, fire!"

As if they had been waiting for the order their whole lives, the silhouette knights shot their Culverins at the behemoth as one. Leaving behind a shrill sound, many lines of red streaked through the air at the gigantic beast the size of a small mountain in the center of the circle.

Suddenly, countless lances of fire struck the behemoth, which had been utterly focused on chasing Guaire. These lances of fire, created by overspells, raised pillars of flame and heat that swallowed up even the behemoth's massive frame, dyeing that part of the forest red. The flames were so great and forceful that they completely obscured the monster, to the point that there was no way to get a read on its state. Even so, the knight order did not let up as they continued to shoot their lances of fire.

Guaire, which had weaved its way through the knight order and taken position behind the army, was resting now to recover its mana pool. Having been through a fierce battle, the unit was exhausted, and the sound of its ether reactor running at full tilt was piercing.

"We did it! We really did it! How...how do you like that, you damn monster! This is the power of our guardian knight order! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

Though he couldn't help but scrunch up his face in distaste as Dietrich laughed madly from behind the seat, Ernie nevertheless remained vigilant as he scanned the hellscape in front of his eyes. Lances of fire were still being shot into the blaze, growing the inferno that was threatening to burn everything to a crisp. With that much firepower, not even the behemoth with all its lauded toughness should be able to get off without a scratch.

But I bet it won't go down so easily; there's no way it ends here... Ernesti's thoughts were the trigger—or most likely not, but suddenly the space that was filled with fire changed. The blaze that had been burning brightly and emitting so much noise until then started to form a swirl. It wasn't just the fire either. Actually, the surrounding atmosphere had started running amok and whirling about, taking the fire with it. This quickly resulted in a blazing tornado. The members of the knight order showed caution and wariness at this clearly unusual event, but they still didn't let up on their attack.

Eventually, the fiery tornado started to change how it moved. After a beat, it turned into a massively long fire serpent, wriggling its head toward the attacking knight order.

There was no need to wonder: it was the result of the behemoth's tornado breath. Said monster probably hadn't intended for this to happen, but its counterattack had incorporated the fire to become even more of a threat than it already was as it assaulted the combatants of the knight order.

"Wha...what is that?!"

The wriggling flame snake licked at the knight order as it spread the fire they had originally launched over a great area. The knight order had been unleashing their spells from some distance away, and the behemoth's tornado breath did not have enough strength to be fatal at that range. However, the knight runners were shaken and their formation crumbled; they had known about the breath attack, but never expected it to be used from inside those flames.

Because a portion of the firing line faltered, the attacks lessened. The behemoth must have detected this change, as it charged out of the fire while repelling the flames with its shell. The monster was glowing red in places from having been in a crucible hot enough to melt iron, and it was plain that it had

taken a large amount of damage. The wounds inflicted to its legs by Guaire had been charred by the heat, and all in all it should have been heavily wounded.

In actuality, the behemoth's movements had clearly dulled, but it had still lived up to all the legends about its durability. The giant beast's charge retained more than enough power to trample over the silhouette knights that were still trying to regroup. The behemoth bulldozed straight into the middle of the regrouping company. The fact that they had been arranged in ranks, which dulled the response of the knight order, was their ruin. The units in the path of the huge beast were flung away, while the fallen units were mercilessly crushed into scrap underfoot.

Several silhouette knights tried to intercept the monster. Their swords were able to shave away at its shell, which had become brittle due to the heat it had been exposed to, but they still weren't able to reach the behemoth's internals and were swept away by its tail and ruthlessly crushed. No matter how wounded it was, the gap between the giant beast and silhouette knights in close combat was still hopelessly large. An entire company was decimated while the rest of the knight order could only watch.

Though they had been prepared for losses, that didn't mean the members of the knight order would fire their silhouette arms knowing they would hit their allies. Because of that, the barrage of fire gradually became more sporadic. But in exchange, their trump card showed itself.

"Companies two, four, and eight...prepare the 'hammers!'"

Phillip's captain unit, Swordwort, waved its blade as his order carried across the battlefield. The knight runners were prepared to suffer casualties, and now that the monster had stopped due to being in close combat, their chance had come to reveal their trump card.

Several silhouette knights ran with giant weapons in hand, pincering the behemoth from the left and right. The weapons in question needed four units each to carry and were called hardcrust bunkers—in short, they were giant metal stakes.

However, as their name implied, these siege hammers hid enough destructive power within them to be able to easily punch through tough castle walls. They

had been prepared as the perfect weapon to use as a trump card against a monster famed for being a walking fortress.

These siege hammers definitely had enough power to use as decisive weapons, but they also had big downsides to them when trying to use them as weapons. Of course they were heavy, for one. After all, the weapon was made to convert weight to destructive force. Because of that, four silhouette knights were needed to operate it, and because of its size, its maneuverability was at rock bottom. In order to hit a monster with it, it was necessary to stop that monster from moving, and that was why they had sent in these trump cards while the behemoth was preoccupied in close combat with the other company of knight runners.

The knight runners of the order already knew of the weapon's demerits. The company currently in combat with the behemoth was no exception. So, they refused to give any ground even in the face of destruction. In fact, they actually moved to engage the behemoth as much as possible, sticking to it in an attempt to immobilize it.

The Kaldatoahs carrying the siege weapons saw all this play out in front of them. The knight runners in their cockpits gripped their control yokes hard enough to elicit creaking sounds as they manipulated their stirrups in their impatience to draw out every last bit of speed from their machines. The knight runners had certainly been prepared for losses, but that didn't prevent their anger at watching their friends get trampled over by a monster. The squad carrying the siege weapons shouted a war cry while running as fast as they could to avoid wasting their comrades' sacrifice.

Along with the roar of the fierce airflow generated by their machines' intake/exhaust mechanism, the Kaldatoahs ran forth at maximum speed. The giant beast was steadily coming closer, and the first siege weapon arrived at the behemoth looking like it had just entered the shadow of a mountain. However, this weapon wasn't the type of thing that could take precise aim. Taking advantage of their built-up momentum, the silhouette knights ran for the largest target on the behemoth, its flank, before ramming the weapon into it.

The destructive force borne from the weight of something needing four silhouette knights to carry it was, in a single word, tremendous. Though its

toughness had fallen due to being roasted in flames, the behemoth's shell was still very hard. And yet, the siege weapon had easily punched through it.

Instantly, the behemoth's body trembled as if it was in the middle of an earthquake. After a beat, it let out another howl filled with even more pain than when its eye had been gouged out, which spread through the area. This howl, which had been raised to the sky, also shook the earth as an immense amount of blood gushed from the venting wound ripped open by the siege weapon stabbing into its flank.

"All right! The hardcrust bunkers work! Now's our chance, keep it going! Finish it!"

A cheer rose from the combatants of the knight order. The siege weapons were hard to use, but now the knight runners knew that their power was more than enough to be effective against division-class monsters. There were still two more squads carrying the siege weapons, and they were both about to reach the massive beast as well. It was still moaning in agony, and showed no signs of trying to evade the siege weapons. The remaining two squads were aiming for its head and the opposite flank. If they hit, then not even a walking fortress of a monster could survive. Most of the knights of the order were now sure of their victory, and the siege weapon squads ran forward while carrying the hopes of the entire army on them as they closed the final bit of distance.

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Suddenly, the behemoth that had been expressing its anguish and agony looked down. Not even Ernie could divine the meaning of this move, let alone the knight runners of the order, though they were all suspicious. This did not escape the notice of the squads carrying the siege weapons.

Of all things, the behemoth then unleashed a breath attack at full power straight down. The violent winds, being aimed at the ground right under it, gouged through the earth in their frenzy, the compressed atmosphere throwing rocks everywhere in the tight space it was contained in as the attack exploded. There was no chance for the squad carrying the siege weapon aiming for the head to dodge when the attack was so close. They were hit by flying rocks and caught up in the explosion, and thus were destroyed.

Unbelievably, the behemoth used the force generated by the explosion, tornado, and resulting shock wave to stand up. The knight runners of the order, who had all been maintaining the cordon around it, were staring at their holomonitors aghast. The behemoth's giant body, reaching over eighty feet long, sported weight that beggared belief. And yet, it had managed to lift its front legs entirely off the ground. This situation was so unexpected that no one could respond immediately.

"Oh...crap! It's dangerous, get out of there!"

Phillip hadn't needed to shout that. The team that had been aiming for the beast's other flank had attempted to evade in their confusion at the sudden development. However, due to the fact that they had been running full-tilt with such a heavy object, they weren't able to abruptly change direction, and though the units gouged out the ground in their attempt to stop, their momentum wouldn't let them.

The behemoth's massive body, urged on by gravity, fell toward them. The destructive force brought about by the monster's weight was so great the siege weapons couldn't even compare. The moment it fell, it caused a small earthquake. And the ground that its body slammed into caved in as boulders were flung around the vicinity and clouds of dust and dirt billowed up, obscuring the monster.

The siege weapon team had been unable to run, and of course they hadn't stood a chance. Even the siege weapon, which was basically a big lump of metal, had been bent out of shape. Meanwhile, the silhouette knights that had been carrying it were no longer recognizable as such.

The attack was so grand that not even the behemoth who had performed it got away unscathed. The bleeding of its pierced flank intensified, and its shell had cracked in places. This couldn't be seen from the outside, but several of its innards had been damaged by the impact, which had gotten through its reinforced defenses. At this point, the behemoth was on its last legs.

Still, the damage to the knight order was even more severe. Including the company that it had first attacked, forty percent of their forces had been completely annihilated while another twenty percent had been damaged

significantly by flying rocks. Most importantly, they had lost their trump cards, so the attack power of their army had greatly fallen. On top of that, seeing the coup de grâce they'd all placed their hopes on being neutralized had delivered a great blow to their morale. The members of the knight order were now twice as nervous as before.

The Culverins of the remaining Kaldatoahs started to clatter as the hands holding them trembled. The movements of the knight runners inside had been unintentionally transferred to their machines. Both the giant beast's power and presence were slowly eating away at their wills.

Dietrich silently trembled as he watched the exchange of attack and defense between the behemoth and the other knight runners from inside Guaire. The monster had managed to best the guardian knight order's best attack, which they had sacrificed comrades to make connect. He couldn't help but wonder if it was even possible to kill this monster. The will to fight, which had swelled within him, came crashing down. In reality, the behemoth had also taken grievous damage, but he was already shaken by the fact that the power he'd believed in hadn't worked, so he lacked the calm necessary to notice that. What brought the trembling Dietrich back down to reality was the intense rage he felt from the muttering coming from the person in the seat in front of him.

There was a quiet pause. "I will never forgive it..."

Dietrich could only see Ernesti's silver hair from his position. However, he could easily feel the unusual aura he was giving off.

"How dare it destroy robots *right in front of me?*"

"Huh?!"

"The only thing allowed to destroy a robot is...another robot..."

"Whaaat?!"

While muttering things that Dietrich couldn't understand at all, Ernie had Guaire stand. He was smiling faintly, but the extraordinarily strong will shining in his blue eyes changed the air around him into that of an incarnation of carnage. As if responding to his rage, Guaire's intake/exhaust mechanism gave an impressive snarl. The mana thus supplied spread to the crystal tissue

throughout its body, filling its armored form with power.

Its current mana pool was at over fifty percent capacity, the sword in its hands was usable, and the machine was basically undamaged.

The red knight took a step forward. Having become an embodiment of destruction, Ernie made to once again return to the battlefield. Along with the protracted, sad cries of the passenger who was unwillingly involved in this action, the red silhouette knight Guaire ran forth toward the giant beast.

★★★

The behemoth slowly crawled out of the dense cloud of dust and dirt. At this point, it was covered in wounds, but the fact that it could still move was a testament to its hardiness. It was as if the division-class monster's strength was bottomless.

Judging calmly, it might have been possible to notice that this was close to being its last struggle. However, for the people of the knight order who were already overwhelmed mentally, the mere fact that the behemoth was still moving caused them to lose all will to fight. Though they responded by firing their Culverins, there was no way the unfocused attacks would be effective. They were unable to even break through the monster's shell, which was in tatters at this point. Not only that, but the cordon that the knight order had formed to surround the behemoth was pushed back by its movements and was on the verge of breaking.

Phillip, the captain, felt the danger of the situation and had been actively shouting encouragement for a while now. However, it wasn't that easy to recover morale that had just been lost. His impatience and anxiousness grew steadily. In that situation, a vivid red wind burst through the crumbling encirclement.

Amid a bunch of Kaldatoahs left in their base metal colors, the red silhouette knight stood out greatly. No one had the time to stop it as it made a beeline toward the behemoth.

"Hey!
It'simpossibleohcrapthat'sbadnoyoucan'tdoittheknightorderpeopleareherenowa

The pilot of Guaire, Ernie, was completely unconcerned with how the knight order was doing. The same went for Dietrich and his screaming, which at this point had reached the territory of being completely unintelligible. They basically didn't exist to him. His deep blue eyes were focused completely on the behemoth.

Putting the knight order behind it, Guaire ran straight at the behemoth. The behemoth may have been covered in wounds, but as soon as it saw the red humanoid that had remained in its memory, it once again raised a roar. Paying no mind to how heavily it was bleeding or how much of its shell was destroyed, it forced itself to move.

In a flash, the two closed in on each other.

As one might have expected, Guaire had the advantage thanks to its excellent speed. On top of that, the behemoth's shell was much more compromised compared to the beginning of the fight, so its prided defense was only a shade of its original strength. The red unit became as a gale, using slashes with the might of its speed behind them to cut into the behemoth. The trajectory of one of these swipes dug accurately into one of the cracks on the behemoth's shell, creating a stiff sound and some sparks as pieces of shell were sent flying.

"It looks like it's at its limit if regular slashes are working!"

Guaire made an about face as it tried to stop itself, legs sliding along the ground. Immediately, it got back to dancing around the behemoth. It moved, concentrating on evasion, before turning to the attack. At this point, the roles between attacker and attacked were reversed.

The sight greatly affected the mentally overpowered knight runners. From their perspective, Guaire was being piloted by a student from Laihiala Knight Runner Academy. A mere student, far younger than the knight runners, hadn't lost their will to fight in the face of such a fearsome and large monster. In fact, said student was resolutely dueling it. At first glance, it might have seemed a foolhardy act, but that was exactly why the sight of it said more to the knight runners' hearts than thousands of words ever could.

"All squads, reform the cordon! Fix your lines! We're resuming the attack!"

The knight order members felt shame over the fact that they'd been

overwhelmed by the giant beast's might, and that made them stir and regroup even more energetically. Having regained their momentum, the army quickly fixed its formation, surrounding the behemoth. Each company made their own movements and commenced supporting fire, making sure not to hit or interfere with the movements of the red unit that was fighting at close quarters with the behemoth.

The red unit's sword split apart the monster's shell as spears of flame exploded and forced the behemoth to keep still. The giant beast's powerful attacks were sealed that way, and now its large frame was just a huge target.

In a single swoop, the conditions of battle tilted to one side, and now it was the behemoth's turn to be cornered. At the same time, the knight order combatants' morale rose as Guaire ran around freely. Eventually, the gigantic beast's body reached its limit. Its shell had started to fail all over the place in a chain reaction, and the blood it was shedding was so copious it had turned the ground underneath muddy. At this point, it was clear to everyone the massive beast had no more means to resist its fate.

However, the last page of this battle was suddenly flipped in a place no one had expected.

Unexpectedly, Ernesti and Dietrich felt a falling sensation, as if they'd sunk into something. Guaire, which had been taking evasive action, tried to turn around. But because it had lost power in one leg as it tried to brace against its momentum, it ended up falling over spectacularly. The momentum it could not completely nullify had it tossing end over end as Guaire rolled along the ground. Guaire had been nearly untouched all this time, but now its armor was warped and pieces had been peeled off and sent flying.

"What—is—going—oooonnn?!"

In a panic, Ernie sent orders to Guaire, making it slam at the ground during their tumble and forcing itself upright. Guaire then assumed a kneeling position, somehow securing a stable pose.

"We haven't been hit by the behemoth. Why...where did we take damage...?"

Though this situation was completely unexpected, Ernie smoothly started to take stock of the machine's status. Thanks to their tumble on the ground, the

silhouette knight's armor had been damaged, but it was far from being fatal. Ernie immediately tried to make Guaire stand, but the response of its legs was abnormally dull, and it once again sank to its knee.

Ernie had Guaire turn its head to look down at its legs, and saw that each of its leg joints were creaking and screaming, and crystal tissue fragments were falling out of gaps in the armor.

Seeing that, Ernie finally understood what had happened. They hadn't been hit at all. Ernie's style of Full Control—the result of his improvising to directly interface with Guaire's magius engine—was able to produce much more freedom of movement than the traditional control scheme, as well as provide for more precise control. But on the flip side, the extremely mobile style of combat he had demanded from Guaire placed a great burden on the machine, and it had been unable to withstand this burden.

Furthermore, because it had been fighting far longer than it was expected for a normal silhouette knight to be fighting, said burden had compounded even more. And the legs, in which most of this burden was concentrated, had reached their limits and had started to disintegrate. A living thing would have avoided getting to this point through the being's sense of pain. However, a silhouette knight was a machine, and it had no function to detect this abnormality. And so, there had been no way to know of any exceeded limits or destruction of parts until it was too late.

Ernie's brow became deeply furrowed. The reason he and Guaire had enjoyed such an advantageous position until now had been because of their high mobility. Now that Guaire's legs had broken down and their mobility had effectively died, it could be said that they were unable to fight. The only choice left to Ernie was to abandon the mech and escape.

On top of that, he had no time to worry over this decision. The behemoth had already begun its charge toward the red unit it hated so much, focusing on Guaire just as it had been doing ever since the silhouette knight rejoined the fray.

The knight runners of the order bathed it in Culverin fire in an attempt to save the red unit that had been forced to stop and kneel. But that wasn't enough to

halt the giant beast. The behemoth's remaining right eye was bloodshot with rage as it let a cry of resentment leave its mouth. Heedless of its cracked shell and its bleeding wounds, the monster charged forth in an attempt to pulverize everything in its path. Its speed had clearly deteriorated, but its attack was a death sentence now that Guaire couldn't move.

What unexpected timing, Ernie thought sadly. *It's truly regrettable, but I need to make my escape.*

With his abilities, as long as he abandoned the machine, then he could get out of the way of the massive beast's charge.

Yes, I *could...but only me.*

He could escape. However, behind him was a panicking Dietrich who wouldn't be able to pull off the same feat. Undoing his seat belt and standing up, Ernie glared at the behemoth through the holomonitor. He had no time left now, and the giant beast's assault would surely trample straight over Guaire. Instantly, his brain spun up to full speed.

I wouldn't be able to sleep well if I were to abandon both Guaire and my senior here...but saving him won't be easy.

He continued to search through all possibilities. What Ernesti was capable of, what Dietrich was capable of, and what Guaire was capable of.

There is...a way. But it's a gamble. There'll only be one chance. The ante is my life... But, well...dying together with a robot wouldn't be too *bad.*

And here, the mecha otaku had reached his final form. With no hesitation whatsoever, Ernie made the most extreme and insane choice. In other words, he had decided to resist as far as his life would allow.

"Sir, can you hear me?"

Ernie's tone was so calm it seemed out of place. It was unclear whether his voice reached Dietrich, who was still behind the pilot seat. The high schooler had fallen into despair from the danger that was in front of his eyes, and he was now mumbling something continuously, which sounded like a strangled cry. He seemed to be far from in control of himself.

Ernie’s voice didn’t change. Though now, there was a strange bit of spirit infused with it which caused Dietrich to start and tremble.

Without even checking on how Dietrich was doing, Ernie pulled out his Winchesters along with the silver nerves attached to them, bringing them forward so far they hit the holomonitor. That left an empty seat.

“I-It’s all over! What will me taking the controls even accomplish at this p—”

“I don’t care about that. If you don’t want to die then sit down now please.”

Dietrich responded to the phrase, “if you don’t want to die.” The situation was extreme, but he still crawled forward into the pilot’s seat.

“D-Dammit!!! So what do I do?! What *can* I do?!”

“I’m only going to say this once, so listen well. First...”

Though a portion of the silver nerves had been pulled out along with the Winchesters, several were still connected to the control yokes. Piloting using the standard controls was still possible. Confirming that Dietrich had taken the controls, Ernie let go of Guaire in his Magius Circuit.

The behemoth was already right in front of them. It was wounded and on its last legs, but the impact of its frame was still overwhelming. It filled their vision. Ernie took a deep breath, looked straight at the enemy that filled the holomonitor, and started to concentrate.

Then, he put his greatest strength, his incredible processing power that could even control a silhouette knight, to full use in constructing a massive script with fearsome speed. The script was even bigger than one for an overspell—something normally only used by silhouette knights.

Having trained from a young age, he had far more mana than normal people. However, that was only on a human scale, and it was still not enough to cast an overspell. His processing ability could construct the script, but he still wouldn’t be able to put it to use himself. However, he was standing inside an available mana source: Guaire.

A silhouette knight couldn’t construct magic at will. And Ernie could not cast an overspell on his own. The two together, however, would be able to make up

for each other's weak points, allowing Ernesti to employ an unprecedented strategy.

"~~~.....! ~.....? .....!!!!!!"

Without being aware of it, Dietrich started to scream something. Though he was stiff with fear, he still believed in the small boy in front of him and moved.

Meanwhile, Ernie single-mindedly kept calculating. He needed to construct a bigger spell, one as strong as possible to protect them.

The behemoth's face, which stuck out and looked like a rock on its own, came toward Guaire in an attempt to smash the unit. It was so close it was possible to see its rugged exterior.

From there, everything was settled in a single moment.

A bullet of compressed air formed between Guaire's arms, which were outstretched as if to embrace the behemoth. It was an Air Bullet spell, only gigantified and enhanced to the limit. However, it didn't fire. Ernie was actually aiming to use it as an airbag. Meaning it was actually an expanded, overspell version of the magic he often used to cushion himself during high-speed movement: Air Suspension.

The giant beast clashed with the constructed wall of atmosphere. The already compressed air was compressed even further thanks to this. Although its power was reduced by this shield, a violent force still assaulted Guaire. Because of this, its armor warped and fragments of crystal were scattered through the air.

"Now! Jump backwaaaarrddd!!!" Ernie's eyes snapped open as he shouted.

Dietrich responded to that shout reflexively and not consciously, kicking the stirrups into a jump. Guaire's legs were so damaged that it had trouble even walking, but it still faithfully used what little crystal tissue it had left to follow its orders, squeezing out its last bit of functionality.

Just as the behemoth was about to push through the wall of atmosphere and slam into Guaire's body, the mech jumped backward as hard as it could. With that, the crystal tissue in its legs broke completely, but their purpose had already been served.

“Not yet! Endure it! Hard Skin!”

Ernie’s “plan” wasn’t over yet. Next, he cast a hardening spell on Guaire’s outer skin. At basically the same time, the behemoth’s head finally slammed into Guaire.

The impact had been lessened, mitigated by the wall of atmosphere, but even that combined with the hardening spell still wasn’t able to completely take the bite out of the behemoth’s charge, and the silhouette knight’s torso armor instantly caved in, sending the armor around it flying. The holomonitor in front of the pilot’s seat shattered, crushed, fracturing the scene displayed in front of them as Ernie gulped.

“To think that all this...still wasn’t enough!”

With all his desperate efforts broken through, for a moment Ernie thought of giving up. However, a small amount of luck shined upon him at the last moment. The training units employed by Laihiala Knight Runner Academy were, thanks to their stated goal, equipped with especially thick torso armor. The hardening spell Ernie had cast on it had done its job, and though it was now greatly warped, it had completely stopped the behemoth’s charge and protected its pilots.

★★★

Everyone had been prepared for the red unit to meet its end, but Guaire still retained its basic shape, and with its arms stretched wide, looked like it was trying to grasp the behemoth’s head. Had the behemoth felt insulted or something when it saw that the silhouette knight hadn’t broken after enduring its charge? It continued on, turning the tackle into something of a push.

“If we survived...”

Then next came the chance for a counterattack.

Ernie interrupted a part of the control yoke’s command, taking back control of a part of Guaire. He was only going to move the unit’s right arm. The arm rose, and then started to punch the behemoth’s head. No matter how weakened the monster’s defenses had become, they hadn’t softened to the point where they could be destroyed by a fist, even a metal one. However, the fist did not strike

at the outer shell, but the empty left eye socket.

The half-broken sword from before still rested in that socket. Ernie had Guaire grab it. What he did next ignored all consequences, using all the crystal tissue he could while pumping all the mana left in Guaire's pool into the action. Ernie had removed all safety limiters, used all the mana left in the machine, and even added in his own processing power to construct the biggest spell he could.

"Checkmate."

Along with that whispered line came a lightning strike larger than any other in world history. It passed through Guaire's arm, through the sword it held, and directly into the behemoth's head.

The behemoth, as a living being, had a brain. The lightning passed through the eye socket, through the optical nerve and blood, and directly into the brain. This tremendous flow of electricity overran the behemoth's brain, mercilessly burning through its internal structure and destroying it. With the brain, the command center of all the monster's vital functions, destroyed, not even a beast of the behemoth's size would be able to survive.

Finally, the behemoth was dead.

The excess electricity continued on to burn through the behemoth's nerves, causing the corpse to twitch and convulse for a moment, making it look like the monster was thrashing wildly. That movement ended up throwing Guaire, who had been holding on to the monster's head, through the air and onto the ground. Guaire's mana pool was completely spent, and it was unable to reinforce its own structure. So the impact from hitting the ground and rolling caused the silhouette knight to break apart, destroying it.

Meanwhile, the massive beast slowly sank to the ground.

It was the end of that horrid monster which had been taking full advantage of its overwhelming power. This ending, at once heroic and anticlimactic, had everyone lost for words. Eventually, they realized that the monster would never again move, and gradually the knight runners of the order started to raise a cheer. From there, it wasn't long until it became a full blown cry of victory.

★★★

“As expected, it was getting really dicey by the end there. We could have been turned into mincemeat.”

Guaire was in a sorry state. Of course all its limbs had been torn off, since the spell to reinforce the joints had stopped. Also due to that, the machine’s inner skeleton had come apart. Everything around the cockpit had been crushed, not to mention the warping throughout the entire machine. Not one armor plate in the entire unit was intact, and only patches of the red paint remained. The cockpit violently shook on the way down, but Ernie deployed Air Suspension with his own mana to get through that unscathed. The recoil still pushed Dietrich into the seat, and he was almost crushed by the force of it, but it was better than becoming mincemeat.

Even though everything he’d done had been like a sacrifice play, Ernie had survived. He let out a deep breath in relief, but the next moment his expression clouded.

“Awwwwwww...Guaire’s in pieces...”

Without the slightest thought for Dietrich, who had fainted with the whites of his eyes showing, Ernie shook his head, filled with irrelevant regret.

“Ah, but I can’t afford to stay sad. I’ll make sure to repair you, Guaire, so wait for me!”

Filling himself with the resolve to follow through on his once again irrelevant decision, Ernie made to leave the half-destroyed cockpit.

Chapter 9: After the Fight

A clamorous noise like dead trees snapping rang through the air at even intervals. The source of the noise was the gigantic carcass of the behemoth, which looked like a small mountain.

After it died, it stopped supplying the mana to feed its Physical Boost spell. So, its over eighty-meter long body was unable to withstand its massive weight and it all came crashing down. Its shell, which had become cracked all over during the battle, crumbled, while the entire corpse gradually shrunk in height thanks to its bones snapping one after the other. Its lower torso was especially affected, having been almost completely crushed under its own weight.

Still surrounding the giant beast, the people of Jantunen's guardian knight order shook the ground with their victory cry. With their Culverin-type silhouette arms, which resembled spears, raised high into the air, they celebrated their victory over the massive beast.

The knight order's losses were great. However, it was because they'd lost so much that they sang of their victory, as if to offer it up to the departed.

★★★

Three silhouette knights stepped away from the knight order people, who wouldn't stop cheering. Among all the Kaldatoahs brought by the knight order, these three units alone were of a different model, and stood out.

One was the captain's unit, Phillip's exclusive silhouette knight Swordwort. Compared to the Kaldatoah, which prized practicality the most, its appearance was extravagant. It stood out even more among the men because of the additional outer armor in the form of a surcoat it had.

Beside him walked his vice-captain, Gottfried, in his Kaldiaria. It was based off of a normal Kaldatoah, but was built much stockier and sturdier.

Behind them walked a training silhouette knight from Laihiala Knight Runner Academy, Earlcumber. Ensconced in pure white armor, it was at once rustic and dignified, displaying a different functional beauty from a Kaldatoah.

They passed by the behemoth's corpse, still lying on the ground and collapsing in on itself, to approach something that lay beyond. As they did, they could see pieces of red metal tossed about.

What was scattered throughout the area were the remains of the silhouette knight Guaire.

Phillip was in the lead, and the first thing that jumped into his eyes was Guaire's arm. Because it had been destroyed starting from the skeletal frame, the part was now in a shape that would have made it hard to imagine its original form. While looking at it out of the corner of their eyes, the group continued silently. Eventually, they reached their destination: the torso section, which had been separated from the limbs and the head. Parts of its armor had been peeled off, and the crystal tissue on the inside had been turned to dust. The chest's skeletal structure had been crushed, causing the entire thing to become warped. Furthermore, its thick and sturdy frontal armor had been twisted, attesting to the stupendous force that had assaulted it.

I had thought that maybe... But from the looks of this, the knight runner is... I suppose I shouldn't hold out hope...

Though they didn't put it into words, everyone there felt much the same. They had dared to hold the slightest hope, but given the state of the torso and the incredible force it must have been attacked with, they couldn't imagine that the knight runner inside had survived.

Philip and Gottfried silently took in the remains of the fallen silhouette knight through their holomonitors—the red knight from Laihiala Knight Runner Academy's high school who had fought until the end to protect its juniors from the behemoth. It had stood in front of the knight runners of the order, who had all been overwhelmed by the behemoth's attack, faced the giant beast like a raging fire, and managed to take the monster down with it. Phillip wondered what the knight runner piloting the unit in front of him was like. The pilot should have been a student. Since that was the case, the possibilities for his or her future should have been immense. The pilot had incredible skills, enough to threaten a behemoth, a high-minded attitude that led them to put others before his or her life, and a tenacious will that allowed the pilot to bounce back in a disadvantageous situation. Each of these qualities would have made for an

ideal knight. Though he had never exchanged words with the pilot, he nevertheless gave a silent prayer for the fallen hero who had stood so resolutely against the massive beast’s attack.

Of the three silhouette knights, Earlcumber came forward and knelt down at Guaire's side.

The sound of compressed air rang through the area as Earlcumber's frontal armor opened up. Edgar stood on top of that hatch and spent some time looking down at the remains in front of him, but eventually he started to speak slowly.

"Dee...it's already too late, but I need to apologize to you." He paused for a while, before, "At that time, I...thought you abandoned us."

Contrary to Edgar's quiet speech, his expression was twisted with intense regret.

"For a moment, I was really disappointed in you." Once again, he paused for a moment. "But at the same time, it also made total sense. To me, you weren't the sort to follow along for this sort of thing, Dee. But...you...you came back."

Edgar clenched his hand tightly as he trembled.

"And then...you... Sorry, Dietrich. I can't even imagine why you hid such ability from us. Still, you put your life on the line to save us..."

His soliloquy was suddenly interrupted by a violent bursting sound. Right afterward, Guaire's torso armor flew high into the air.

Like that, the armor described a parabola through the air, and when it landed it rolled further while producing echoing noises. All three silhouette knights watched the piece of armor fly through the air, stupefied, before returning their gaze to the wreck at their feet. Before them in their dazed state, a small figure popped its face up from the pilot's seat.

"My word, to think that the frontal armor was so warped it couldn't open. Thanks to that, it was a lot of work to get out...uhhh? Hello, everyone, what brings you here?"

It took a while before someone could muster a response. "Huh?"

★★★

Because the guardian knight order deployed all its forces, Jantunen was left on high alert. But now, their gates were wide open to allow the return of the

knight order. The victorious guardian knight order marched down the main street in neat ranks.

The behemoth's attack had been announced at the same time as the knight order had deployed, so the citizens had been wracked with unease and fear. But now they met the returning knight runners with unreserved cheers and applause. The excitement was at a fever pitch, as if they'd just won a war. Though, to be fair, a victory against a behemoth was worth the same, or possibly even more.

Eventually, the ranks had all passed by, and what followed next made the crowd of citizens stir. It was something bigger than a silhouette knight's body—the behemoth's head. It had been put on a cart to be hauled here, and it still carried with it an overwhelming impact. The head alone showed the citizens—who had never seen the creature move—how incredibly dangerous the monster must have been. For an instant, silence ran through the crowd. But right after that, they erupted in a cheer twice as loud as before.

Praise flowed from the citizens' lips, lauding the guardian knight order who felled such a gigantic beast. Their respect for the knight order protecting them had deepened. Jantunen's excitement had now reached its peak.

★★★

A little ways away from the knight order's procession, a café lay hidden from the heated passion of the rest of the city. Most of the citizens were out on the main street, so the café was nearly empty. Several boys and girls that seemed like customers had walked in. They were the ones most involved in this incident: Edgar, Stefania, Archid, Adeltrude, and Ernesti.

"Just wow. There should be a limit to your ridiculousness..." Edgar sighed as he put down his cup of tea. His words reflected the feelings of everyone there other than Ernie. And he'd uttered those words because of Ernie's lighthearted explanation of his involvement in the felling of the behemoth. "That actually makes me start to sympathize with Dee for being caught up in it..."

Ernie had hacked a magius engine, gaining full control over a silhouette knight before using it to wage high-mobility battle. Just that would make one's common sense raise a shrill scream as it died in agony. However, as Ernie's

explanation of events continued, Edgar couldn't help but clutch at his head, and even Stefania's eyes opened wide in clear surprise. Kid and Addy were a bit exasperated, but it *was* Ernie, so they just looked at each other as they whispered about how weirdly obvious it was that he would do something like this.

"See, he really did steal a silhouette knight."

"Hey you two, what do you mean, 'really'? You're right, though." Ernie seemed slightly indignant, but he withered when the twins glared back at him, averting his eyes.

Other than Ernie, Edgar was the only one in the group with experience piloting a silhouette knight. Ernie's explanation had been extremely shocking, but at the same time it made total sense to the older boy. In his memory, it was impossible for Guaire to move like that without pushing itself to its limits. Still, the recounting of events was such that Edgar shook his head in disbelief many a time, before suddenly he thought of a single possibility.

"Ernesti...what did you plan to do if Dee hadn't run away at that time?"

"I wouldn't have done anything. I only acted on the spur of the moment, so if he hadn't run away, I would have gone with everyone else on the carriages."

Edgar looked as if he had just swallowed something incredibly bitter. He was imagining what would have happened in the fight if Ernie and Guaire hadn't been there. It was easy to imagine that, at the very least, Edgar wouldn't have been around, and the knight order's losses would have risen by leaps and bounds. In fact, if things had gone badly, they might not have even been able to defeat the behemoth. The MVP of the fight was undoubtedly the small boy in front of him. However, though he had produced such tremendous results during the battle, the boy's standing was complicated. Edgar bit his lip, resolving himself as he plunged into the main topic for their gathering.

"We...the survivors of the high school section will be making our way to the capital, Konkaanen, after this. They are conferring decorations there."

Though the subject matter seemed to be good news, a part of Edgar's heart remained clouded.

“There will also be representatives from Jantunen’s guardian knight order. Most likely it’ll be Lord Halhaagen and a few others. The killing of a division-class monster is the kind of news that will spread throughout the country...no, even outside the country very quickly. It seems they will be holding a pretty large ceremony.”

“I see. Congratulations...though I gather from your expression that something is wrong?”

“They will most likely hide the existence of the red silhouette knight Guaire’s contributions to the battle with this... In other words, neither you nor Dee will have your achievements recognized.”

Stefania dropped her gaze down to the tea in her hands with a sorry expression. A moment later, Kid and Addy realized what those words meant, and they fixed Edgar with a glare. Ernie was the only one who didn’t seem to mind at all; he just nodded calmly.

“As I thought. Though I suppose if I were in a knight order, or at least in the high school knight runner department, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“Hey, come on, you guys would’ve had it bad if Ernie weren’t there, right?! Why is he getting snubbed now?!”

Kid couldn’t resist standing up in anger, but Stefania held him back with just a gaze. She let out a breath, and slowly started to explain.

“Calm down. An actual knight would have gotten a promotion or medal. A high school student would also probably have been formally recognized as a knight runner...but Ernie can’t be made a knight as he is now.”

“Why? Ernie’s a lot stronger than most knights out there!” Addy complained.

“Becoming a knight means joining a knight order,” Stefania explained. “If he was simply outstandingly strong, then that would have been fine, but there most likely aren’t any knights around who would work with a twelve-year-old boy. Belonging to an organization needs more than one party to be fine with it.”

“If he was at least an adult,” Edgar added, “there would have been ways around it, but... Anyway, just try suggesting that the kingdom should bestow honors on a twelve-year-old boy. Even if they honor the knight order alongside

him, you'll rip the knights' standing to tatters. And a knight's standing reflects the country's standing. No one wants that to happen."

With a tilt of his head, Ernie responded with a smile, "I see. So, they asked you two, my seniors, to give this explanation?"

Edgar and Stefania's expressions stiffened just a little. Without calling that out, Ernie continued to speak.

"At any rate, personally I'm already satisfied with having been able to control a silhouette knight, and I feel like it's better to just get nothing than to make things complicated by demanding a reward. I'm the one who decided on my own to intervene, after all. However, I'd appreciate it if you'd work to prevent them from trying to use me at their convenience."

Stefania nodded emphatically. "I won't let them do that. I swear upon the Serrati name."

"Yeah, I'll make sure to relay that to Lord Halhaagen," Edgar promised.

Satisfied with those replies, Ernie nodded. But in response to that, Kid and Addy growled softly, their dissatisfaction clearly showing on their faces.

"Are you really fine with that, Ernie?"

"Yeah...in the first place, wasn't it your dream to become a knight and pilot a silhouette knight? Are you sure you should hold back here?"

"You could say this time is an exception. I don't plan to force a reward out of anyone."

Kid and Addy were still absolutely dripping with discontent, but Ernie brought the matter to a close.

Edgar and Stefania secretly let out sighs of relief. In truth, Guaire and the behemoth had basically taken each other out; and the fact that their junior wouldn't be getting any compensation for that risk hurt their hearts. On the other hand, because they understood how the knight order's side was struggling to deal with this irregular occurrence, they had wanted to at least meet him and explain things face-to-face in an attempt to have Ernie understand. That was why they volunteered for this job. The pair had been

apprehensive, wondering if Ernie would go on a rampage, and given the subject matter, they were prepared for anything. The fact that he was so understanding was something they were grateful for.

Oh man, that was close. I almost went berserk, after all. If I went as far as to crush the knight order's reputation, things would become a lot more troublesome down the line, so I'm glad the other side came to talk things over...

From the outside, it may have looked like Ernie was calmly sipping his tea, but internally he was sweating pretty profusely. In truth, he had also been worrying over the conclusion of this incident. Not only that, but in terms of standing, it wouldn't be easy for Ernie to make an appeal. In that sense, it was a stroke of fortune that the authorities approached him for a compromise.

In truth, I was able to move around as much as I wanted, and most importantly I was able to take a look at the control script in the magius engine. In terms of reward, that's already plenty. And depending on how you think about it, this incident could be considered doing a favor for the knight order and having them owe me one. Things would blow up too far if I tried to recklessly stick my neck out, so let's just prop them up. Yeah...if I can forge some connections with the knight order or at least some of the people that were there, I think everything could turn out all right.

While pondering on how to deal with the aftermath of this incident with a bright smile, Ernie slowly sipped his tea.

With that tense subject closed, the air between everyone calmed down. The sounds of cheers coming from the faraway parade had yet to cease, so they spent some time chatting at their leisure.

★★★

Gradually, his consciousness surfaced. The first thing that came to mind for him was a question.

What...happened to me? At that time...the monster...

The next thing he felt was pain. It was a dull pain that came from all over, and this stimulus cleared up his hazy mind.

"Krk...urgghh..."

While the creaking pain from his body caused him to groan, Dietrich Künitz opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the ceiling of a wooden building. Looking beside him, he noticed clean white sheets spread out under him. Though he was a little confused, he eventually managed to understand his situation, somehow. It seemed he was in a hospital somewhere—in other words, he had been saved.

Which...means that the battle is over?

The massive beast they had been fighting was imprinted on his memory, and as he thought back to it, his entire body trembled. It would have been exceedingly hard to save him while leaving that thing alive. So, to him that implied the battle had been concluded in some way or another. Furthermore, given his current state, Dietrich surmised that they'd won.

"Oh, so you've woken up."

Upon concluding that the incident had been solved positively, the tension instantly drained out of Dietrich's body as he realized he was in a safe place. Seeing him roll over in bed, dazed, a voice called out to him from his side.

"This is the Jantunen guardian knight order's office. You've been out like a light for an entire day after the end of that battle."

Dietrich turned around, his eyes wide and his body slightly trembling. It wasn't because of what had been said to him. It was because of who had spoken.

"You've taken a beating in places, but you can rest easy, it's not that serious. You're young, so you heal up fast too."

The owner of the voice had a tough, sturdy frame and was wearing white clothes. His head was shaved cleanly, and he made coquettish motions with his inner thighs as he spoke with his deep voice, but with a girl's speech patterns—it was obvious from a glance that he was a well-built man.

An extremely grief-stricken scream rang through the office, originating from a corner of the infirmary.

★★★

On the West Fremmevilla Highway—the stone-paved road that led from Jantunen to the capital, Konkaanen—a caravan of carriages and silhouette knights were making their way to the capital.

The carriages were occupied by students from Laihiala, while the silhouette knights were from Jantunen's guardian knight order. The knights were traveling to attend the conferment ceremony that was being held, while also acting as escorts for the Laihialan students.

One of the carriages in the procession had a person sitting atop its roof. This person, who seemed to be sunbathing, was sitting on the roof and looking back at the following carriages with a relaxing air. The last carriage in the line was carrying the retrieved remains of silhouette knights. Almost all of the ones who had been downed by the behemoth had been turned into scrap, but at the very least they had been sure to retrieve the torsos of the silhouette knights, which were the most expensive parts. It depended on how heavy the damage was, but as long as the ether reactors and the magius engines were fine, it would be relatively easy to restore them to their former glory. At worst, they were hoping to at least be able to reuse the hearts in new silhouette knights.

Because the units belonging to Jantunen's guardian knight order had been sent to Jantunen, the carriage was only carrying those that belonged to Laihiala Knight Runner Academy.

The person on top of the roof—Ernesti—was directing his gaze behind the procession. Somewhere in that last carriage were the remains of Guaire, but because it was covered with a canopy he couldn't see it. As he thought about Guaire, he was also reminded of the final scene of his fight with the behemoth. While feeling the rumbling of the carriage traveling over stone pavement beneath him, he looked back on that fight to the death.

I can think back on it all I want, but in the end that last action was nothing but a huge gamble. In order to not have that happen again, I need to at least get a mech that won't break even if I'm moving as hard as I can... This problem isn't something I can really leave to other people.

At the moment, he was the only one who could drive a silhouette knight to its limits in such a short time. Meaning he was the only one who could understand

the problem and come up with a countermeasure. He also needed this countermeasure for when he would eventually create his own unit.

“Hey Ernie. You were up here thinkin’ about stuff?”

While he was pondering and wallowing in his hazy cloud of worry, his thoughts unable to coalesce, someone glommed onto him from behind. There was only one person he could think of who would do something like that, so Ernie turned around to face Addy.

“I was. I need to fix the flaws that were made clear in that last battle.”

“Again with that?!”

Seeming vaguely unhappy, Addy draped herself over him. Addy was taller than Ernie, so when she put her weight on him, he was easily pushed over. While allowing himself to be pushed into that uncomfortable pose, Ernie raised an objection.

“Wh-What do you mean, ‘again’? If I don’t think about it while I have the chance, then next time it comes up I’ll be the one in trouble.”

Gradually, the weight on his back eased off, and Ernie took a breath. Addy had stopped moving and dropped the sulking expression. What replaced it was a somewhat worried one.

“Ernie, you really are...again... Hey, there’s something I want you to promise me.”

“What is it?”

“Next time don’t just jump out on your own. Take us with you.”

“That’s...”

Ernie couldn’t see Addy’s expression, as she was behind him. However, the tone of her voice alone told him how serious she was. Without turning back, Ernie started to ponder and worry over that while maintaining his gaze. The path through life he’d chosen to travel was pointed straight at silhouette knights. Going there meant...

“True, we might not be much help, if at all. But...”

“That’s not... It would depend on the circumstance.”

“I wonder. I can’t pilot a silhouette knight, after all. But at the very least, I want you to tell me what you’re going to try to do, Ernie!”

With her having gone that far, Ernie no longer had a leg to stand on.

“I understand... I’ll try. I might not be able to follow through in true emergencies, though.”

“Mrr...the way you put it is so unfair! I’m not saying that we’ll be able to do anything by being there, but having three people is definitely better than being alone!”

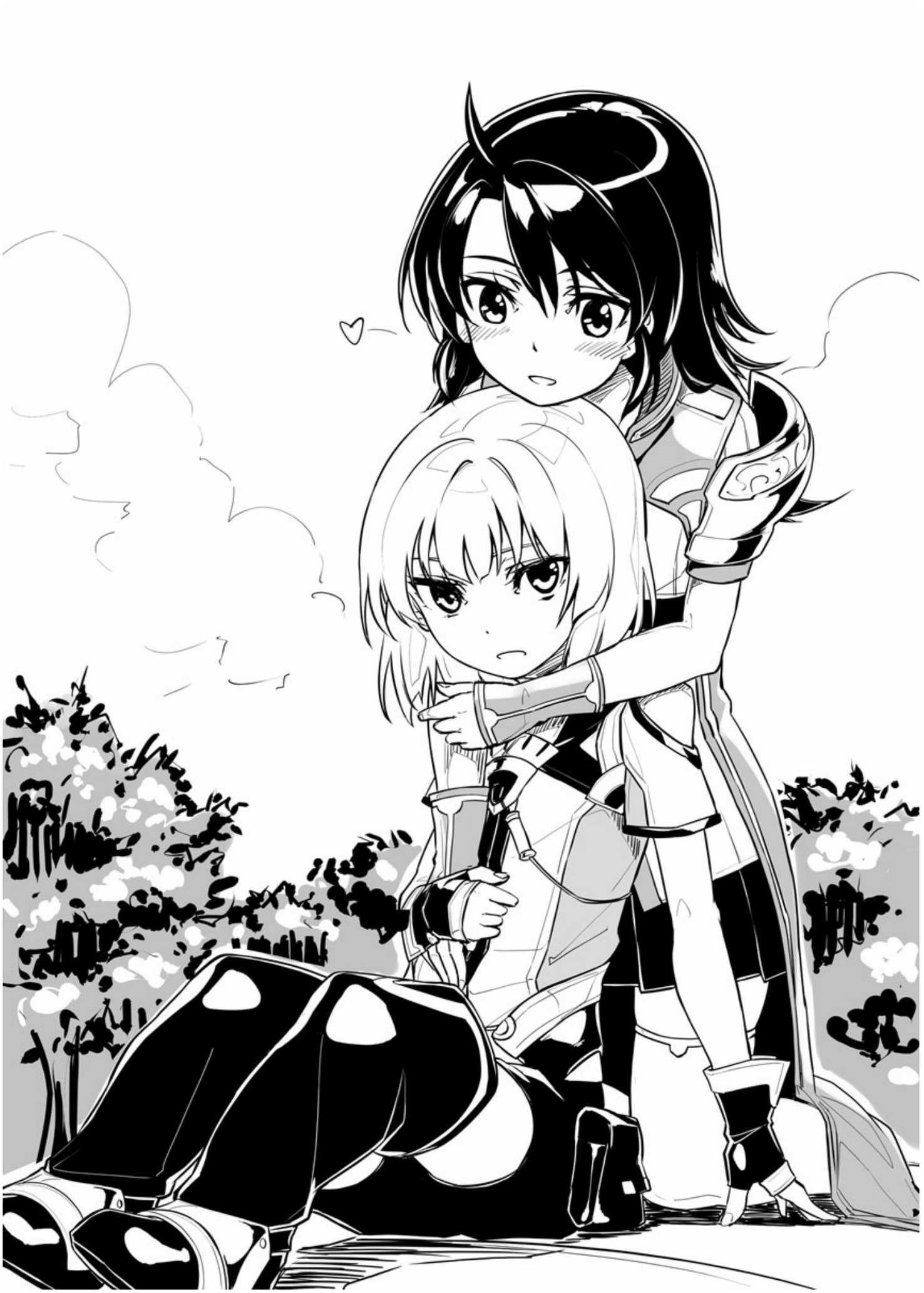
“Ha ha, you’re right. Three people would...three?”

Ernie had been replying to Addy with a strained smile, but suddenly something she said had him looking really serious. A famous saying had given him a great flash of inspiration.

“Three rather than one...three, together as one...a single arrow would snap right away, but three together wouldn’t... That’s right, it’s because they’re only a single piece that they’re so brifflewhafryufwhooingfhh?”

Ernie’s thoughts had started to fly off somewhere else, so Addy pinched his cheeks and gave them a squeeze and a pull.

“It’s rude to start thinking about unrelated things in the middle of a conversation!”



“Owww... Urgh, you’re right. I’m sorry.”

While watching Ernie rub his cheeks, Addy also suddenly had a great idea. She moved to peek at Ernie from the side with a full-faced smile. For some reason, Ernie only got a bad feeling from seeing that, and he couldn’t shake it away.

“That’s right, I thought of something nice! Teach us how to move a silhouette knight!”

“Wow...so that’s what you came with...”

Ernie groaned as he showed Addy another strained smile. Internally, though, he wondered what he should do.

★★★

An inviting aroma wafted from the pot roast placed at the center of a large table.

More food was arrayed around it, crowding the table. Meanwhile, Ernie’s mother Selestina Echevalier was still filling bowls with soup. Beside her the twins’ mother, Ilmatar Alter, was working hard lining up finished pies. For a regular meal, the dishes were way too extravagant and too numerous, but the women were still happily busying themselves with adding more.

“I wonder if it’s about time I taught Addy how to cook?”

“Hee hee, maybe. All that girl does is get up to trouble with Kid.”

They talked while they prepared food with dazzlingly skillful movements, and once they were done they called their respective families. Before long, all the members of both families had gathered, and so started a harmonious mealtime.

They were in the Echevalier home, celebrating the safe return of both families’ children with a small party. They had always planned to do this when the kids had returned, but the field exercise had become more than that with the unprecedented dual threat of a stampede of monsters and the subsequent attack of a humongous division-class monster.

When their families were informed of this sudden disaster, their parents’ faces turned pale. Both families were the same, but it was especially bad for Ilma as it was just her and the twins in her house. The worry she displayed at

the time was severe. Of course, there was no way they would wait for further news alone, so the parents bonded as well while they spent time together in the Echevalier household.

The number of casualties had ended up comparatively small for the size of the incident, and all their children had come back safely, so their families had a lot to do between panicking and rejoicing.

“Still, I’m so relieved that everyone is safe.” Ilma muttered after a sigh as she watched the children gobble down all the food on the table from one end to the other. Even now she felt like if she were to let her guard down, tears would come flowing out, so she hurriedly covered her face.

“Sorry for worrying you. As you can see, we’re all fine...though it was kind of a miracle.”

“It’s all right, as long as you come back safely. And if you all feel well enough to put down this much food, then...it really does seem like you’re all okay.”

“Offwhchwoauuse!”

“Momimfchworywargghhf!”

“At least swallow your food before speaking, you two...”

While participating in the conversation, Kid and Addy continued to innocently stuff their mouths. After all, the only things they had to eat during travel were preserved rations, which barely had any taste at all. The thing they were most interested in at the moment was the food in front of them. Ilma didn’t seem to mind, and in fact she was diligently distributing the food to everyone.

“I heard that you all got caught up in something terrible, but it seems you all came out fine. I wonder what you did out there, Ernie?” Tina inquired.

“Right, I got in a punch-out with a behemoth.”

“Mrnghaakhh! Ahakkghhakk! *Cough cough!*” Hearing the way-too-blunt conversation between mother and son, Matthias ended up choking on his food.

“Wow, it was huge, wasn’t it? Was it okay? Did you manage to punch it properly?”

“I did, since I borrowed a silhouette knight from an upperclassman. There

were some parts that were a little dangerous, but I made sure to win."

"My! You borrowed a silhouette knight? That's wonderful, Ernie. But you can't push yourself too hard, okay? It's not guaranteed that you'll always be able to borrow one, right?"

"You're right. I was very lucky that I had such a 'good' senior this time."

Matthias frantically looked the other way, but everyone else at the table was treating this conversation as normal, which showed how acclimated the households were to this.

Only one person at the table spent the meal quietly, preferring to watch warmly over his family instead of speaking. It was Ernie's grandfather, Rowley, and he called out to Ernie after the meal.

"So, Ernie...about tomorrow, I'd like you to come with me somewhere. Is that all right with you?"

"Okay, grandfather. Where are we going?"

"Hm, well..."

★★★

The capital of the Kingdom of Fremmevilla, Konkaanen: Originally, this city was built as a forward base at the foot of the Auvinier mountain range, and so was something like a fortified city. These influences remained in the form of solid stone construction and the layout of the city, which had the castle in the center surrounded by multiple layers of walls. Currently, only the outermost wall still functioned as such, while the inner ones only really served to section off parts of the city. Even so, their existence told of the place's history.

Fremmevilla's royal castle stood proudly in the center of the city and was named Schreiber Castle.

Its appearance, which was influenced greatly by its origins as a fortress, was a mix of both decorative and plain, and even now could easily operate as a defensive bastion. It matched well with Fremmevilla Kingdom's moniker as a country of knights, and all those who visited Konkaanen felt pride at the castle.

The center of Schreiber Castle held an audience chamber.

The space was wide, with a ceiling high enough to fit silhouette knights inside. There were extravagant banners and luxurious curtains on all four sides, as well as pillars spaced out evenly throughout. A pure red carpet was laid out along the center of the room, leading to the throne that the king sat on. Behind the throne was an incredibly large seat in which a silhouette knight sat, looking down upon all.

This silhouette knight was the king's personal unit—named the Royal Mount: Reidis Ol Villa. It was the most refined and elegant looking of all the silhouette knights in Fremmevilla, and it had a mantle draped across its shoulders bearing the same pattern as the national flag. It truly embodied the figure of a king who stands above his knights. Kaldiaria units piloted by royal guards were stationed to the left and right sides of the space, and this scene, with Reidis Ol Villa seated at the center, made for a very majestic sight.

Occasionally, this place would be inundated with soldiers as well as silhouette knights, but at the moment there were only a few people here.

The man in the prime of life who sat on the throne in front of Reidis Ol Villa was Fremmevilla's tenth king: Ambrosius Tahavo Fremmevilla. Beside him was the patriarch of the Serrati family, Marquis Joachim Serrati. And directly in front of the throne was the captain of Jantunen's guardian knight order, Phillip Halhaagen. Normally, he would be kneeling with his head low as etiquette dictated, but he had already gotten permission to raise his head, and so he reported directly to Ambrosius.

"And that concludes my report on the battle with the behemoth."

King Ambrosius, having heard Phillip's account of the incident, grunted and nodded magnanimously. He held documents detailing exactly what happened, and had been looking through them as he listened.

"What happened with the retrieval of the behemoth's body?"

"Right. Well, for something of a behemoth's size, the usual garbage collectors obviously wouldn't do, so I assigned several of my knight order to the task. I believe we will have retrieved most of it within a couple days."

"As much as we can, I'd like to use its carcass to make up for the losses from this incident. Although, for having taken on a division-class monster, your losses

are surprisingly small.”

“Your Majesty, it’s true that Jantunen’s strength has fallen somewhat, we Serratis will bolster them with reinforcements from our territory.” Joachim supplemented the report with his own words.

While listening to that, Ambrosius’s gaze stopped on a point in the report. It was information pertaining to Guaire, and to Ernesti, who had piloted it. Those who saw the king’s face would find it hard to describe his expression as anything other than troubled.

“Echevalier...could he be Rowley’s grandchild? To think he would contribute this much. Hey, Phillip, this is hard to believe. Did this child really overwhelm the monster?”

“With all due respect, I saw it with my own eyes. I know how hard it is to believe, but...”

Of course, this was something Phillip just couldn’t commit to either way, so he ended up trailing off.

Actually, while listening to this conversation, Joachim personally heavily doubted the captain’s story, though he didn’t let it show.

“I do not believe you would come up with such useless lies. I don’t, but this...” Ambrosius paused for a moment before continuing, “Especially this passage. You report that he made changes to the magius engine’s script on the spot. It would be insane to believe all this.”

“Half of that is just what I heard, but I did actually see how he moved, so...I believe it must be true.”

“I have also received similar reports...” Joachim noted, “though whether or not they are true, only Lord Halhaagen and his guardian knights would know.”

Ambrosius silently closed his eyes. Power that could match a behemoth was marvelous, but in the end it was just raw strength. Still, if the boy had actually laid his hands on a magius engine, things would be completely different. That was because such a thing had never been done before; it would be superhuman.

After a moment's thought, he quietly muttered, "This one...is dangerous."

Phillip was the one who panicked at that. Ernie's movements in that battle had in fact saved dozens, or even scores of knight order members. On top of that, they were unable to reward Ernie due to the complicated circumstances. He had accepted such a thing so quickly it was almost disappointing, and Phillip was feeling guilt and indebtedness toward the boy. Though he was far older than Ernie, they had fought together. And Phillip wasn't so callous that he could treat someone who had saved him and his own so poorly.

"My apologies, Your Majesty, but I must say this. That boy may be only twelve years old, but he is incredibly intelligent, and he is very sensible in temperament. He also understands etiquette, and based on what I hear from those around him, everyone thinks well of him. Most importantly, he was always on the front lines during the battle with the behemoth, and—"

Ambrosius waved a hand to interrupt Phillip's speech.

"c But to think he is only twelve, and it might already be a good idea. Even so, his abilities are a fearsome thing...and he is still only a twelve-year-old child...he may drown in his own power eventually. That is what I am afraid of."

Ambrosius's fears were well founded. No matter how capable and pure of heart Ernie was, the flow of time may change that. Especially for someone so young; his psyche would be subject to a very sensitive period in the future, and if he were to become conceited because of his own power, his capability would actually become a demerit.

In actuality, internally Ernesti was already almost forty years old, so such normal trains of thought didn't apply to him. However, that was outside the scope of these people's imagination. So they of course harbored doubts about him losing his talent or going down a wrong path.

"Well, what should we do then?"

"I believe he will become a great knight if he does not lose his heart, but...we must guide him. Though, that might not be necessary if he's with Rowley. Hm...let's see... First, make some preparations. I want to meet him."

Ambrosius's words were met with a polite bow by Joachim and Phillip.

—To be continued in Knight’s and Magic vol. 2

Author: Hisago Amazake-no

Lives in Hakata. Thinking of new ideas while eating ramen. Tonkotsu is delicious.

Artist: Kurogin

A light novel illustrator who has worked on series such as the Gundam AGE novelization. He has also worked as an illustrator, character designer, and mechanic designer for characters in mobile games. According to him, “I love Idolm*ster’s Makoto, but femboys aren’t bad, either.”