A modern day STEM enthusiast wakes up in Robin's body at the Start of Fire Emblem Awakening. He quickly finds that he is in the doomed timeline, and that industrializing Ylisse is a necessity if he wants to survive the coming apocalypse. Things quickly spiral out of his control, and he finds himself stranded in a foreign plane, his only hope of returning home the limited pool of magical theory he has learnt.
As I open my eyes to the midday sky, I’m greeted with a strangely familiar sight. A blonde girl and her blue haired brother standing behind me, looking down at me. The blonde one says, “Chrom, we have to do something.”

Her brother replies “What do you propose we do?” I know that line… surely, it couldn’t be?

The blonde one - Lissa, I remember - says, “I… dunno…” That settles it, then - I’ve been sucked into a video game. That’s… strange to say the least. Alright - I can worry about that later: for now, I need to be at the top of my game. Think: how should I play this? The best option would be to impersonate Robin. No problems. I mean, surely strategy game experience translates into real life.

What do I do about the amnesia? … No that was dumb. Play it straight with them. Hopefully Frederick doesn’t come down on me like he did in the games.

Noticing I’m not asleep anymore, Chrom says “I see you’re awake now.”

Chrom. Right. I’ve got to make a good impression. “Huh. Not everyday you wake up to the leader of the vaunted Shepherds and his retinue.”

Offering a hand, he says “So, you know who we are? Well, there are better places to take a nap, you know?” A Good start, I guess. I grasp his hand and he pulls me up.

“Name’s Robin. ‘s a pleasure.” As I stand up, blood rushes from my head, leaving me lightheaded. I wobble before managing to steady myself.

I cast my gaze around. Yeah, these guys look scarily like their video game equivalents - I’m fairly convinced that there’s not any sort of trickery on their end. Frederick cuts in, “If I may ask, what is your business in these parts – napping no less? The roads of Ylisse are not as safe as they once were”

Damn, I’ll have to improvise. “I’m a bit of a drifter these days, travelling all over. I was setting down for a rest - I guess I just drifted off.”

Frederick frowns, “A drifter? You don’t look the part, what did you do for work before?”

He’s right. Robin’s coat looks to be seriously good quality for medieval industry. “I was the tactician of a mercenary band. Our group went through a change in management I didn’t exactly agree with, so I split.”

Chrom’s eyes light up. “Truly? Well, the Shepherds have been keeping an eye out for a talented one, what sort of experience do you have?”

Smooth - he’s hooked, now I just gotta reel him in. “I directed small commando raids – maybe twelve people, tops. We were usually contracted by small settlements to take care of bandits.”

His expression falls a bit at that, “You lead from the back?”

Yeah, I’ve got to explain the fact I’ve never used a sword somehow. “Not by choice, mind you. I was deemed too important an asset by the group to be on the raids, so I stuck back and coordinated. I
can’t say I’ve used a weapon more than once or twice.”

Lissa butts in. “That’s no problem – I’m only good at healing but Chrom let me in! Besides, if you wanted to learn, I’m sure we could find someone willing to teach you.”

Internally, I let out a whoop of joy - that’s almost too good to be true. “You’d offer me training? I would gladly accept, if you would have me.”

Seeing my eagerness to accept, Frederick’s expression twists into a slight frown. For a moment, I expect him to say something, but he holds his tongue. Chrom breaks into a grin. “Then it’s decided – we’ll give you a trial period, but from the sounds of things, you’ll do fine. Welcome aboard, Robin.”

That went better than I expected. I think I hit off with Chrom and Lissa pretty well, and Frederick seems far less adversarial of me than I had feared. Ok. Action plan: Chrom and co are headed back to Ylisstol after a skirmish with bandits harassing a southern village. I know that sometime soon we’ll be reaching Southtown and dealing with that situation. But honestly, I’m not terribly worried. Frederick can pretty much solo it even on the harder difficulties in the game – I’m sure at least some of that will be true here.

What’s really plaguing my mind is what changes to the timeline I should make. Should I try and save Emmeryn? I mean, her death galvanises the Shepherds and caused the Plegians to rout. But is it worth it? What if I could save her and win the war anyway?

No. The life of one person is not worth compromising the timeline I’m familiar with.

I blink in surprise at my own ruthlessness - that’s cold. Emmeryn’s practically a saint – wouldn’t the world be a better place if we win the war with her as Exalt?

Okay. Bandits are pillaging the village. Bad news. Are those… Small bodies. Oh god.

Chrom notices my blanch, “You look ill, is everything alright?”

Internally, I curse - Chrom’s empathy should make me like him, but calling attention to the fact that I’m not a hardened merc is unappreciated. I’ll have to improvise. “Yeah, just, I cut my teeth on defending villages like this one from bandits. Brings back some bitter memories.” Never miss an opportunity to endear yourself to Chrom.

Adopting a heroic pose, he raises his voice, “Take heart, we’ll repel these dastards! A plan, if you would, Robin.”

Right. I’ve got to get my head in the game, damn it. This is for real. I give a moment of consideration, “Alright, Lissa’s the VIP. She has someone between her and the bad guy at all times – no matter what. We’re going to move up in an arrowhead formation towards the big boss – he’s likely coordinating from the town centre – Frederick, you’re in front, Chrom, the right, I’m the left. We’ll be approaching from the west side on the north of the river. We’re going for shock and awe here – make them quake in their boots.”

Lissa screws up her face in confusion “VIP? What do you mean?”

Of course - modern jargon hasn’t been invented yet. I’ll have to watch myself. “Very Important Person. Her incapacitation is to be avoided at all costs. Without a healer we’ll be dead in the water.”
Chrom nods in agreement. “Sounds like a plan. Alright Shepherds, move out.”

I wasn’t kidding when I said I had no idea what to do with a sword: I’ve never even held a medieval weapon before - these bandits have me beat pretty badly in terms of skill. This fact struck me in the form of an axe to the shoulder.

The offending axe was wielded by a man fitting the exact caricature of a bandit - extremely muscled, a wild beard, a few facial scars, scraggly clothing and rotting teeth. Fuck, that hurts. I back off a bit and make a jab at the other guy. He jumps backward with a snarl, dodging my clumsy attack without issue.

Thankfully, Lissa noticed, and sealed the wound without any ado. Her staff provided immediate and effective relief from the pain. Well, that’s not entirely true - it feels like I’ve got a wicked bruise there, but I’m not crippled anymore.

Noticing my troubles, Frederick impales the bandit with his spear. A spray of gore was launched forward from the ruthless attack and the bandit crumples, his body limp in an instant. Without ceremony, Frederick withdraws his weapon, charging back into the fight.

I swallow, realising just what I’ve gotten myself into. Chrom and Frederick are very accustomed to separating bandit heads from bandit shoulders. Seriously - Frederick just gutted two people and removed the head of a third without so much as batting an eye.

On the other hand, seeing the pillaged villagers on the way was pretty gruesome - maybe the brutality was warranted afterall. I give the conundrum a moment of consideration before coming to a decision. These people have brought this fate upon themselves - they’ve deemed themselves above the law, and are taking what is not rightfully theirs at the expense of the lives of others. I won’t shed a tear when the leader’s head is on the floor.

Chrom stops, a little ahead of us, and says “I can see the town centre up ahead; the leader shouldn’t be far! Shepherds, charge!”

All things considered, it went fairly well. Chrom went in and acrobatically ran the chief through, while Frederick mopped up the rest of the rabble. After that, the first man broke and, like dominoes, the rest ran for the hills.

Honestly, I was a little worried Lissa or I would be flanked, but things worked out in our favour. We declined a feast – much to Lissa’s chagrin, and departed for Ylisstol that afternoon. Frederick pulls up beside me. He doesn’t look terribly happy. “I’m unconvinced of the merits of letting that rabble escape.”

Always the critic. Honestly, I didn’t have any particular reason beyond minimising risk, but that’s not really an acceptable answer. I’ll have to make something up, “I’m not certain of it either, but if any of them put down the axe for the hoe, I’d say we’ve gained something by it. Without a strong leader, rabble like that will likely just melt off into the other bandit groups”

“Which will only cause more problems for us.”

“Yes, but the idea is to judge whether that problem is worth having if it means we can get the bandits
out of the village faster – hit them in their lairs and we can kill them to a man, no problems. On our
turf? Not so much."

“That is a rather... dynamic way of thinking about it. I suppose you’re right.”

While he certainly isn’t fond of me, I am rather surprised at how amenable he’s being. I guess
forsaking the amnesia story paid off?

It’s morning. We had bear last night. The entire night passed without incident. No earthquakes. No
risen. No future children.

Fuck.

Shit.

Fuck.

I’m in the doomed timeline.

If I was in the future timeline I could pretty much cheat my way killing Grima since I know the beats
of the story and what exactly needs to happen for the happy ending. The doomed timeline, however?

The gloves are off. From what I remember there’s roughly twenty years until Grima completely kills
everyone and the second generation is shipped off to the alternate timeline – maybe ten before he’s
awakened? Could I catch a ride with the future children if it comes to that?

No. It’s not going to come to that. I’m going to fucking shell the bastard out of the sky before it
comes to that. Ten years to industrialize an almost-renaissance society? It’ll be tough, but I think I
can get it done. I mean, I’ve already made a good start by getting the ear of the Crown Prince. No
pressure, I guess. It’s not like the stakes could get much higher than ‘everything ever’.

I spent the rest of the morning helping pack up camp in a fugue-like state – mind racing with plans
and contingencies. I managed to outline the things that need to happen for the highest chance of a
‘happy ending’.

One: preserve the Exalt’s bloodline by any means necessary. I don’t care if it means I’ve gotta have
Lissa awakened in the end, so long as I’ve got exalted blood of some kind.

Two: industrialize Ylisse to the best of my ability. Nukes are, frankly, unrealistic given the timeframe
I have. Rifles and artillery, on the other hand – not so much.

Three: have Ylisse annex as much of Plegia as possible in order to impose strict anti-grimleal laws.
Honestly, I can’t see it working too well, but some oversight is better than none. Failing annexation,
installing a strictly anti-Grima head of state after the war is preferred.

Four: failing the above three, and Grima is awakened, hitch a ride to the alternate timeline with as
many Shepherds as possible to try it all again. I also took off my Grimleal coat. It’s a good coat, but
it’s going to send some fairly serious conflicting messages. I’ll have to burn it later.

Virion and Sully met up with us soon after we left camp – Sully had originally left the capitol after
hearing word of Bandits massing to attack Southtown, and Virion tagged along, I guess? They
joined us for the rest of the journey back. “I haven’t had the pleasure to meet you yet. I am Virion –
“Robin – the most tactical of tacticians.” I delivered the line with a wry smile. I managed to get a chuckle out of him.

“Oh, you, I like. Now, tell me, how did Chrom manage to pick you up?”

“He found me napping on the side of the road. Offered me a position after a quick chat. You?”

“Oh, it’s rather boring actually. Perhaps I will tell you another time. You must have quite the silver tongue to get Chrom to warm to you so quickly, however.”

“I don’t really think of it that way. Perhaps Chrom is simply quick to make an assessment of one’s character.”

“Ha! I think you may be correct there, friend.”

The rest of the trip home was spent in easy conversation with Virion. It worked wonders to take my mind off of the mess I’m in.

Ylisstol was rather… underwhelming, compared to the cities of the twenty-first century. I mean, I’m certain the city is positively beautiful compared to the other cities of the world, but I’m simply far too used to modern life to be moved.

Emmeryn, on the other hand, is a very good public speaker. Her words never fail to capture the attention of all in attendance. Lissa spoke up “And besides, we had plenty of help!” Internally, I thank Lissa. Brownie points with the Exalt are much appreciated.

“Ah, you speak of your new companion here?”

“This is Robin, He helped coordinate our assault against the brigands – a brilliant strategist, if I may say.” Chrom gestures to me, and I give the Exalt a small bow.

Emmeryn stares at me appraisingly, “It sounds as though Ylisse owes you a debt of gratitude, Robin.”

“It is no trouble.”

“Regardless, if you every need of something, you have only need to ask.”

Thankfully, if Frederick had any concerns, he stayed quiet.

The introductions to the rest of the Shepherds went about as it did in the games. I got a room to myself in the barracks and a tour from Lissa. I’m expected to spend my days familiarizing myself with both the rest of the Shepherds, and learning how to not die in a combat encounter. Frederick has seen fit to personally direct my training. Joy.

Well, it will undoubtedly directly save my life on many occasions, so I guess I’m grateful for it.

But that starts tomorrow. For the rest of today, I’m spending the time writing down as much
information as I can about twenty-first and twentieth century science and technology. Physics, Chemistry, Engineering, Mathematics, Medicine, Biology – the whole lot.

I was a bit of a STEM enthusiast back on earth, so thankfully, I’ve got a lot of the basics of how most things work down. I have no doubts most of it will need to be refined, but that shouldn’t be too hard, should it?

Anyway, I know how the important stuff works for the most part – guns and gunpowder. I hope what I’ve got will be enough. On that note, Ylisse doesn’t write in English – or any other script I recognise, for that matter. Odd, given how they speak English. Oh well, that’s something to work on, I guess.

Lissa pokes her head into my room “What’re you doin’?” While I appreciate her dropping in, I’d honestly rather these documents stay under wraps for now. Although… Lissa does have a non-trivial amount of influence within the Ylissean state. Perhaps I could use her to help execute my plans?

“It’s complicated. How can I help?”

“I heard about how Frederick’s going to be training you for the next few weeks. I dropped in to tell you that I’d be joining you.”

She gives me a smile. If only she knew the world of pain we would undoubtedly be going through. “Really? Well I’m glad I’ve got someone to suffer through it with, then.”

Lissa hums in agreement, before moving over to have a look at my scheming. “I don’t recognise this writing, what is it?”

“It’s a language from my homeland. I use it for all my personal notes. Keeps nosy foreigners from being able to snoop on me.” It’s not entirely true, but it gets a snort of laughter from Lissa.

“Really? What are you writing about? I don’t recognise what this is a drawing of. Is it a design for something?” She’s referring to the really rough plans for a rifle in front of me - my trump card against the Grimleal. Sure, the big guy himself isn’t going to go down to a bullet, but whoever tries to summon him hopefully will.

“It’s a contingency plan in case things don’t turn out how I need them to.” Lissa leans over and grabs a sheaf of notes – biology.

“Oh, these diagrams are actually pretty good! Are you a healer too?”

“More of a scholar. I couldn’t tell you how to use a staff, but I know what goes where on the inside.”

“A scholar? Oh, Miriel will like you.”

Lissa picks up another sheaf – Math. “Hopefully. How good are those staves of yours? Like, what can’t they do?”

“They can heal almost anything up to and including death so long as the person using it is skilled and powerful enough. Realistically though, anyone that isn’t a prodigy is going to have some major troubles healing things like a lost limb. Arrows and dirty wounds are troublesome too – unless you’re paying really close attention you’ll just leave them inside the patient. That’s really bad, by the way.”

She puts the papers back, shaking her head slightly. “That looks pretty complicated. Can you walk me through how it works?” She’s talking about my notes on the rifle.
I hum in consideration. “On one condition.” This feels like a really bad idea, but I really can’t think of another way in. I guess there’s no harm in it, though.

“You teach me to read Ylissean.”

“Too easy. Now, what’s this contingency plan?”

I don’t think Lissa really got the designs, but she’s agreed to teach me how to read Archanean – as I learnt it was called. Apparently, the whole continent shares the same writing system. Valm uses a few different ones, but still speaks a similar language. I’m pretty certain she thinks I’m from some obscure microstate over there that she’s never heard of, and I’m not going to do anything to disabuse her of that notion.

So, I fell into a routine – fitness training with Frederick in the morning, getting to know the other Shepherds in the afternoon, communal dinner with the rest of the Shepherds living in the barracks and reading lessons with Lissa in the evening. At the end of the day I’m usually dead tired, so I don’t end up adding too much more to my notes.

At the end of the first week, Frederick tells me to start considering what weapon I want to use. I met Miriel earlier that week and asked her how magic works. Apparently, I’ve got some magic potential. She offered to teach me the basics.

It’ll have to wait until I can read though. On that note, Lissa tells me that I’ve made some impressive progress with Archanean script. I should be ready for it by the end of the month. I attributed my progress with the script to its similarity to English - the two scripts use wildly different characters, but are otherwise quite mechanically similar.

Regarding the timeline, I really have no idea what’s happening. There’s been an uptick in bandits and increased border tensions, but no invasion by the Risen. I really don’t know what kicks off the war in this timeline, but I hope it’s not the assassination attempt. Since there was no Risen threat, there’s no reason for the Shepherds to rush off to Regna Ferox to secure an alliance. Given that, I have no idea when or where we’re going to get on track with the other timeline - if at all.

On that note, I ‘stumbled’ across Chrom’s hole in the wall on one of my training runs. It’s getting patched up, so hopefully people won’t be able to infiltrate the castle as easily.

On the topic of my training, getting used to my new body is hitting me pretty hard. From what I remember from the games, I look like one of the possible customized Robins – not like the one you see in the promotional materials. Thankfully, I’m still a guy. Though having blue eyes and blonde hair are certainly a departure from my old brown. I don’t know how old this body is, but it’s most similar to the oldest customization option. My hair is also a lot longer than I usually wear it. I’m not sure if I’ll cut it, though. Frankly, I’m not entirely unhappy with the change - though it is the most disconcerting thing about my experience so far.

Frankly, the big stuff is nothing in comparison to the small stuff – my fingers arms and legs are all a little bit smaller than they used to be. This means that I’m a complete klutz until I get used to this damned body – I mean, Sumia of all people won’t be able to infiltrate the castle as easily.

The mark of Grima also hasn’t shown itself yet – it wasn’t there when I woke up. Maybe it was tied to Robin’s soul rather than his body? Does that mean that this body can no longer be used to resurrect Grima? I don’t know. Probably best to act as if it could, though.
Wouldn’t the best solution be to off myself, then? I mean, no vessel means no Grima, right?

In the end I decided to go with a mace. It hits hard and doesn’t require a particularly skilled user – being essentially a fancy club and all. Perhaps more importantly, I can use a shield or a spell book with it.

On the Monday of the second week, Frederick brought me to the royal craftsmen for my gear. Since I wanted to use both magic and melee, Frederick got me fitted for a brigandine - some sort of hardened leather coat with steel plates sewn and layered on the inside. It’s heavy, but I can still move my arms far more easily than in full armour – which is apparently a must for combat casters.

I guess fire emblem magic works on dungeons and dragons rules, then? As far as the mace goes, I was given a few of the standard flanged maces that the weaponsmiths that supply the town guard made. Apparently, maces aren’t very popular in Archanea, but they had a few laying around. Frederick tells me that he’s putting in an order for some higher quality ones, but these will do for now. Along with the mace, Frederick recommended I pick up a shield. I wasn’t intending to originally, but Frederick is the expert here.

Thankfully, Robin’s height is about what mine used to be. Being in a new body was jarring enough, but I don’t think I would have been able to handle being two-thirds of my old height on top of that.

Frederick put in an expedience request on our orders – apparently, I’m wanted by Chrom for a test soon. He’s leaving to clean out some of the more dangerous bandit dens with the cavaliers in a few days. Once he gets back, he’ll gauge where I’m at.

On the subject of the Shepherds, Lissa and I have hit it off really well. Between training with Frederick and reading lessons, we spend most of the day together. Otherwise, I enjoy speaking with Virion over tea in the afternoon most days. Miriel and I usually chat over dinner – I think she’s glad to have someone who can keep up with her admittedly impressive vocabulary.

I also gave some more thought to the timeline. In the games, Robin’s body from the doomed timeline is the vessel for Grima. I have no intention to become a puppet for what is essentially an eldritch god, so I’m really going to have to make sure that Validar gets put down. I don’t know for certain whether Grima could still inhabit this body now that Robin’s gone, but I’m not taking any chances.

In the game’s timeline Validar is revived by Grima, but I’m going to assume that it was only possible due to the presence of alternate timeline Grima kickstarting the Grima revival process a bit. I mean, the fucker’s right and proper dead – a big pile of bones in the desert. There is absolutely no way he could have the power to do that right now.

By the end of the second week, Frederick started to run sessions in the afternoon as well. By the end of the third, I’d passed the standards set for entry into the ranks of Ylisse’s professional soldiers. Given that the bulk of Ylisse’s troops in times of war are villager conscripts given minimal training, this puts me on par with a somewhat respectable standard. Still behind the standard set by the Ylissean knights, let alone the rest of the Shepherds, but I’m getting there. Chrom also got back and brought me out on a small raid of some bandits harassing nearby villages – maybe a half day’s journey there and back.
Chrom turns to me. I can’t make out his expression in the dim light of the stars. “How are we going to play this, Robin?”

The bandits are holed up in an old farmstead. They’ve got one sentry stationed looking at the surrounding fields. Fortunately, the moon is new, and he has very little light to see by. Between us we have a single shuttered lantern. It should last until dawn.

“We’re going to wait for a good opportunity. These guys don’t seem like the brightest bunch. We’ll sneak up through the field on our bellies. If he falls asleep, we can take them out without them even waking. Otherwise, we wait for a good time to do a surprise attack.”

“Why don’t we just rush in?”

“I’m sure we could, but I want to play this as safe as possible.”

And so, we crawled prone through the empty field. Eventually, the guard dozed off, and we closed in. Chrom, cool as ice, stepped closer. He positioned himself and promptly cut his throat without an ounce of hesitation. Unfortunately, the bandit didn’t die immediately - he sprung awake, drowning in his own blood. He fumbled around, brandishing his axe, hand clutching his throat. By the time he had been finished off, he had knocked over a pile of pots and tipped what was left of their dinner – soup – onto the smouldering remains of the fire.

Of course, the resulting surge of steam woke up the rest of the bad guys.

From inside the barn, a gruff voice yells “Garth? What was that?”

“Get ready for incoming, Chrom. We’ll have to do it your way.”

“Right.”

“Shit! Intruders! Get ’em boys!”

The rest of the fight was absolutely terrible – we fought in the near complete darkness; the only light was from the lantern we set down behind us. There seemed to be no end to the bandits – they just kept coming out of the house. In the end, we retreated to a nearby shed and held the door until morning.

We worked out a rhythm fairly quickly. I held the doorway with my shield, letting the idiots just batter away at it, and Chrom would sweep in and run them through with his sword once they left an opening.

If they managed to dodge that, they got clobbered by me.

All in all, a horrible time. We weren’t really ever in any danger, even outnumbered as we were, but we were constantly on edge the whole time, looking for the next attack from the edge of our limited vision. The fight continued for the next few hours, until things brightened up enough to see without the lantern. After the bandits realised just who it was they were fighting, they routed. Chrom saw this and threw his sword overhand like a javelin, his expression nonchalant - as if this was an everyday occurrence for him. The blade flew true, impaling the leader’s leg. The bandit promptly keeled over, barely giving a grunt of pain. Chrom moved in and finished him off before he even got the chance to get back up.

I sigh. Chrom was an absolute powerhouse - he could have taken all of these by himself if he’d wanted to. “Well, I’m glad that’s over. Next time make sure you finish the guy before he can wake his friends, ay?”
“Hah! Surely you jest! I haven’t had such fun hunting bandits in years!”

“You’re crazy, Chrom. That was terrible. Anyway, let’s hurry back to Ylisstol. I just want to collapse in my bed right now.”

“Aye. Night-time raids always tire me out.”

It’s the Tuesday of the fourth week of my stay with the Shepherds – two days after our raid. Chrom’s decided to give me one final competence test in the form of a duel. As far as ideas go, it’s not a bad one. But frankly, I know I’m far outmatched. I’m psyching myself up off to the side of the ring. Lissa and Virion turned to watch the fight.

Lissa asks “You think you’re ready for it?”

“Ha! If your brother lives up to half his reputation I’d need a good few years of Frederick’s training to even stand up to him in a proper fight.”

“Pah! I know that, I was asking if you think you’ll pass whatever test he’s set for you.”

“Honestly? I hope so. I don’t really have anywhere else to go if I fail.” I’m not lying. Plus, if I fail this, there will be dire ramifications for the well-being of the future.

“Well, I think this is just a formality. You’re a Shepherd in all but name at this point.”

Virion speaks up “The princess has a point. It would sadden me to see you go, friend.”

He’s right. I’ve done well to integrate myself into the Shepherds – it would be far out of Chrom’s character to kick me out now.

He calls me from the other side of the ring “Robin! You ready?”

“This is it. Wish me luck, guys.”

Lissa smiles “You’ve got this, Robin! Go get ‘em!”

Virion suppressed a smile, as if trying not to laugh at a particularly funny joke. “Yes, good luck my friend. You’ll be needing it.”

I move over to the ring, a bead of perspiration running down my face. The midday sun is shining down harshly, doing me no favours. We both have our training weapons – dulled blades and points. A good hit will still cut, but we’re unlikely to die from it before a healer gets to us.

“Sorry I couldn’t help you with your training, friend. I’ve been run ragged dealing with bandits.”

He’s been on raids against the bandits almost constantly. Apparently, things are getting bad. If I had to guess, war with Plegia isn’t that far off. “It’s fine. Frederick has been a great help.”

“He tells me that you and Lissa have been going through his famed fitness routine. What’s your evaluation of your progress?” Chrom’s smile widens a tad.

“I honestly couldn’t tell you. Far from-”

“En guard!”
He lunges forward. I barely manage to bring my shield up in time. Sneaky bastard. His blade glances off, and I push it aside with my shield. I snap my mace up from below in a quick strike. He dances backward. He’s not even trying.

“Very good. A bit slow on the retaliation, but your reactions are great.”

Yeah, that’s what a lifetime of gaming does for you. Still, it’s an advantage I’ll take without complaint. “That was a bit sneaky. Can’t say I expected it from you.”

We begin circling each other. I didn’t come into this without a strategy, I just need some time to execute it. While I was talking I brought my shield up in a defensive position and began to unscrew the pommel of my mace with one hand from behind my shield. If he’s going to fight dirty, so will I.

“One must be prepared for underhand-”

I grab my mace with my shield arm – it’s a strapped shield, rather than one that needs to be grasped - and toss my pommel at him. It beans him right in the forehead. I rush in and place the spike of my mace to his throat to end him rightly.

“Dead.”

“Draw.”

I look down, his sword is pointed straight at my heart. Damn. I deflate - I was quietly hoping that trick would work. I wasn’t expecting him to recover quite so quickly. Still, I’m impressed that I even managed to get a draw out of this.

Internally, I shake off my disappointment. Chrom’s an exceptional warrior - even at this point in the timeline. The fact that I even managed a tie is something to be proud of.

I hear Lissa give an exited whoop from the sidelines. Chrom straightens and gives me a bow. I return it. His lip quirks up in a wry grin.

“That was crafty. Just what I’m looking for in a tactician. Welcome to the Shepherds, Robin.”

Now that I’ve passed Chrom’s test, Frederick eased off on the training a bit. Instead, I started working with Miriel. Lissa’s still coming around most evenings, but it’s mostly just to chat rather than for Archanean lessons at this point.

Lissa’s sitting on my bed, kicking her feet. “That was a pretty neat trick you pulled with the pommel earlier today. Where’d you learn that?”

“I needed a trump card to catch Chrom. I came up with it a few days before. I thought that Chrom might not expect it, so I gave it a go.”

Not the truth, but I want to avoid bringing up where I’m from. If I lie and say Plegia, I could very easily be caught out. If I say I’m from an outrealm or something, that could cause problems if Validar calls me his son.

Lissa starts giggling. “Well, he definitely wasn’t expecting it! I think you bruised his ego and his big head!”

“Truly? Well, I’m glad I was underestimated then.”
I’m currently drawing the basic design for the internal combustion engine. I’m not certain Ylisse has metals strong enough to make it yet, but it couldn’t hurt.

“What’s the deal with all the inventions that you’re always drawing?”

“These could seriously help out Ylisse if things come to war with Plegia. Technology is a force multiplier above all other.”

“Yeah, but don’t you need to, ya know, actually make them to make sure they work?”

“I already know they work. The question is whether Ylisse’s craftsmen could handle making them.”

“So why haven’t you got them to try?”

“Well, most of what I’ve got here is going to be costly to develop, and I doubt Emmeryn will let me make weapons of war in times of peace. Some of the other things here could improve quality of life, but again, it’s going to cost a lot to produce.”

Lissa’s frowning. That doesn’t usually happen. “You’re certain they work?”

“Absolutely.”

“Then why haven’t you asked? You don’t have a favour for the exalt for nothing!”

“I, uh. I dunno. I expected I would get rejected out of hand, so I saved myself the trouble. I was planning to contract a craftsman to make them once my pay had accumulated”

“Jeeze. You’re not friends with the princess for nothing. Tomorrow we’re going to go meet with the Exalt. You’re going to bring all of your notes and we are going to present all of them to her. All you had to do was ask, Robin, and I would have vouched for you.”

She seems to be genuinely annoyed with me. “They’re all written in English, shouldn’t I translate them first?”

“Doesn’t matter. You can read them out and I’ll have a squire scribe them.”

“Who else is going to be at the meeting?”

“I imagine Frederick will want to sit in. I’m going to get Miriel to as well. Phila is out on a mission so she won’t make it. Now, you need to get an early night. I’ll see you early tomorrow.”

Lissa leaves the room. I’m left thoroughly baffled. What on earth just happened?

The presentation went well, I guess. Lissa’s still acting a bit distant to me. Miriel was engrossed and immediately took the translations for her own study. Everyone was suitably cowed when I explained the destructive potential of the weapons detailed. I started them off small – primitive firearms and explosives. Everyone seemed very concerned that with a bit of industry the average village peasant could have the destructive potential of an experienced mage. By the time I got to the weapons I’d use only as a last resort – nukes, Nano plagues, kinetic bombardment, chemicals - I had lost everyone but Miriel, though she was suitably horrified.

As far as the non-weaponry goes – refrigeration and vaccination were immediately green-lit for research and development by the Ylissean arcane academy by Emmeryn herself. Apparently, they
have branches for the more mundane topics as well as magical ones. Unfortunately, Emmeryn made a point not to approve military technology, despite my direct recommendation.

Miriel pulled me aside afterward and asked why I had been creating such destructive weapons.


She looks confused at that. “What? Surely you aren’t talking about the Grimleal prophecy?”

I sigh. “I wish I weren’t. From my understanding, the Grimleal pose a serious threat to the continued existence of the entire world. They are a doomsday cult, plain and simple. Their single aim is the resurrection of their god, bringing about the apocalypse for the rest of us.”

Frederick walks over. “It’s true, Miriel. Our intelligence sources suggest the same. Whether they are currently active in pursuing their goal is unknown.”

I smile at his affirmation. “I believe they are. It would be a gross irresponsibility if I did not do all within my power to prevent such an event.”

Miriel presses her lips into a thin line, making a noise of consideration. “I would like some time to analyse these documents. I may be able to get in contact with some of my peers from the academy. If what you say is true, then we must be prepared.”

Frederick gives her a solemn nod. “The Exalt may not approve, but I would agree. The Grimleal have always made war with the followers of Naga. This is no different.”

Huh. Well, Frederick and Miriel are on board, at least. Maybe we could pool funding and develop them privately?

My magical studies ground to a screeching halt after the presentation – Miriel has spent all her time with me grilling for more details, and all her other time helping out with the research and development.

I’d got down enough of the basics for some self-directed practice, but it is nothing compared to direct instruction from Miriel.

My understanding of magic is as follows: Parallel to reality is a secondary realm where all magic power resides – imagine the three spatial dimensions as a sheet of paper: this secondary realm is essentially another sheet layered on top of ours. It consists of literally nothing but energy. Miriel couldn’t tell me much else about it - for all I know this realm doesn’t even follow the same laws of physics as ours.

All life – and some non-living things – have an associated ‘signature’ in this realm, this signature is apparently what grants matter agency. Signatures are essentially super-compressed energy, hence their strange behaviour. Agency can be thought of as the ‘shadow’ cast by this signature onto our own world. Strangely enough, plants also possess a signature, meaning that plants have agency, I guess?

Essentially, everything that is either alive or able to able to act by its own power has a signature. Using magic is essentially done by manipulating your own signature to produce a particular result by tapping into the ambient energy in the magical realm.
This can sort of be thought of as a chemical reaction – you put in the ingredients: your intent broadcast through your signature, and an associated somatic or verbal component, then, you supply the realm with an amount of activation energy in order to break a hole for the realm’s energy to go through.

Of course, things aren’t nearly that simple: the amount of energy you use is absolutely massive – beyond anything mere mortals could supply. That’s where the tomes come in – they’re essentially optimised reaction environments and catalysts in one – they bring the energy cost down to manageable levels.

The energy used in the reaction comes from your signature, Miriel started off her tutoring with a very strict warning to never exhaust my signature’s energy supply completely – apparently it grows back, but only if there’s some left. I can guess doing that wouldn’t be pretty at all – becoming a vegetable or outright death seem like the most likely outcomes.

I’m nowhere near touching a tome, though. For now, I need to practice controlling my signature, along with memorising the somatic components of the most basic spells.

It’s been a few days since the presentation. Miriel sits down across from me during breakfast. “What are your recommendations for military projects?”

I’ve gotten used to Miriel’s lack of small talk. She’s been seeking me out regularly to have things clarified about the documents over the past few days. “Rifles and artillery are a must. The first is a weapon without peer in the current technological and strategic paradigm, and the former is a serious force multiplier. Flight would be great, but I suspect it may be beyond Ylisse currently. The combustion engine would open up a vast array of both civilian and military applications, but the turnaround on that one may be a bit long. Ideally I would get all four – the tactical ramifications of that combination are frankly beyond what this world has ever seen.”

She pauses, giving her words some thought. “And yourself?”

I blink in confusion at the non sequitur. “Pardon?”

She drops her voice. “Are you from beyond this world?”

I curse internally. I mean, this technology is centuries ahead of anything that this world has ever seen, but it can’t have been that obvious, could it? Fuck. Cat’s out of the bag, I guess. How do I handle this, though?

I could deny it - play for time. Although these sort of questions are bound to only get more common when I start rolling out my tech. No… that’s a recipe for damaged trust; and if there’s one thing I need, it’s trust from the Shepherds.

The other option, of course, is to spill everything. I’d always intended to bring a few people in on the secret, anyway, but not this soon. What are the potential outcomes if I tell Miriel, though?

Well, I could gain a valuable ally - of all the Shepherds, Miriel is perhaps the most useful to me, barring the royal family. Her connections to the academy and her sharp mind would be very valuable assets for developing my technologies.

The alternative, however, is that Miriel decides that I’m a danger to Ylisse and goes public with things. The possible results of that? Death, incarceration or social exile…

No, from what I know of her from the games, it would be very unlikely for that to happen. She’s far more likely to want to work with me to get at the knowledge that’s in my head. It’s decided, then. I’ll
“Bring Miriel in.”

“Not here. Come to my room tonight and we will speak. I would ask you keep this to yourself until you know the full story, however.”

She frowns. “I will do so. However, should your answers not satisfy me, I cannot guarantee it will stay that way.”

She gets up, and leaves.

I sigh, turning to my breakfast. That was a bit more hostile than I was hoping for.

Miriel enters my room without so much as a knock. She stands in the middle of the room, giving me a hard look.

“Talk.”

She’s getting right into it, then. Time to spill the beans.

“Best I can tell, I’ve the mind of someone from an alternate dimension attached to the body of someone from this realm. I haven’t the faintest idea how such a situation arose, but I intend to make the most of it.”

“I suspected as much. Your signature is unlike any other I have seen. It also explains the fact you didn’t know Archanean despite clearly coming from a wealthy family.”

“How did you get that last one?”

“The coat you were found in would have cost nearly as much as a small house in the worker’s district, yet Frederick tells me you have not been seen in it since. Your body also carries the weight of many enchantments – a common practice for the Plegian elite. Your ignorance of social customs and strange manner of speech also tell of your alien origins.”

“Well. What do you plan to do with this information?”

“What do you wish for me to do with it?”

Here’s the critical moment. I swallow, pushing down the icy tendril of anxiety that found its way into my gut. “Work with me. When I came into this realm, I came with knowledge of a possible future. The grimleal seek to bring about the apocalypse. They must not be allowed to succeed.”

Miriel simply nods, as if she had already considered such a response. Her expression remained aloof, as it has been since she walked in. “An acceptable proposition. Two, however, are not sufficient for such a goal. Who else do you suggest we notify?”

I blink. Was it as simple as that? Bringing more people in, on the other hand, is not something I’d planned on at this point, but I can certainly see what she’s talking about. I guess I should make the concession though, even if only to keep her on side.

“I don’t know. We need to lay the groundwork, gather evidence. Eventually, I definitely want the Ylissean upper echelons on our side. The Feroxi Khans wouldn’t be a bad idea either. Virion, too.”

She sits down on the bed next to me. “I believe Ylisse’s Plegian intelligence sources have already
provided us with sufficient evidence. But that would be acceptable. I would request we also include senior staff at the academy research and development team and the Ylissean craftsmen guild. Their assistance will be crucial to our venture.”

“That sounds fi-”

Lissa bursts into the room. What was it with Ylisseans and not remembering to knock?

“Robin! We need t- Miriel? What are you doing in here?”

Miriel and I were sitting close to each other, speaking in hushed tones. I doubt she overheard any of this, but it’s not exactly a good look.

“Ah, Lissa. Good, sit down, we need to talk.”

I raise an eyebrow. Does she really intend to bring in Lissa? I mean, I guess you could consider her part of the Ylissean upper echelons, but, I don’t know if it would be a good idea at this point. Miriel returns the eyebrow, as if daring me to challenge her.

“Robin is not of this realm. He came with forewarning of Grima’s return. We need your help to prevent such an event occurring.”

Lissa frowns. “Why didn’t you tell me earlier? I could have helped you with this.”

I exhale, shaking my head “You wouldn’t have believed me.”

Lissa sighs, looking disappointed. Damnit. This is exactly what I was trying to avoid - the cooperation of the royal family is far too important, and Miriel just dropped a bomb that damaged Lissa’s trust in me.

Miriel continues anyway. “Then you understand the severity of the situation. Can we count on your help?”

I’m still processing, figuring out the political ramifications of damaging my trust among the royal family, but they just keep going. Lissa sits down at my desk, turning the chair around to face us. “What’s the plan now?”

I look at her, injecting my voice with as much seriousness as I could. “We bring more people that we can trust in. We must keep this from the grimleal at all costs.”

“Who’s on the list right now?”


“Why Virion? He seems to be an odd choice.”

“I know I can trust him with this. He can help run a lot of the groundwork.”

“Why not Emmeryn? She seems like an obvious choice.”

“I can’t trust her not to put her pacifist values in the way of the objective. You saw how opposed she was to even considering Ylissean military research.”

Lissa swallows. Her voice is shaky. “Robin. This is flirting with treason.”
“I’d rather be treasonous than knee deep in the apocalypse.”

Miriel nods. “I agree, Lissa. This is far more important than loyalty to the Exalt.”

We spent the rest of the night planning. Lissa and Miriel would go to Chrom and Frederick in the morning. After that, Miriel would bring in the research and development head, and Lissa would bring Chrom and Frederick to get the head craftsman on board. I’m handling Virion. The first meeting is set for Monday night of next week under the guise of a brief of the new technology’s progress. Emmeryn is not invited.

In fact, she gets her progress reports handed directly to her. She doesn’t know it’s happening. Let alone that it’s going on in the private room of a very high-class banquet hall in the upper district.

“Virion. We need to speak. Is this a good time?”

“Ah, Robin! Sit down, I’ll pour you some tea.”

Virion’s tea is a strange herbal blend that I can’t really put my finger on. It’s not my favourite, but I doubt that I’ll be finding English breakfast tea in this universe.

“Thanks. Now, what do you know of the Plegian state religion – the Grimleal?”

“Not much. I know they aren’t well liked by anyone not Plegian, I know they exert a great deal of influence within Plegia and I know that they are typically zealous in their belief.”

“Pretty much. The problem is that they worship Grima. They have one single purpose: resurrect Grima by any means possible. I know for certain that, should he be resurrected, it would be the death knell for all mankind. Make no mistake, Virion, the Grimleal are the single biggest threat in Archanea.”

Virion’s face is set into a frown. “You have evidence, I assume?”

“Twofold. Here is an information package gathered by Ylisse’s informants within Plegia. Secondly, I received a vision from an unknown entity when I arrived in this realm. The Grimleal are making moves. Should we do nothing, the apocalypse will be upon us within the decade.”

He reads through the letter I handed him, sipping his tea. “The package is unreliable. The source is ex-Grimleal. For all we know, he could be trying to provoke us into war with Plegia.” He pauses for a moment, considering my previous words. “What credence can you give to support your claims of prophecy? Such things are by no means unheard of, but they are certainly extraordinary.”

The fact that prophecy are common enough to garner such a subdued response really shows how far from home I am. “You fled from a country called Rosanne over on Valm after Walhart the Conqueror invaded. You left behind a trusted retainer, Cherche. You joined the Shepherds in order to get close to prince Chrom with the goal of securing help to liberate your homeland.”

There is a pregnant pause. Virion’s stone set expression cracks, revealing a smile. “You have convinced me, friend. What would you have me do?”

“I am assembling a council to deal with the matter. I need you on it. Here’s your first set of instructions. Commit it to memory, then burn it.”
I pass Virion the envelope I had prepared earlier. “Very well. Now, on to less serious matters. From what I hear, you and the princess are quite close. Anything you’d care to tell a friend?”

His smile was now a smug grin. “Hah! In your dreams, Virion.”

Chrom and I were the first to arrive. He pulls me aside as we enter the room. “I want you to chair the council. If I’m being honest, this is out of my depth. I’m a leader, not a planner. I’m going to trust you with this.”

“I think you’re not giving yourself enough credit. But, very well.”

“Oh, and Robin? Keep your Thursday lunch hour clear. We need to meet.”

“Related to Grima, or otherwise?”

“Otherwise.”

Things went without a hitch. I’m not sure how Lissa got Chrom to side against Emmeryn, but she did. I guess he must be growing tired of inaction against Plegia’s advances. Everybody briefed everyone they were supposed to, everyone else showed up on time, and there were no uninvited guests.

“Thus, begins the first session of the anti-grimleal council. Suffice to say, you are under no circumstances permitted to share what you hear in this room or the existence of this organization with anyone else. Now. You’ve all been gathered here to combat an existential threat to both Ylisse, and Archanea as a whole. Make no mistake, people, we may not go down in history, but the actions of this council will. Our mission is singular: prevent Grima’s apocalypse by any means possible, both now and forever. Questions?”

I look to the eight people gathered. Chrom motions his hand. “I question the merits of keeping Emmeryn out of this. This would be treasonous if Lissa and I weren’t here.”

He’s not wrong. After Chrom’s father went on his crusade, Emmeryn passed a decree that permitted the rest of the royal family to act against the wishes of the Exalt. There is also a condition that allows them to extend this protection to anybody else. It was meant to prevent another war in the case of a corrupt exalt. I doubt Emmeryn foresaw it being used against her – frankly, it’s a terrible law that only serves to weaken the Exalt and sow division among the ruling class.

The craftsman – Thomus – is the epitome of a smith – massive muscles, calloused hands, along with the features of an Ylissean commoner: sandy brown hair and brown eyes. He nods, before saying “Emmeryn is a good exalt. I trust her wisdom on most matters, but I am divided on this one.”

Miriel responds. “Based on the Exalt’s previous behaviour, the likelihood of her condoning these actions are rather low. We cannot afford the be impeded at this crucial juncture. Including her introduces an unacceptable element of risk.”

The head of the research and development team – Magister Quinlan – looks like a typical noble academic: dark brown hair, blue eyes, a lean frame and sharp facial features. He says “I must agree with Miriel. Emmeryn is to be trusted in times of peace, but her father’s legacy has left her ill-equipped to deal with times of war. We are under no circumstances currently at peace with Plegia – they have been waging a shadow war for months, and we have simply rolled over and done nothing.”
Chrom seems mollified. Thomus says nothing more.

I say, “Anything else?”

Frederick speaks up. “Lissa mentions that you received a prophecy for the return of Grima. What time frame were you given?”

“I wasn’t told an exact date, and my deviation from the events of the foreseen timeline has undoubtedly changed things, but my estimation was ten years before his awakening, and twenty before the apocalypse has concluded. The vision ended with Naga sending the last remnants of the Shepherds to an alternate timeline. That timeline was saved. Ours was doomed.”

Frederick swallowed. While not rattled, he certain looked rather off put. “Who made it to the secondary timeline?”

“Nobody alive today. The future was left to the next generation.”

This information puts a grim look on everyone’s face. Chrom takes charge. “Well, we know what’s at stake now. What’s the plan, Robin?”

“In broad strokes? Use the information package that I brought with me to rapidly industrialize Ylisse. Proceed to use overwhelming military force to quash the Grimleal. Annexation of Plegia would be optimal, but installing a puppet leader would also be an acceptable outcome. In the case of a summoning event, perform an awakening ritual on a member of the exalted line in order to, er, ‘un-summon’ him. Perhaps the most powerful weapons in the package would be able to put him down, but we have no idea until we try – unlike the awakening ritual.”

Quinlan gives it some thought. “How far away are we from developing the weapons you speak of?”

“The weakest of them were developed roughly five centuries after my society was where Ylisse is now. We hadn’t cracked the strongest of them yet by five and a half centuries. However, we had to do things the hard way. You’ve got a head-start with me and my information. That being said, getting there in even sixty years would be a stretch in my opinion, let alone ten.”

He nods, accepting my explanation. “What, then, would you suggest we do in the event the awakening ritual fails – or, Naga forbid, we lose the exalted bloodline in our struggle?”

“That would be an absolute worst-case scenario. But, in such an event, I would suggest we gather our foremost experts and leaders, then petition Naga to send us to the secondary timeline. Failing that, overwhelming firepower could work. I assume you have read the schematics for artillery?”

The craftsman and magister nod. “A concentrated barrage with high-yield shells may do the trick. Honestly, though, if we’re at that point, we’ve got our back against the wall.”

The magister speaks up again. “All of the information in the packet is entirely mundane. What did your society know of magic? Perhaps there is a binding ritual we could use?”

“My society existed in a realm completely mundane. Magic was strictly limited to fiction.”

This surprises Miriel and Quinlan. Lissa seems to have had an epiphany. Quinlan replies excitedly “The implications of that are enormous! A realm without magic? How did your people have agency? Perha-”

Frederick cuts in. “Magister, we’re off topic. Might I suggest we move onto immediate actions?”
“Right. Chrom. You and I need to start preparing the Shepherds for guerrilla warfare and commando raids. A campaign against Plegia is inevitable, I would like to be as prepared as possible. Additionally, I would like you to get in touch with the Feroxi Khans. Get them up to speed. We may be unable to do this without them on our side.”

Chrom gives me a firm nod. I continue “Quinlan, start working with Thomus closely, we need to have the most useful parts of the package in development as soon as possible. Miriel should have forwarded you that by now – rifles, artillery, the combustion engine and flight.”

They both give motions of assent. “Virion. I need you to keep an ear out for grimleal activity. Get in touch with whatever contacts you have left – if they start to make a move, we need to know about it.”

He nods. Of course, he had received his actual orders yesterday. “Frederick. Start using whatever influence you have among the military to get us ready for an all-out conflict. I’ll also leave it up to your and Chrom’s discretion whether we should bring in the Wing and Knight commanders.”

Frederick considers this for a moment, before saying “The Wing commander is too close to Emmeryn. I will give thought to Knight Commander Edgar, however.” Chrom nods, agreeing with Frederick’s assessment.

“Miriel. I need you to start intensively practicing your combat magic skills. You’re one of our most capable minds – if we ever have to abandon this timeline, I need you alive to help whoever’s left set up in the new one. Once you’re at an acceptable standard, start helping out Quinlan and Thomus.” She gives a determined nod in return.

“Lissa, I need you to get in contact with people you trust in the church of Naga. If you know someone that we should bring in, run it past Chrom and I. Otherwise, try and get their healers more prepared for a protracted conflict. Also continue your physical training regimen. Chrom’s the most likely among your family to fall in the line of fire. In that case, we will need someone else to wield the Falchion and perform the awakening ritual.”

Chrom looks distressed, he cuts in “Please! Do not speak of such terrible things, Robin! Ev-”

“No, Prince Chrom. Such things are pragmatic. You wanted a tactician, you got one. I am simply accounting for every likely circumstance.”

He frowns deeply at me. “We will have words later. For now, consider Robin’s commands direct orders from me, everybody. We will meet again in two weeks for a progress report. Dismissed”

Magister Quinlan and Craftsman Thomus leave with a smart bow in Chrom’s direction. Only Shepherds are left in the room. Chrom speaks up. “I have news. Emmeryn wants us to run more counter-bandit raids. She’s still not addressing the rotten core of the issue.”

Virion shakes his head, his face was set into a thin scowl. “Someone needs to convince her of the gravity of the situation – do you think a direct confrontation would work?”

“If there is one thing I know about my sister, it’s that there’s no changing her mind once she’s made it up. No, if we want to deal with this problem, we’ll have to do it covertly. We’re going to travel to Regna Ferox to ask for assistance with a top-secret raid into Plegian territory.”

I ask “A black-op? Who’s the target? Grimleal or royalty?”

“I’m currently undecided. We’ll also inform the Khans of the situation. The trip is planned to depart in five weeks’ time. Emmeryn thinks it’s simply a diplomatic meeting to discuss the raiding
problems. That’s it for now. I’ll be speaking to the rest of the Shepherds tomorrow. Robin, Virion. A word, before you go.”

I wasn’t exactly eager to keep this from the rest of the council, but Virion insisted we do until his people had arrived. “I trust your letters have been sent?”

I had instructed Virion to gather all the personnel he had left behind in Rosanne in exchange for a promise to help him free his country however I could once Grima had been dealt with. Apparently, he was rather well-liked within the country’s academic circles, so he should be able to convince some of his old friends to head over to Ylisstol.

“Indeed. With favourable conditions, they should be joining us in four months. Five if things have deteriorated on the continent”

“Good. We need people in on this that are unknown to Emmeryn and her base. I’ve ordered appropriate facilities to be covertly constructed both within the worker’s district. I want your list of recommendations for the council once they arrive.”

This is… oddly out of character for Chrom. I mean, he clashed with Emmeryn and her policies in the games, but it never got to the point of outright defiance. Is this the result of the butterfly effect, or simply an aspect of Chrom’s character that wasn’t shown?

Chrom brought in the rest of the Shepherds this morning. It was one of his conditions, apparently. Reactions were fairly standard – they suspected something was up with me, and were glad it was nothing malicious. The barracks had an air of grim determination about them. I guess being told that the apocalypse could be here within the decade would have that effect.

There’s a voice at my door. “You in there, Robin?”

“Yeah, come in.” It’s Chrom. He’s giving me a stern look. Better get this over with, I guess. “Lay it on me.”

“You can’t be treating people like they are nothing but resources.”

Oh. That’s what he’s so upset about?. I guess he has a point? Being treated like an asset would probably be pretty demoralizing. “If you say so. I can coat my strategy and tactics in softer words, if that would help.”

“That’s not what I meant. You’re forgetting that your ordering around people, not mindless automatons.”

“What, specifically, are you referring to?”

“Your orders for Miriel and Lissa. I know for a fact that Lissa was in tears last night. She thinks you don’t care about her. Miriel may accept your cold logic, but everyone else needs a more personal touch.”

Lissa was that shook up? Why? I know she’s been a bit distant lately – ever since the presentation I gave to Emmeryn, but I thought she’d work through it and talk to me when she’s ready.

I shake my head. Drama was a pain in the ass. If Lissa’s got a problem that she isn’t going to solve herself, I guess I best take the direct approach. “Lissa’s been a bit distant lately, do you know why
that is?”

Chrom lets out a long-suffering sigh. “I do. You’ll have to ask her yourself, though.”

I give it some thought. I really don’t have the time for it right now – I’m flat-out with combat practice, magic practice, consultations with the R-and-D team and meetings with the rest of the Shepherds. “I guess I can ask her during combat practice tomorrow, then.”

“No, Robin. You’re going to go to the atrium right now and ask her. Without fail. Or else I will drag you there myself.”

That sets off alarm bells in my head. Things are urgent enough to warrant an immediate visit? What on earth has caused this? “As you command, Chrom.”

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“Lissa? Chrom ordered me to speak with you. What’s happening?”

She turns around. Rather than her typical smile, she has a dejected look on her face. “Do you even care, Robin?”

“What, what are you talking about?”

“You treat me like a weapon to use against Grima - an object, not a person. Does our friendship even mean anything to you?”

There are tears welling up in her eyes. Shit. I forgot Lissa was only a kid. She doesn’t have the emotional maturity to deal with such matters yet. I curse at myself internally - I was way too cold last night. Way to go, douchebag.

“I admit, I was a bit too callous last night. Perhaps I am too used to dealing with people more hardened to the world. But. Rest assured, Lissa, I value our friendship very much. After all, you hold the title of my first friend in Archanea – where would I be without you?”

I crack a wry smile. Lissa does too. “Lying face down in a field, that’s where – and don’t you forget it!”

“Forgive me?”

“Maybe. You’ll have to make it up to me, though.”

“Oh? How so?”

“Learn how to use a staff. You know far too much anatomy for us to not teach you. Besides, Maribelle and I can’t be everywhere on the battlefield.”

It takes me a moment to process that. Maybe I wasn’t giving her enough credit – I was expecting something like me taking the blame for one of her pranks.

“And I suppose that you’re offering to teach me?”

“You betcha! I’ll be around same time as usual. See ya then!”

And just like that, she’s back to her cheery self.
White magic – as I’ve taken to calling it – requires far more finesse than combat magic. Rather than performing the same set of actions for the same result every time, white magic requires you to manually direct energy from the realm into the desired area. The staves – like spell books – act as catalysts. However, directing the energy by itself will do nothing but cause some burns. You also have to use the energy to accelerate the body’s natural healing mechanism.

Just how I do that is a bit beyond me right now. Unfortunately, that means I’ve been giving Lissa burns. They’re pretty minor, but literally burning her due to my own inability puts a real damper on my enthusiasm for our practice sessions.

It’s also tiring – like, really tiring. Acting as a conduit for energy naturally causes some of your own to escape into your spell, which, when combined with the fact that you’re expending energy to actually start the spell, means that I end up dead tired by the end of it.

It’s Thursday, the meeting Chrom told me about at the council is happening in his personal sunroom. The view over Ylisse is amazing.

“Alright, what’s this about, Chrom?”

“I’m going to start having you lead raids against the bandits. Things are starting to get out of control – we need to cut down their numbers so that things are manageable while we’re away in Plegia. I also want you to get more experience leading from the front.”

“Makes sense. Do we have intel about where they’re holed up?”

“Yeah. They’re concentrated in the mountain range to the west of Ylisstol.”

This is unexpected – nothing like this happened in the games. Although, I don’t know what I was expecting, given that most of my foreknowledge about specific events is essentially useless. This also means I’m going to have less time for magical training – both with Miriel and Lissa.

“Who am I taking with me?”

“I want you to pick the team for this one – bring five Shepherds with you. Frederick, Sully and Stahl are needed elsewhere, and I need to stay behind in Ylisstol. Your first mission departs tomorrow night. Here’s the briefing.”

“Thanks, I’d best get to work. See you, Chrom.”

While I’m not happy with the situation, it could honestly be worse. In the end I decided on Lissa, Miriel, Virion, Vaike and Kellam. We should be back in time for the next council session, provided things go smoothly, so I’m not terribly worried about taking some of the members with me.

Our first target is a day and a half’s journey from the capitol – an abandoned tin mine that some travellers reported as being inhabited by ruffians. The second is less than a day further – a small lumber mill that a nearby village has lost contact with – no prizes for guessing why.
From Quinlan’s report, he expects rifles to be ready before the month is out. The trouble spot is ammunition – the smiths are having to develop more advanced techniques in order to produce the casings efficiently. Ylisse also lacks access Saltpetre in any significant quantity – the little we do get is from a small mine in Regna Ferox. That’s a bit of a problem, considering it’s a vital ingredient in gunpowder. Normally, it’s used in some minor rituals and not much else. Plegia, on the other hand, has deserts practically made of the stuff. That being said, I’d obviously rather they not get their hands on the recipe.

All the more incentive for annexation, I guess.

Chapter End Notes

And that's the first chapter. While I plan on updating this as frequently as I can, things might not work out that way. Chapters will likely be a similar length to this one. Looking at the plan I've got in front of me, this could easily hit 100k+ words.

Until next time.
Riding on horseback is a pain in the arse. Literally and figuratively. Worse, we departed just before dusk and are riding through the night. It’s all for a good reason, of course – we should arrive at the mine around midnight two days from now - the perfect time for an ambush.

Mirieli and Lissa spent the first few hours of the ride explaining more advanced magical theory to me. Virion, surprisingly, was also well versed in the practice. He added his insight from time to time. Vaike and Kellam were a bit lost by the conversation, so they rode ahead somewhat.

Honestly, most of it went a bit over my head too, but I’m sure I’ll get it after I read the literature more deeply. Overall, it was very uneventful, and, come dawn, we stopped for a rest.

Most of us had been up for more than twenty hours at this point, so a rest was in order. We set up a small camp and guard shifts a small way away from the road.

Everybody got about six hours of rest before we departed. I had requisitioned some ‘reinvigoration draughts’ from the Ylissean Royal Alchemists, so I’m not too concerned about everyone being tired for the ambush.

Lissa convinced me to let her ride double with me after a few hours so that she could have me practice my white magic. She says I’m getting better at it, but I still haven’t even managed to direct the energy properly, so I’ll take her words with a grain of salt.

Riding double is far more uncomfortable, so all in all, my afternoon was very tiring and very frustrating. By my judgement, we arrived at the mine at around eleven – although, I could be very wrong, given the lack of timekeeping devices in our possession.

“Kellam. Do you reckon you could sneak in closer to get a better look at their setup?”

I had specifically instructed Kellam to armour lightly for this mission – he’s far too good a sneak to not use as a scout - though he is still using a spear as his weapon. I had always wondered why the games had him classed as an armoured knight rather than a thief or assassin.

“Sure thing. What am I looking for?”

“Sentry position, armament and number. The number of entrances into the place. Possible ambush routes. Unguarded directions – that sort of thing.”

He departs into the darkness. Between the six of us we have a single shuttered lantern. Naturally, we had more, but we left them with the horses a way back.

After a while, Kellam returned.

“Four sentries. All with bows and arrows. Armoured with leather jerkins and not much else. They’re all sitting around a fire chatting – not paying attention.”

“Perfect. Everyone, drink one of these. It’ll wake you up. Virion, Miriel, do you think you could take the four of them before they alert their buds?”
I hand out the draughts. Everyone unstoppers them and downs it in a gulp. It tastes… like an espresso shot. Seriously? Was their ‘reinvigoration draught’ just coffee? I guess so.

Virion says, “It’ll be tough, but I could take two.”

“…I am unsure. I can certainly get the first, but the second may be beyond me.” Miriel responds, apologetic.

Kellam gives the problem some thought, before saying “I’m handy with a javelin. I could get the last one.”

“Then it’s settled. Anything else?”

Kellam spoke up again “I only saw the one entrance to the mine. You and I could bottleneck them in there with our shields.”

“We don’t know if there’s a secondary exit. It’d be best if we breach and clear the mine.” Seeing no more questions, I continued “Ok. We’ll talk about that once we clear the sentries, though. For now, we don’t want to draw attention to ourselves, so stay quiet.”

Kellam leads us through the near darkness to the mine. True to his report, the sentries aren’t paying attention at all. From the sounds of things, they may actually be drunk.

I gesture for everyone to get ready. The Shepherds now have their own hand signals that had been ruthlessly drilled into all of us by Frederick the day after the first council meeting. He took ‘prepare for guerrilla warfare and commando raids’ fairly seriously – I’m thankful for it, however.

I count down from four, and on zero, a bolt of fire, an arrow and a javelin are loosed. A beat later, a second arrow flies. All four of them strike a target.

The first guard has his head blasted through by the bolt – it doesn’t really explode or anything: the back of his skull just caves in and he slumps over dead. The second has a javelin fly and strike him in the back of the neck – silencing him. Virion’s first arrow strikes his target in the throat likewise – he keels over with nary but a croak.

The second arrow, however, strikes the final guard in the shoulder. He lets out a yelp of surprise “In-”

His call is silenced by a second bolt from Miriel. We all duck down, waiting to see if any bandits come rushing out of the mine. A few moments pass. All is silent save for the rustling of the surrounding forest in the mountain wind.

More moments pass. Nothing. We all exhale in relief. I begin speaking in a low tone. “Well done, Miriel, that may have saved us there. Ok, here’s the plan: Kellam and I are going to be in the front if the width of the mine permits it. Our job is to be the shield wall. Vaike, you’re directly behind us – take any attacks of opportunity you can. Lissa, you’re behind him, heal any wounds the party gets. Virion, Miriel, you’re in the back line. If the tunnels permit it, fire past us into the enemy. Otherwise, prevent any flanking action. Now, ideally, we’re going to sneak in there and slit the throats of everyone while they sleep – the formation is for the case that we’re discovered.”

Everyone acknowledges the plan. I take a quick look around the former guards’ setup. There’s a campfire, some chairs and a table with playing cards splayed out. Nothing of note. We move out and enter the mine. There isn’t a foyer or anything – just a downward sloping tunnel reinforced with wooden struts and a thatched mesh. It looks sturdy enough, but I wouldn’t trust the integrity of it if the struts were destroyed. The tunnel is wide enough for two abreast, but not tall enough for our back
row to shoot over our heads.

I’ve got to hunch if I don’t want to hit my head on the beams. Bloody midget Ylisseans. We move
down the tunnel carefully. After about thirty meters from the entrance, the tunnel opens up into a
cavernous room. I motion for everybody else to hold back a bit while I take a look. There’s a
wooden landing with a wide ramp leading down into the room. There isn’t any cover, but they
haven’t noticed me yet.

It’s a full-blown operation – a quick glance reveals at least thirty bandits in various stages of
wakefulness. The far wall has four metal cages against it. Slave cages – there looks to be a few
people in each. Other than the one we’re standing in; the room lacks any other exits. There are
bedrolls scattered about the room. Roughly half are currently occupied. There are weapons leant
against things all over the room. Most of them are axes, though I spot a few bows and swords.

Despite the sloppy guardsmen, these guys are very well armed and supplied – not one person looks
to be in the rags typical of barbarians. This is obviously Plegian military operation. Bandits my ass.
We need to put this down hard. Unfortunately, there’s no way we’re going to do this stealthily. Not
with that many people. I duck back into the tunnel before someone sees me. I explain the situation to
everyone.

“Virion, Miriel. Focus anyone with ranged capability. Kellam, Vaike and I will handle anyone
coming up the ramp. Lissa, stay back and keep an eye on our flank, we’ll call if we need healing.
Yell for Vaike if you notice someone trying to sneak up on us.”

Everyone nods. Lissa moves back. I signal for everyone to begin. Miriel starts flinging fireballs at the
occupied bedrolls, Virion nails anyone with a bow and, Vaike yells “Come and get us, Plegian
dogs!”

Our position was good, but not perfect – the ramp wasn’t quite small enough to hold with two people
abreast, so Vaike had to be on the frontline without a shield. That isn’t ideal, considering that he’s a
big target without much in the way of protection.

Our initial surprise attack proved to be very effective, however. Virion and Miriel took out at least
eight of them in the first few seconds. After they realised what was happening and dived behind
cover, it became a matter of waiting them out and holding the landing.

Vaike’s taunt also seemed to work well, as a number of fighters simply charged the ramp without
heed for their own safety. They were quickly dispatched under a combined volley of arrows and
flames.

Someone must have had a brain, however, because the remaining Plegians – sixteen or so – picked
up shields and formed an impressively coordinated shield wall. While this may have neutralized
Virion, it didn’t do much to help them against Miriel, who simply lit fires under their feet – literally.

This, of course, threw their formation into disarray, allowing Virion to pick a couple more off.
Whatever plans their commander had went out the window with that – they were quickly losing
both manpower and morale. So, he threw all of his chips on black and called a charge.

We braced ourselves. Their first line was led by an absolute mountain of a man wielding a two-
handed great-axe. He was headed straight for me. Their line hit ours like a runaway train – the big
dude decided he wanted to get my shield out of the equation, so he knocked it back with a shoulder
barge. I managed to hold onto it, but I had to leap back to avoid the follow-up strike. Kellam and
Vaike instinctively took steps backward to compensate. Kellam lashed out with his spear, skewering
his own opponent. Vaike managed to trade a shallow abdominal wound for his opponent’s life.
I had to take another few steps backwards to not be split down the middle. He overswung and put his weapon through the boards beneath our feet. Unperturbed, he simply wrenched it out without batting an eye. I internally shake myself - I’m not confident in my shield’s ability to block that thing. We’re fast running out of landing here – a few more steps and we’ll have to fight in the tunnels.

Actually, that’s a not a bad idea. “Shepherds – assume tunnel formation, as we planned!” We started to give up ground like it was going out of fashion – each step backwards bringing us closer to the exit, but Kellam and I took our pound of flesh for every damned inch. The big guy was relentless – each swing coming closer to hitting than the last.

Each time he missed, Kellam would take the opportunity to stab him with his spear. While he was good enough to not get hit anywhere vital, his body was soon pocked with shallow cuts.

We finally got a good hit in fifteen meters from the exit – the big guy decided he’d had enough and began to charge, raising his axe above his head. I wasn’t having any of that, so I leapt forward, into his space – and far too close for him to use his now badly out of position axe.

For his trouble, he took a shield to the nose and a mace to the knee. Kellam joined in and finally managed to skewer him through the torso. And, just like that, he fell and did not get back up.

The rest of the bandits looked nervous at that. This guy was obviously either their leader or their powerhouse – probably both. There were only five of them left at this point, too. We began pushing forward. One fell to an attack of opportunity from Vaike. Two were impaled by Kellam. The other two were bludgeoned without trouble by me.

The slaves were not in good shape. They looked to have been beaten, starved and tortured for the better part of a few weeks. They were also from the mill that the village nearby had lost contact with – our next target for purging bandits. We offered to escort them back and remove any remaining threats; they gladly accepted.

The mine itself is clearly very old – cleaned of tin and then abandoned some time ago. Despite this, it is still in good shape. I’m not sure how I feel about just leaving it – given that it will likely just fill back up with ruffians in a few months.

In regards to the possessions of the bandits themselves, there wasn’t anything too amazing – a few thousand gold and some nice weapons that were appropriated for use by the Shepherds. No correspondence from Plegia, either. I guess they must have destroyed it in order to cover their asses.

Damn, I could have used a good casus belli.

We rested up and departed for the mill at around eight the next day.

The mill didn’t have any bandit presence, which was a relief for the former slaves. There wasn’t any major damage, either, so they think they could get it back up and working before too long.

We couldn’t stick around, though – we’ve got a bit of a schedule to keep if we want to be back in time for next Monday’s council session. It’s Saturday today, and we’ve still got eight sites left to hit.
The rest of the week went about the same – we’d travel between sites by day, arrive to find them either abandoned or occupied, clear out any bandits and move onto the next. It was tough work – especially considering I spent my time travelling also exhausting myself by practicing magic. By Thursday we’d hit five more sites: three of them occupied. We had long since depleted our small store of coffee – much to my annoyance.

“Keep on trying. You need to command the energy: make it bend to your will and heal your patient.”

“I’m trying. It’s just not working out for me.”

I still had not cracked white magic. Lissa – bless her – simply refused to give up trying to help me, despite all of the energy burns she receives during our practice.

Virion moves over to us, and says “If I may interject, I think I may know what’s wrong. You are not conceptualizing the energy correctly: you’re thinking of it as a wild beast to be tamed and brought to heel, am I correct?”

“That’s the impression I got from how people described it. Is there a better alternative?”

“I see… I’ve met people with this problem before – if I recall, it was quite vexing for them to get over. Perhaps you should visualize the energy in a way more suitable for yourself, rather than how others think of it?”

That seems… absurd. Still, I guess things like visualization could have an effect on your signature. But what to think of it as?

Oh, bloody hell. I’ve been thinking of the energy as some living being – something with an innate will and consciousness. As I’ve come to discover, such ideas are rather foreign to this world – I guess that’s because it’s a hold-over from Earth’s religions. Maybe I should consider the energy as, well, energy – simple, right?

“Well, let’s give it a try.”

I begin the incantation. And, just like that, Lissa’s burns vanish. Huh. I’m an idiot. I should have realised something was wrong days ago, and changed my way of thinking, rather than just continuing to throw myself at the problem.

Lissa, seeing her work pay off, let’s out a whoop of excitement “You did it! Congratulations, Robin!”

My magical abilities began to improve much faster after that breakthrough – by the time we arrived back in Ylisstol on Sunday I could cast a simple heal spell consistently. Miriel also began helping me out again, and I’ve got a much stronger grasp on anima magic now – in fact, I even managed to cast the basic fire spell a few times; though I haven’t quite got it down perfectly yet. Chrom met us at the palace gates. He looks gaunt. I doubt we look much better, though.

“Robin, you’re back. Good.”

“Chrom? What’s happened?”
“The bandits have ramped up their attacks on our breadbasket provinces. You’ve secured Ylisse’s mines and lumber, but they’ve been hitting agriculture hard in the past week. Frederick and I have been running almost non-stop putting out fires.”

That’s bad. Ylisse’s primary export is food to Regna Ferox – they hit us there and they damage Ylisse’s economy big time. “Has the situation been contained?”

“No, you need to get back out there. The rest of the Shepherds can handle defence well enough, you need to hit them where they live. Here’s an information packet with everything we know about them.”

We head back out almost immediately – only stopping to replace our horses and provisions. While I’m at it I send a runner to grab more expresso from the alchemists. It isn’t the best coffee, but it’s better than nothing at all.

I crack open the packet once we’re out of Ylisstol. It says a unit of about forty is holed up in the forests between Themis and the provinces that hold Ylisse’s farms…

I curse internally. That town that gets razed in the games is about to get hit, isn’t it? Maribelle is not exactly a pushover, don’t get me wrong, but against a squad of Plegian regulars? Not a chance.

We need to put this down, pronto. Unfortunately, the council meeting will have to be postponed. Vaike pulls up beside me. “What’s the plan, boss?”

That’s a bit odd. He never calls Robin boss in the games, does he? I guess it must just be a butterfly or something. “We’re headed to the forests north east of Themis. We’re going to disrupt any bandit activities we find, and, if at all possible, obtain proof of Plegia’s involvement. Ideally, we are going to remove whoever’s coordinating these attacks from the picture, permanently.”

Themis is a province in the southwest of Ylisse. It’s where most of the country’s livestock is produced - many of the warhorses used by the Knights are also raised there. It’s capital city, also called Themis, is a major trading hub in southern Ylisse.

The provinces surrounding Themis are mostly minor farming provinces responsible for wine and grain production. All in all, it’s not a place we want the Plegians to get their grubby hands on.

Kellam motions for me to stop. “That’s a big camp. They’re packing up, too. I dread to think where they’re headed.”

I give the place a look. “Yeah. I don’t think we can take them on conventionally. Let’s head back to the others.”

Kellam and I depart from our hiding spot in the brush. We’d arrived at the main bandit staging area – a very large clearing in the forest, and, by the looks of things, something big is about to go down. It also seems that the estimate for the size of the unit was way off, too.

“Bad news, guys. There’s at least six-hundreds of them. Taking them on directly is a suicide mission.”

Lissa gasps in horror. “How in Naga’s name did so many get assemble without us knowing?!”

Virion speaks up. “We need to retreat and come back with reinforcements. Themis has a garrison of
considerable size, perhaps we could bring troops in from there?"

Kellam shakes his head. “There’s no time. These guys will be ready to move out tomorrow – wherever they’re going isn’t going to be prepared enough to take so many!”

The situation is deteriorating quickly – the bandits need to be stopped before they’re ready to move.

“Vaike. I’m going to send you to Themis. Get there as soon as you possibly can and raise a force to deal with this.” As I’m speaking, I start writing a letter to the Duke of Themis. Lissa and I both mark it with our seals of office – no-one will stop this from reaching its destination: not if they don’t want to be charged with treason, that is. “As for the rest of us, we’re going to be delaying them by any means necessary – we’re banking on getting those troops.”

I hand Vaike the letter. He gives a wave and starts galloping off towards Themis. If he pushes his horse to exhaustion he should be able to get there before midnight. We should have reinforcements by mid-morning tomorrow. Everyone else faces me expectantly.

Lissa asks “So, what’s the plan, Robin?”

“Right. Kellam. I need you to infiltrate their camp – take out a sentry and disguise yourself. Start sabotaging stuff – kill their horses, dump their water, set some tents on fire. See if you can take out a few important people, too. If you get noticed, get out of there. The rest of us will be covering for Kellam if he gets discovered – we won’t be able to take on all of them, but hopefully we’ll be able to draw enough heat for him to escape.”

The plan didn’t go as well as I’d hoped. Kellam only managed to take out some of their horses before someone discovered him. In his escape, he managed to kill someone important looking and set a few supply tents on fire, but nowhere near what I’d been hoping for.

Our distraction killed ten or so before we had to get out or potentially get overwhelmed. At least Miriel managed to light a whole bunch of their tents on fire in the confusion.

We retreated to regroup and replan. Virion has a suggestion “There’s no way they’ll fall for the disguise trick again. I say we take out a few sentries and leave them to worry overnight.”

Miriel considers it before saying “Doing nothing overnight wastes time that we don’t have. I suggest sneaking up and lighting fires from range periodically.”

I consider our options. We really don’t have many – if we try to do another direct assault, even as a distraction, they’re bound to wise up and trap us. If we can manage to take out their sentries, we could potentially harass them from the cover of the tree line. Until they get fed up and send hunting parties after us, that is.

Actually, that’s not a bad idea – we can handle hunting parties no problem. Not so much a direct confrontation, but small groups wouldn’t be a problem.

“I’ve got something. Our problem is that we can’t handle all of them at once, right? Well, let’s try and bait them into splitting into groups to try and hunt us down. We’ll take out their sentries and cause some damage, then just run off into the night. If they don’t chase us, we’ll do it again. They’re bound to grow tired of it and send people to deal with the problem.”
“Alright, see that big tent over there? Think you can hit it?”

I point to a large tent about fifty meters away. Many people are coming and going from it. If I had to guess, it’d be a mess tent. Miriel nods, and begins flinging fireballs at a rapid clip. The oiled cloth catches quickly, and soon enough, the entire thing is alight. As we hoped, there’s angry shouts of people calling for our heads.

“Alright, time to split.”

Miriel flings a few more fireballs and we all flee. They’ve caught onto our position and are already in pursuit. Looking behind us, the plan worked a bit too well, I’d say. We must have hit something important, because that got them real angry at us.

I think I underestimated the number of people that they’d send our way - there’s about eighty of them hot on our tail. By the looks of things, they’re mostly melee fighters, thankfully. Virion begins firing potshots at them - he manages to take a few down, but he really can’t stop to aim.

So now we’re fighting a running battle against angry Plegians through a forest. Unfortunately, we really can’t do this forever, and Miriel is already flagging. We need to get further from the camp before we make a stand though.

“Robin! We can’t keep this up forever!” yells Lissa.

Miriel, who is red-faced from both physical and magical exertions, gives an exhausted agreement “I am quickly running out of energy. I will not be able to continue this for much longer!”

Damn. We aren’t nearly far enough away - the Plegians could easily call for more reinforcements if we made a stand - even ignoring the fact that if we made a stand here, we’d be quickly surrounded and summarily executed. I curse internally. A Plan! We need a plan!

We’re coming up on another clearing. That’ll do. “Shepherds! We make our stand in that clearing! Miriel! I need you to secure our flanks! Set the forest on fire! Get a good blaze going! We’ll have to hold until sunrise!”

It’s not ideal - I doubt the fire will last as long as we need it to, but it will buy us some time. As we come into the clearing, Miriel starts using the last of her energy to set the brush at the edges of the clearing alight. Thankfully, it was rather dry and very quickly we’ve got a wall of flames separating us from the Plegians. A few made it through before the fire got well and truly going, but they weren’t much trouble.

“Alright everyone, take five. Miriel, get some rations and a nap. Kellam, you and I will make sure nobody gets any wise ideas. We’ll move out if we see an opportunity.”

Now, we’ve essentially boxed ourselves in, but what I’m hoping is that the forest fire that we’ve just caused will spread enough to give us an opportunity to slip out in the confusion. Looking around the clearing, we shouldn’t have to worry about the fire spreading inwards too much - there doesn’t seem to be any plants here.

That’s very odd, actually. There’s a perfect circle where no plants at all grow... Shit. This seems like black magic fuckery to me. I guess we’ll just have to hope there’s nothing left over from whatever went down that’ll fuck with us.

The air is starting to get thick with smoke. It’s not that bad yet, but if it gets too much worse we may
be in trouble.

We managed to get about ten minutes of rest before the Plegians tried something. A few warriors clad in steaming armor came running through the inferno. They must have doused themselves in water to protect themselves from the heat. They were quickly dispatched by Kellam, Viron and I. It seems that their protections weren’t adequate; they were all covered in some nasty burns.

By this point, the fire was well and truly going - the sky was thick with smoke, and the forest a solid orange inferno. It was well beyond my expectation - there was no way that we would be going anywhere - not until it died down. I’m beginning to worry that we may have made a mistake with this. Our purpose was to harass the Plegians so that they wouldn’t be ready to depart by sunrise. But what we’ve done is lock ourselves down in this clearing - the Plegians are free to do however they please.

I curse my short sightedness, before sighing. There’s nothing for it, we’ll just have to hope everything turns out well.

The rest of the night passed without another Plegian incursion. By my judgement, it was around five in the morning when the fire died down enough to escape. No Plegians were found. The forest was thoroughly gutted - and still very much burning.

When we made our way back to our horses, we found that they were gone - along with our gear. The Plegians must have found them. At least we didn’t lose anything that we couldn’t afford to lose - all the intel and confidential correspondence was kept on my person.

What is most worrying, however, is the tracks leading towards Themis - the dirt road had clearly seen a lot of traffic recently, so it seems reasonable that the Plegians are marching there now.

Once again, I let out a string of curses in my mind - there’s a whole bunch of unprotected farming villages between here and Themis. We’re all running on fumes at this point. Even if we caught up, we’d be fighting tired and hungry. We ate the rations we carried with us last night, and the rest were with the horses.

I messed up - big time. We shouldn’t have got bogged down like that. Completely amateur.

“Robin!”

I turned to face the speaker - Vaike was riding towards us with many people in his wake. He looks like crap - he’s undoubtedly been going non-stop.

“Vaike! Do you know where the bandits went?”

He gives me a defeated look “They’re laying siege to Themis right now. The unit we found wasn’t the only one.”

That’s worrying. This looks like a full-on invasion force. “How many more?”

“At least six thousand. I got as many people as possible out before they sealed the city. Robin… it’s bad. They’ve been executing civilians.”

I look at the people behind him. They’re mostly women and children with nothing but the clothes on their backs. There couldn’t have been more than forty.
We decided that trying to break the siege by ourselves was impossible, so we walked to a nearby town - which took the better part of the day, then rested and requisitioned food and horses before making our way back to the capital. We entrusted the refugees into the care of a passing Knight patrol.

Chrom once again met us at the gates of the palace. “Robin, Lissa. It does my heart good to see you safe. After we heard of the attack, we didn’t know what to think.”

“What happened? We’ve been in the dark about things.”

“Truly? That is… worrying. Come, it’ll be best to do this inside.”

Chrom led us to one of the royal family’s conference chambers. Frederick, Emmeryn, and the Knight and Wing commanders were also present. We sat, and Emmeryn began speaking.

“Before we begin, we would like to hear your side of the story. We have limited knowledge of what happened.”

“As per the verbal communication received from Prince Chrom, Princess Lissa, Vaike, Kellam, Miriel, Virion and I departed Ylisstol two days ago to deal with an imminent bandit threat in the forests near Themis. However, rather than a small force numbering around forty, as the intelligence we were provided with suggested, we found an army numbering somewhere around six-hundred. I made the decision to send Vaike to Themis in order to rally troops to help pacify them. In order to buy time, the rest of us began engaging in diversionary and sabotage tactics. It worked to an extent - many of their horses and a significant portion of their tents were destroyed or rendered unusable. However, we were eventually bogged down and had to cease all offensive activities. This allowed the enemy to finish packing up and depart. At this point, we had no horses, supplies or energy left, so I made the decision to retreat to the capital.”

There was a lot of worried murmuring at my mention of the size of the Plegian force.

Vaike began filling in everyone on his side of things. He explained that not long after he arrived in Themis the first of the bandits arrived. Things only went downhill from there. The Plegians began sending in squads of fighters to cause havoc in the streets. They must have had saboteurs and assassins on the inside because the gates remained open and the walls unmanned. Vaike decided that the city was pretty much lost so he organized some civilians and managed to get a group of people through the Plegian blockade.

Emmeryn started to fill us in. “That explains the reports we’ve received, then… Themis and the surrounding villages have been razed. We’ve received a few refugees… but not nearly enough. If they had saboteurs disabled the city’s defenses, then it would explain how they managed to do so as swiftly as they did.”

Lissa and Kellam were flabbergasted at this. Themis was one of Ylisse’s most populous cities, and the province produced major strategic resources for the Ylissean military. I guess the silver lining is that livestock is one of Ylisse’s domestic goods, rather than an export…

I ask “What of the Plegians? Are they still running amok? Or have they returned to their dens?”

Frederick informed us that after the razing of Themis, the force hightailed it to the Plegian border. We were dismissed from the meeting and told to rest up. Emmeryn was conflicted on how to respond to the tragedy, despite the obvious course of action. She said she would be in conference
with her advisors for several days, and would share her decision with the Ylissean military command - of which I am technically part of - afterwards.

Reports continued to trickle in, and Chrom kept me apprised of the situation. A few days after the attack and the survivor count was estimated to be at about four thousand. No one city could comfortably hold them all, so they were split up into a few groups and dispersed across the country. There are currently no plans to rebuild Themis.

“The sheer audacity of those wretched Plegians! They sack our city and kill our people, then have the nerve to claim it was ‘bandits’! Pah! I’ll have Gangrel’s head on a pike as retribution for the lives of every man, woman and child he slaughtered!” To say that Chrom was livid was an understatement.

The reports of the scouts sent to evaluate the ruins of the city have just arrived. It was confirmed that the Plegians had people on the inside that sabotaged the gates. After Vaike left, the Plegian Dark mages began bombardment of the city with fire magic. The dry thatch and timber was the perfect fuel. The city was now home to thirty thousand cremated bodies. Make no mistake, Gangrel will pay for his crimes in time.

I exhale. The past few days have been exhausting. “We need to move up our timetable. Gangrel and the Grimleal are too dangerous to be left alive.”

“Agreed. Emmeryn will not approve of it, however.”

“She’ll have to deal with it, then. Have you heard anything about Maribelle?”

“No, unfortunately. Many of the bodies are simply too burned to identify, so we have no way of knowing whether she perished or managed to escape.”

“If she’s been captured I have no doubts we’ll hear of her ransom soon.”

Unfortunately, that’s the reality of the situation. It seems we’ll simply have to wait and see what comes of it. I give it some more thought, and ask “What’s the progress on the rifles? If even a prototype can be ready by then we’ll have an ace up our sleeve in the event of a meeting.”

“There have been complications, apparently. Something about small parts giving them trouble? You’ll have to ask Thomus tonight”

“Thus begins the second session of the anti-grimleal council.”

I give a glance to the people at the table. Everybody had made it without incident. Miriel, Lissa and Virion all looked haggard from our time on the road - hell, I probably did too. Chrom, also was looking like he’d had a few sleepless nights. Frederick, Quinlan and Thomus all looked no worse for wear.

I continue, “I’d like to start this off with a progress report on the technologies being developed. Thomus, if you’d start?”

The craftsman nods, and says “We’ve made significant progress on the development of the rifle
device. There have been complications to do with our smithing methods being insufficiently precise for the more complicated parts, but we’re working on it. I’d say that we’re still on track to meet the original projection, however.”

“That’s good to hear. How are things on your end, Quinlan?”

“We’ve made progress in regards to gunpowder - our alchemists have devised an appropriate method of production, and our tests have been promising. However, as your information packet suggested, the substance produces smoke during combustion. We’ve hit a roadblock in the production of the percussion cap and smokeless powder, however - we can’t quite seem to get the mixtures right. We’ve had limited success, but not the the extent that the products would be viable for use.”

That’s better than I had hoped - I’d included best guesses for how to produce the explosives used in a bullet: cotton and nitric acid for smokeless powder, saltpetre and charcoal for non-smokeless variety, and mercury, alcohol and nitric acid for the percussion cap. Nitric acid - also known as aqua fortis - I know had once been produced by heating saltpetre and clay back in the day of the alchemists of my world.

All this experimentation would have been very costly if I had decided to privately develop everything - instead, they were being funded through the discretionary funds that the craftsmen’s guild, Chrom, the Shepherds and the academy have access to. There’s a bit of a paper trail, but I’m not terribly worried about it - they are discretionary funds, after all.

“Perhaps your reagents are too dilute? I would suggest trying some of the procedures detailed in the package in order to increase the concentration. In any case, keep up the good work. Now, we should discuss the recent events in Themis.”

At the mention of the city, everyone’s expression turned dark.

Chrom asks “Do you suspect the Grimleal to be involved?”

I reply “Almost certainly. The Grimleal thrive off of the suffering of Naga’s faithful - there would have been merriment in the capital at the news.”

Thomus shakes his head, his expression downcast “Truly? That is a terrible thing… I will not feel remorse when the guild’s creations destroy their organization.”

“Chrom, do we have a timeline for a counter attack? This cannot go without retaliation, no matter what Emmeryn may think.” I ask.

“I’ve been doing some thinking. If they truly have kidnapped Duchess Maribelle, then they are certain to use her as leverage to get whatever they desire from Emmeryn. I suggest that we crash the exchange - Gangrel will undoubtedly be present to gloat: it would be the perfect opportunity. If I had to guess, they’ll be sending a ransom letter sometime soon.”

That’s right - the Duke of Themis had been confirmed to have died earlier today, and his title was passed to Maribelle. Though how much she would gain from being the Duchess of a gutted province is debatable.

“If we can have even a prototype rifle ready by then we’ll have a major tactical advantage.”

Thomus nods “I’ll attempt to expedite the process, but I have doubt we’ll have one ready in time.”

The meeting quickly wrapped up from there - no new orders were issued.
The days after we arrived back in Ylisstol were quiet, thankfully. I got a lot more practice in with both white and anima magic - I can now proficiently use basic combat magic! I’m not great at it, yet, but it’s a skill in my repertoire that I didn’t have a week ago, so I’m happy with my progress.

I’ve been practicing with Sully, trying to incorporate magic into melee combat. It’s tough, but I’m getting better.

The thing about magic is that you need to hold the spellbook, perform somatic actions, and say the verbal components all at the same time - it doesn’t leave much allowance for holding a weapon and shield.

I managed to circumvent the shield issue by having my shield strapped to my forearm rather than grasped by a handle. That simply isn’t an option with my mace, though.

I decided to get a leather loop added to my armor and a hook added to the pommel of my mace for easier draw and holstering. It’s not perfect, but it’s better than nothing.

So, if I want to cast a spell currently, I have to holster my mace and draw the spellbook. Miriel hooked me up with a satchel that the academy mages use - it’s an over the shoulder leather bag perfectly sized for the standardized spell books that has a small flap and a button to secure the books inside. I decided to forgo the strap and have the pouch directly attached to the faulds of my brigandine. Again, it’s not a perfect solution, but it’s better than nothing.

I’m not quite dextrous enough yet to be able to seamlessly switch between melee and spellcasting, but I’m working on it.

In regards to white magic, Lissa suggested I go with her and volunteer in the temple as a trainee healer. I’ve only gone once so far, and it was a harrowing experience.

Patients were laid haphazardly all over the place - many were coughing. Bandages were rinsed in plain water then reused on different people. Medical instruments were left caked in blood.

They may have had magic, but many of these people were deemed beyond the capabilities of the healers, then just left to suffer and die of infection.

I pulled Lissa aside afterward. “Have any of these people even read my notes? Most of those people could have been saved if even basic sanitation procedures were implemented!”

Lissa looked sorrowful. “They have. I personally handed it to the lead healer. If I wasn’t the princess I would have been laughed out of the room. They fail to see how some foreigner would know more about medicine than the church of Naga.”

The absolute state of these idiots. They’ll be kicking themselves when I’m done with them. “Who do I speak to if I want him gone?”

“Emmeryn is the only person with the authority, though her role in the healer’s matters is mostly symbolic. She would face serious political backlash if she tried meddling.”

“That’s… troubling. Ylisse is losing valuable manpower through an inefficient system. Lissa, you have far more connections within the church than I do. It is my direct and explicit recommendation that you work to replace the system currently used with the one outlined within my documents.”

Unfortunately, there’s not too much else I could do, beyond appealing directly to the lead healer. “I
will try, Robin, but a lot of the church is made up of old fogeys stuck in their ways. My position will only get me so far…”

“That perhaps that is the best we can hope for.”

Just like in the games, Emmeryn decided she would offer parley with Gangrel in order to sort the situation out - all pretense that these attacks were mere bandits had been dropped. And, just like the games, the Shepherds are acting as a guard for the inevitable betrayal. The ransom letter had not yet arrived - so we still have no idea whether Maribelle had actually survived.

This is not going to be graceful. The rifles are not ready yet, so we’ll be going into this without a significant strategic advantage. I can’t even rely on my knowledge of the games - recent events have already proven significant divergence from the secondary timeline.

Here’s hoping we come out of this with Gangrel’s head on a platter.

Chapter End Notes

    And that's the second chapter.
    Until next time.
Emmeryn and her entourage will approach the pass at the Plegian border, seemingly guarded by the entirety of the Shepherds, ready to spring into action at the first hint of treachery. Emmeryn will say her piece, Gangrel will whine about Ylisse and then demand the Fire Emblem in exchange for the life of Marielle. Emmeryn will politely refuse, then once again request that Gangrel return his hostage. Negotiations will break down, then Gangrel will order his men to attack.

That’s how things should turn out, anyway. While there has already been a very significant divergence from the continuity I am familiar with, I can’t imagine it effecting this particular series of events too much.

This means that, while we can’t know for sure where the Plegians are positioned, we can be reasonably confident that they will at least be present in force. Naturally, the plan is to neutralize the threat before the direct confrontation, and then capture Gangrel as he attempts to flee.

Frankly, I’d prefer to simply execute the man, but Emmeryn has explicitly forbidden it. While we could simply flout her orders, I’d rather not deal with the fallout just yet.

Currently, the plan is to have the more conspicuous members of the Shepherds acting as Emmeryn’s guard, the ‘Shield team’ - Frederick, Sully, Stahl, Vaike, Chrom and Lissa. While the more inconspicuous members quietly deal with the hidden threat - ‘Dagger team’: Myself, Miriel, Kellam, Sumia and Virion.

Honestly, it’s a pretty basic strategy, but I’m banking on the fact that Gangrel doesn’t know that we’re going behind Emmeryn’s back and dealing with his ambush in advance. On that note, Emmeryn thinks we are simply waiting in the wings to give support in the event of an ambush. Which, while not really wrong, isn’t the whole truth, either.

Honestly, I’m not that confident in Dagger team’s ability to take out enough people while still remaining undetected - Sumia and myself are both rather uncoordinated and Miriel’s magic is not stealthy by any stretch of the imagination. This leaves Virion and Kellam to do the bulk of the stealth work - not something that either of them are bad at, mind you, but it’s not exactly their speciality. Honestly, Lon’qu or Gaius would have been a godsend for this plan.

So, while I don’t have much to work with, I do at least have something. I’m leaning towards having Virion and Kellam work together to pick off as many as possible while Gangrel is talking, and then, when he calls the ambush, the rest of us perform a counter-ambush. I’m particularly counting on a salvo of magical fire from Miriel and I to really sow disarray into their ranks.

“Alright, Virion, Kellam, get to work.” Virion gives me a serious nod, and the pair depart into the brush. The rest of Dagger team hunker down. We’re situated a ways back from the meeting, further up the mountain from where the Plegian ambush forces are hidden.

We’ve got a view of the meeting, but we’re not within earshot. Gangrel has just confronted Emmeryn, who remains as stoic as ever. The air is tense. If Virion or Kellam is found out, things could go very bad very quick - Ylisse ostensibly came to this meeting under the banner of peace - it would not be good for our reputation if this were to come out.
Predictably, the meeting goes south, and Gangrel gestures to his lieutenants. Outraged, Chrom cuts down an encroaching soldier. Gangrel laughs and yells some drivel about this meaning war.

“We’re on, let’s get moving.” I say, forcing confidence into my voice. This isn’t the first time I’ve held command, but now is certainly the highest the stakes have been. Miriel and I stood up, spellbooks in hand. We began a bombardment of the enemy’s back lines. Absently, I noticed arrows flying, knocking the enemy’s wyvern riders out of the sky - Virion’s work, no doubt.

The hillside caught fire, and the Plegian unit cohesion dropped like a stone. Panicked conscripts ran around, trying to extinguish themselves. I managed a solid ten fireballs before I had to cease or risk exhaustion. Miriel got twenty out in just as much time. Sumia poked her head up, looking at the hillside and let out a small gasp - whether it be in surprise or horror, I could not tell.

I surveyed the effects of our attack. It was beyond any reasonable expectation - there was no discernable line held by the Plegians, nor any formation. I noticed a distinct lack of commanding officers on the field. In the distance, I noticed Shield team surrounded by a line of Plegian warriors. They were holding, but we should definitely move to support.

“Dagger team, we’re going to link up with Virion and Kellam, then move to Shield team’s location.” Once again, I injected confidence I did not feel into my voice. I could not say why, but I had a lingering sense of foreboding over the whole situation.

Sumia nodded, moving up to my side, and Miriel fell back, coving the flank. We moved as a group, heading over to where I saw Virion. Occasionally, our path would be blocked by a swathe of burning brush. Miriel simply gestured, her other hand on her spellbook, and the flames were quenched.

“Robin! Come quick! Maribelle is hurt!” Virion’s voice was strained. Without words, we sped up. I whipped out the staff I kept on my belt. I was by no means an accomplished healer, but I would at least be able to help.

We quickly met up with the other group. Virion’s face was stained with soot and blood. Past him, Kellam sat, holding his head in his hands - his normally clean armour similarly tarnished. On the ground in front of him was Maribelle. Her clothes were soaked in blood, and across her torso, running from her left shoulder to right hip was a deep gouge. I could see a crude attempt at a field dressing, but with an injury this size, it’s effectiveness would be negligible.

Maribelle was conscious, but only barely.

I quickly dropped to my knees in front of her. This wound was bad - something that would trouble even an experienced healer. “Sumia, Virion! Go and assist Shield team - once they’re able, I need you to get me Lissa! I won’t be able to do this on my own. Miriel, Kellam! I need you to secure the perimeter, make sure nobody interrupts me. Maribelle, you need to stay awake.” My commands were snapped. This was bad - losing a Shepherd wasn’t in the cards: our plans could potentially be ruined, even by the loss of someone as inconsequential as Maribelle.

I began channelling my energy. I was already low from the bombardment, but I’ll have to run the risk. Quickly, I discovered that her wounds weren’t quite as bad as I had thought - the gash was far more shallow than it had appeared, but she had already lost quite a bit of blood.

My first priority was to check on important organs. She was slowly bleeding into her left lung through a small cut. I sealed that up without much trouble, and removed the blood already inside. Her intestines were punctured in a few places - that could get nasty if Lissa doesn’t help me clean it up later. Thankfully, everything else seems to be no worse for wear. Maribelle got lucky.
Next, I started looking at the tissue damage - severe, unsurprisingly. Knitting split tissue is a slow and exhausting process for someone as inexperienced as me, but it’s something that she’ll die from if I don’t handle.

I began the process. My energy reserves were getting low - well below the threshold that Miriel recommended I stay above. It wasn’t quite dangerous yet, but I’m skirting a line here. I started at the deepest part of the wound, working my way towards the surface. It was slow going, but it handled the worst of her bleeding the earliest.

I managed to get about half done sealing the gash before I ran out of steam. If I tried any more, I’d be putting my life on the line. Aside from the tissue damage, the only other thing wrong was her ribcage, which was cracked in five places - not something I can handle right now.

Fuck. I haven’t done enough - the worst of the bleeding has been handled, but she’s still losing blood. Blood she can’t afford to lose right now.

Shit. Ok, drastic measures. Lissa still hasn’t shown up, and I don’t know when she will.

I’ll have to cauterize it.

“Maribelle. I’m out of juice, and you’re still losing blood too quickly. I’m going to have to cauterize. Miriel, get over here, Kellam, find her something to bite down on, then hold her down.”

Maribelle’s eyes remained distant. She’s too far out of it to respond. We’re running out of time.

I gestured for Kellam to go ahead. He pushed a folded wad of cloth into her mouth - a piece of his armour, I noted. His face was grim, as he placed his hands onto her shoulders in a comforting manner.

“Miriel, I need you to heat up my dagger. After that, you’ll need to help Kellam.” Without a word, she began, and quickly, the dagger was glowing a dull orange. How hot does it have to be? I’ve got no idea. Hopefully this is right.

I pulled it back, giving her a determined nod. She quickly secured Maribelle’s legs under her weight, while Kellam secured her arms. Maribelle’s eyes were wide now. I couldn’t tell exactly what she felt, but it couldn’t be good. Fear? Panic? Doesn’t matter. At least she was still with us, I guess.

I began, and just as quickly, Maribelle began to scream, thrashing under her restraints.

It wasn’t the sort of scream you usually heard on the battlefield - those were distinct in their own way.

This one was much, much worse.

It wasn’t a quick process - my dagger was a short, thick thing, that could only cauterize a small part of the wound at once. It was a long cut.

After a short while, Miriel had to reheat the dagger. Tears were streaming down Maribelle’s face. She was whimpering incomprehensibly. Kellam had a hard look on his face. There was something in Miriel’s expression that I couldn’t quite place. It wasn’t a good thing.

Well. To put it simply, things went to shit. Lissa never did show up - she was too busy handling the rest of the injured Shepherds. To make things worse, in the confusion, Gangrel and Aversa managed to escape.
The Plegians had far more troops than we had anticipated - we expected that our magical barrage would have taken out the bulk of their force, but instead, it had only been a small fraction. Shield team had been outnumbered fifteen to one.

Despite the slim odds, the Shepherds had come out of it with only two major injuries: Stahl had taken a spear through the gut, and Chrom had nearly had his leg cut right off. Almost everyone else had an assortment of smaller, less lethal injuries, however. By the time we finished up with Maribelle and regrouped with the others, Lissa and Emmeryn were still run flat out.

Apparently only a sliver of muscle had saved Chrom from losing the limb entirely.

Fuck.

He’s never going to make a full recovery - that sort of trauma needs the sort of healer that only appears in legends. He won’t lose the leg, but he will always have trouble moving it around.

This is a problem. Chrom’s fighting style is acrobatic, to say the least. Our plans for dealing with the Grimleal centred around the unstoppable powerhouse that had been Chrom supported by the immovable object that is lines of riflemen with artillery support; to say that this is a problem is an understatement of the highest order - this single injury has left our plotting in ruins.

Emmeryn had almost healed herself into a coma after she finished up with Chrom. Likewise, Lissa was wiped afterwards - between healing Stahl and all of the more minor wounds of the rest of the Shepherds, she didn’t have much left in the tank for Maribelle. She gave one look at her, grimaced, then finished up the work that I’d started.

Much like Chrom, Maribelle’s wound would never heal completely - she’ll be left with a shallow gouge across her torso, with some major cauterization scars to go along with it. Whether that was because Lissa had been exhausted, or simply not skilled enough, I don’t know.

Ricken did end up shadowing us, but he got caught by the Plegians when he tried to sneak around. He ended up getting away safely, then met up with us after the battle. The young mage was thoroughly unhappy that Maribelle ended up getting hurt. He might of been unhappy with me, but I couldn’t bring myself to care.

The timeline has been pretty thoroughly butterflyed away by right of me simply not being Robin - Chrom wasn’t meant to get injured in this timeline until the assassins came for him sometime soon, but now that he’s been crippled, he’s going to be a much easier target for everyone.

And the worst part is that I don’t even know why this happened. It could be that I’m simply not as tactically skilled as Robin, or it could be something seemingly inconsequential.

We’re on the way back to Ylisstol now. The royal family is still pretty out of it, so Frederick, Miriel, Virion and I are discussing our next move during a rest break.

“From my future knowledge, the next thing the Plegians would have done is send assassins to Ylisstol to try to kill the royal family. I do not know if they still will, given that the future I saw had Chrom uninjured. Though I suppose it would not be unreasonable to expect them to.”

Frederick nodded, agreeing with my analysis. “With milord injured, I expect that they will redouble their efforts, if nothing else. I propose that we set a trap for them.”

That… Isn’t a bad idea, actually. Hopefully, Validar will fall for it. The man needs to die - he’s too strong of a piece for us to let the Grimleal keep him.
Virion makes a noise of contemplation. “In my experience, such maneuvers will only work if the assassin’s target does not realise they are bait. My house attempted a similar thing with Valmese, however, things didn’t work out the way we wanted. The assassins found the trap we had set by observing the subtle changes in their target’s behaviour.”

We all stew on that for a moment, then Miriel speaks up. “Then the solution is manifest. We do not inform the royal family of our measures.”

Deception would be the obvious solution, but I doubt many of the Shepherds would be keen to deceive Chrom or Lissa. I say as much, but Miriel cuts me off. “We do not need many to set a trap. You and I would be sufficient for any reasonable amount of assailants. A prepared mage is not a force to be trifled with.”

Frederick nods. “That would be an acceptable solution. Keep me notified of any developments.”

Coming to an agreement, we departed. Miriel followed me. I gave her a questioning look, and she simply pressed her lips together and tipped her head in the direction of the Exalt’s guardsmen. Ah, not something for their ears, then.

We move further away, towards the treeline.

Once we have a bit of privacy, she starts speaking “Things did not go as we planned. I believe that there is a leak somewhere.”

I give a moment of consideration, then come to a startling realization - the Hierarch - I completely forgot about him. If he was willing to rat out the exalt’s location, he’d be willing to give any battle plan he came across. The bastard probably heard that the Shepherds were expecting to be betrayed, and passed it on.

I groan, and explain my theory to her. I’m stupid - this could all have been averted if I had been more meticulous with the information I had. Miriel’s face was grim as I spoke. I put my head in my hands. If I had not forgotten about him, Chrom wouldn’t be crippled, Maribelle wouldn’t be disfigured and Stahl wouldn’t have been impaled.

Next to me, Miriel fidgets. “Your body language tells me that you are blaming yourself. According to literature that I have read on the subject, doing so is bad for the psyche.”

I exhale. “Yeah… You’re right. What should we do about him?” I look up. Miriel is sitting next to me now, her face twisted in consideration.

“Nothing direct. We don’t have any proof beyond your word; so we put more operational security measures in place to mitigate risks. Additionally, we could give him misleading information: doing so may allow us a greater degree of operational freedom…” She trails off, then softly continues “Yes, that would work well - the timing is perfect. Robin, I have the workings of a plan. We shall discuss this further when we return to Ylisse.”

I’m glad she’s got something, at least. I nod, then say “Good, I’ve got some ideas for keeping our plans out of enemy hands - I’ll talk with Frederick about them later.”

A call goes up, signalling the end of the break. Miriel turns to face me, and says “Splendid. Would you like to march with me? I have more observations about your magical signature that I would like to discuss.”

I smile. Despite how dry it may seem, Miriel’s observations are always a lot of fun to talk about. “I’d love to.”
This isn’t the first time we’ve discussed my signature, either - apparently it is quite unique. Miriel has described it to me as ‘a battered, exotic, thing that doesn’t seem to quite fit in your body.’ However, I am honestly apprehensive about the implications that go along with that - what the hell happened to me?

“Any change?” Miriel asked, entering the room and sitting down beside me. It was the fourth night of our stakeout for the assassins. We’ve been keeping a close look at the castle’s perimetre for any intrusion - more by magical than mundane means.

Miriel and I were cooperatively casting some fairly extensive surveillance enchantments. Normally, this would be beyond our capabilities, but Miriel borrowed some specialized foci for the purpose.

The result being that we have sight of the signatures of everyone within the castle grounds. Unfortunately, this isn’t really something we can use offensively - it required extensive preparation of the site before hand. However, it is just about perfect for our purposes.

I rolled my neck. While we did have full vision of the grounds, it was only through strategically placed viewpoints that were arrayed before us. “One maid snuck out into the town, a guardsmen abandoned their post and retired early, and one of the Knight Commander’s squires is staying in late.”

“No change then. This is unfortunate, I was hopeful we would be finished with this quickly.” What went unsaid was that the plan she had cooked up to take advantage of the Hierarch had a strict time limit. Our next chance would not occur until next year - far too late to be of use. It was a brilliant plan, however, and we were planning on bringing it up at the next council meeting.

We sit in silence next to each other. We’re in a store room that we’ve appropriated to use as our command post. Conveniently, the guard barracks are nearby, so we can rally the troops at the first sign of an incursion.

Miriel suddenly shouts “There! On the western wall. Assassins - there’s no doubt.”

I snap my head to where she is pointing. Twenty black clad men are climbing over the ramparts, unnoticed by the guards. A stealth field of some sort, then - too bad for them that they did not shield their signatures. I could not see how they were managing to climb the sheer wall, either - invisible ladders?

There was no time to think on it, however. We quickly exited the room, and roused the guards. We sent runners to the Shepherd’s barracks to wake everyone.

Quickly, we had a sizeable force assembled, and encircling the offending force. Their stealth turned out to be some form of colour change curse - they blended into the night nearly perfectly. However, it was trivial for Miriel and I to counteract by simply lighting the area up with some flare-like fireballs.

Once the assassins realised they’d been made, they began trying to get back over the wall. It was not to be, however - we had instructed for some forces to mass on the walls for just this purpose.

Stuck with their back against the wall, and enemies in all directions, the Plegian assassins quickly fell against our superior might. We did not even receive a single fatality from the exercise.

Shit. Is Validar even in this group? “The Dark Mage! Find their Dark Mage!”

The guardsmen started going through the bodies, looking for the distinctive garb signifying the
Grimleal. A captain waved me over, after a quick word with his lieutenant “Sir Robin! No Dark Mage in this group, Sir!”

I glance at Miriel. This wasn’t the plan. She returned my look, brow furrowed. I give my thanks to the captain, and wave the Shepherds over to me. “Everyone but Vaike, Virion, Kellam and Miriel, you’re on shield team - prioritize protecting Chrom, Lissa and Emmeryn. Find Frederick - he’ll take command. Dagger team! You’re with me! We’re going hunting!”

Everyone gives a flurry of affirmatives, then hurries off to get into position. My team forms up around me. I give everyone a quick glance.

Miriel looks exhausted - hell, I probably do too; we’ve been on fours hours of sleep a day for nearly a week now. Virion looks ruffled, but is still in his normal gear - he had to rush to get it on, no doubt. Kellam isn’t in his full armour, but he has most of the important bits on. Vaike, of course, is shirtless, and looks to be wearing his sleepwear pants.

Apart from Miriel and I, it seems that everyone spent the last four days relaxing.

“Alright, we’ve got a missing dark mage. He’ll either have infiltrated the grounds and is trying to kill Emmeryn, or fled. Either way, our objective is his death. Miriel, any ideas for how we’ll go about finding him?”

Off towards the east wing, a plume of necrofire explodes out of a window. Flying along with it, the charred corpse of a guardsman, his lifeforce drained by fell energies, is launched onto the palace lawns.

Miriel quirks a smile. “I believe we just did.”

We launched into a dead run. Quickly, we found the culprit - a thin reedy man surrounded by ten cloaked assassins: Validar, without a doubt.

I quickly guested for Kellam and Vaike to take the front. Virion began harrowing the unarmoured men with arrows launched at a rapid clip. Miriel and I fell into our standard casting stance, and began throwing fireballs with the goal of controlling the battlefield in our favour. Hallways and escape routes were quickly blocked with roaring infernos.

Kellam, despite being most comfortable in a suit of heavy armour, was no slouch in lighter gear - he had deceptively good footwork, and could punish over-extended attacks with the best of them. He quickly dealt with a trio of overconfident assassins who thought they were dealing with a simple footsoldier.

Vaike, on the other hand, was a powerhouse - his axe whipped through the air at a speed that cleaved through limbs without trouble. Despite his unarmoured body, he was nowhere near unprotected - he had a bulk that was the envy of many; his thickly corded muscle making the few hits that managed to connect shallow flesh wounds.

In the back, Validar looked harried - he was talking with his lieutenant, gesturing wildly in our direction. Sweat dripped from his forehead - the flames were quickly limiting how much space they had to work with. Eventually, however, he shouted, flipping his hands up in frustration, gave one last command, then ran and jumped out of the window. Glass shattered, and he hit the ground rolling. Jumping out of a second story window would be painful, but not lethal.

I let out a curse in frustration - this guy! “Miriel, with me! Everyone else, deal with these guys!”

We cease our bombardment, leaving the fires we’ve already started to burn. I sign for Miriel to use...
wind magic, then jump out the window too.

She arrests my momentum with a quick gust, then jumps herself. I return the favour. While it’s not impossible to do such a maneuver on yourself, it is certainly far easier to do it on someone else.

I break into a sprint, rapidly catching up to Validar. Miriel lags behind, but manages not to be left behind. Once he gets in range, I begin flinging fireballs. I’m at about a quarter left in the magical tank, so I won’t be able to do this forever.

Validar lets out a curse as one connects and bowls him over. The spell itself didn’t do much damage, but that wasn’t my intention. Miriel gets in range and starts contributing her own fire soon after.

While he’s tied up intercepting Miriel’s gouts of flames with his own magic, I quickly close into melee. He realises what I’m doing too late and tries to redirect his magic towards me.

That earned him a face full of cold, hard, Ylissean steel. The man unceremoniously crumpled to the ground, his face a bloodied wreck. I seized the opportunity, swinging my mace downwards for the coup de grace.

With almost no time to spare, Validar snapped his hand towards his spellbook, and promptly sublimated into murky black smoke.

The smoke quickly dispersed, leaving nothing of the man behind. I whipped my head around, scanning the courtyard. He was nowhere to be seen.

I let out a curse of frustration - the nerve of that bastard! Behind me, Miriel catches up, and lays a hand on my shoulder. “A teleportation curse - he is far out of our reach now. Let’s regroup with the rest of Dagger team.” Her voice is quiet, but her tone brooked no argument.

As much as I would like to run off into the night after him, it would be entirely unproductive. No, we need to secure the castle grounds and ensure that the royal family remains unharmed.

He’ll just have to die another day.

If you asked most people, the night was a resounding success - the assassin’s plans were foiled, there were few casualties among the Ylissean guardsmen, and Ylisse walked out of the attack with several prisoners.

If you asked me, we may have won the battle, but our failure to kill Validar was the loss of an opportunity that will not happen again. The man had badly overextended - and that had been our best chance to kill him before he works his way into a position of power after the war.

Luckily, Panne and Gaius joined up. I haven’t spoken with them yet, but I did see them hanging around the barracks. Gaius will be a serious asset for our mission in Plegia - the Shepherds were seriously lacking in stealth and scouting capabilities before this.

I had a quick talk with Chrom after the fight - my first chance since before the ambush. He’s recovering well, and, while he will never be at one-hundred percent again, he’s still very capable with a the Falchion.

There’s been a few other developments, too; Emmeryn decided against relocating to a safer place - not surprising given the ease with which the last attack was foiled. What’s more interesting, however, is the fact that Lissa has recruited Libra into the Shepherds.

I sat down across from her at breakfast, a few days after the attack. Though the royal family has their own dining room, Lissa and Chrom make a point of eating with the Shepherds frequently. “Lissa.
I’m curious, what’s the reasoning behind this?” I gesture to Libra, who is sitting a few seats down, talking with Maribelle.

I haven’t spoken with her since that disastrous counter-ambush either. From what I hear though, she’s been having troubles with the scarring. Actually, come to think of it, I haven’t spoken to anyone outside of Dagger team for a while.

“Robin? Where’ve you been? I was looking for you earlier, but I couldn’t find you.” She seems surprised to see me. I guess I had been rather occupied with preparing for the ambush, but did I really skip meals for the past week? I blink, realising that, yes, I had been skipping meals in favour of working - opting to instead raid the leftovers with Miriel and eat at rather odd hours.

I shake myself from my contemplation, responding to her question “Miriel and I have been run flat out planning and dealing with fires that have been popping up everywhere.”

Lissa gives me a flat look. But she doesn’t say anything more on the subject. “I met Libra at the temple. After I introduced him to your methods, he was rather interested in meeting the man behind the medicine. With Maribelle out of action for the foreseeable future, the Shepherds were down a healer - this was the obvious solution.”

Ah, that’s right. Maribelle was having trouble moving with her scars. Not that much of a problem for a mounted healer, but she’ll be off of active duty for a while. In any case, she’d have to take some time off in order to get the affairs of Themis in order. There was talk of carving the devastated province up and distributing it to its neighbours, but Maribelle was staunchly opposed to such measures.

Across the room, I see a red haired woman enter, then sit down across from Sumia - Cordelia, no doubt. What was she doing here? Seeing the target of my confused expression, Lissa said “Gee, you’ve really been out of the loop, haven’t you? That’s Cordelia - Sumia’s friend. Apparently, she had a bad mission with the Pegasus Knights. Sumia offered to vouch for her spot in the Shepherds, and she jumped on it. Chrom agreed, so she’s a Shepherd now.”

A bad mission? Must be a butterfly. At least I didn’t push her away from the Shepherds entirely, I guess. “Oh really? I’ll have to go say hello sometime.” I quickly finished up my breakfast. It’ll have to wait for later - I need prepare for the council meeting tonight.

As I stand to leave, Miriel bursts into the room. She sees me, and hurries over. “There’s been a development. You’re needed.” She sounds frayed, but doesn’t elaborate further. Not the good kind of development, then. I motion for her to lead on.

She brings me out of the castle grounds, and towards the academy. I lower my voice, and ask “What’s happened?”

She jerks her head. “Not here.” with her hands, she quickly makes the signs for ‘injury’ and ‘bad’. An accident at our labs, then? Not good. That could involve anything from chemical spills to explosions, and I’m not sure I’m qualified to be treating those just yet.

We arrive, and are ushered inside by a group of robed mages. They all seem fairly young. Undergraduates? They lead us to a back room on the ground floor of the main building. Miriel and I enter, and they stay outside. Through the door, I hear them whispering in panicked tones - something about the Magister? They hadn’t said anything to us as they were leading us here.

Miriel crosses the room - a supply closet - and moves a box, revealing a trapdoor. We enter, and are greeted with a laboratory. It is furnished sparingly - several benches run the length of the room, each
cluttered with apparati and mechanisms of various sorts. At the far end of the room, there is a doorway that had been boarded over. This was the lab? There wasn’t very much ventilation at all. In fact, the room was positively stifling - odors of various sorts made breathing difficult.

There’s four mages here, each of them much older than those that lead us here. One of them waves us over. On the ground, there’s a figure laying on the tiled ground. “Sir Robin - you’re here! Quinlan collapsed, and has not woken - Miriel tells me you are quite the healer, can you have a look at him?”

I give one more look at the room. There’s not even a single window. ‘I don’t have to, I already know what afflicts him. Evacuate the room, bring him with us. He’s been poisoned by the vapours of the chemicals you’ve been working with.”

I should have seen this coming. I’ll have to write up more safety procedures. Once we’re back out in the storeroom, I pull my staff out and examine Quinlan - yep, heavy metal poisoning from exposure to Mercury vapours.

If there’s one thing about healing magic that amazes me, it’s how good it is at dealing with poisonings - it’s a simple matter to remove the metal from his system. Where it goes after I’m done, I don’t know, but it’s not in him anymore. Healing the damage that has already been done by the toxins is more difficult, but not trouble by any means.

I move over to the other mages, likewise cleaning their system up, and then Miriel for good measure. They’ve all got varying levels of exposure - if we didn’t catch this, it would have been bad. “I should have foreseen this. The vapours from the chemicals you’re working with are very poisonous. You’ll have to implement measures to limit your exposure - I’ll have suggestions written up and sent over soon. In the meantime, send for anyone who has been in the room for any amount of time. The effects of the poison are slow acting, but we don’t want to risk anything.”

I sigh. This entire setup was a mess - poor chemical containment, no safety measures, no ventilation, no organization. It’ll take a while to get this up to spec. I guess I have nobody to blame for this but myself - I really should have been far more explicit in my documents.

I collapsed into my seat at the table. The other members of the council are still arriving. Miriel sits down beside me, equally exhausted.

It’s been a long day.

The lab hadn’t been salvageable - the fumes had made it pretty much impossible to stay in there for more than a few minutes at a time. So, we’d packed everything up, and hauled it across the city to the facilities Chrom had ordered constructed a while ago. It hadn’t been easy, but we needed a lab, and working out of the basement in the academy was not an option. It was essentially a warehouse in the worker’s district - nice and spacious, but, more importantly, it was well ventilated.

It didn’t hurt that it had been constructed to be a difficult position to infiltrate or assail, either.

I’d given everyone a crash course in best practices for handling chemicals, and some of the handier undergraduates had constructed a fume hood powered by wind magic. The mages that handled the lab were all Professors at the Academy - each of them deemed trustworthy by either Miriel or Quinlan. In turn, the Professors used their trusted undergraduates for gruntwork.

I guess some things never change.

Miriel turns to me “I am impressed with the ease which you handled the poisonings. My talks with healers indicated that such techniques were rather advanced.”
I cocked an eyebrow. An advanced technique? That couldn’t be right. I’d been healing heavy metal poisoning with a similar ease to healing papercuts. As Lissa enters the room, I wave her over to us. “That doesn’t sound right. Lissa, Miriel tells me that healing poisonings is an advanced technique. Is this true?”

She nods, “Yeah, they tend to give even master healers a run for their money, why do you ask?”

I frown. “I’ve just spent the day healing our lab workers from particularly bad cases of heavy metal poisoning. I had about as much trouble with it as a minor flesh wound. What gives people so much trouble with them?”

She frowned in turn. “Truly? That’s… Well, unheard of, really. You’re a mediocre healer at best, no offense. If you’ve been curing poisonings like nothing, well, I don’t know what to say!”

She paused for a few moments, considering something, before she continued. “Normally, poisonings are difficult to cure because finding the poison in a person’s body is rather tricky. Once it’s been found, removing it, then fixing the damage is usually trivial. If you’ve got a knack for finding poison, that tells me you’re very skilled at perceiving the state of your patient’s body…” She trailed off, brow furrowed. Before exclaiming “Of course! It all makes sense - those diagrams you drew of the human body. You know a lot about how it all works, right?”

Coming to the same conclusion as Lissa, Miriel’s eyes widen. “That would imply that the perception magic used in healing is directly affected by how well the caster’s understanding of biology is!”

Miriel paused, before continuing “The implications - your ability with fire magic is at a level extremely disproportionate to your experience. Yet, you understand the mechanisms behind combustion well, do you not?” Seeing my nod, she just about yells in excitement “My goodness, this bears experimentation! If we could train mages and healers of your caliber with simple education, rather than direct experience, Ylisse would become a center of magical ability unchallenged by anywhere else in the world!”

After that revelation, the last of the council members enters the room, and we shelve the topic for discussion later on. Getting down to business, I inform everyone of the developments in the lab. Quinlan is with us - having made a full recovery earlier in the day, and he goes into detail about the progress of our bullets.

“After the suggestions made by Robin last time, we had the breakthrough we were looking for. We’ve perfected the formula for the explosive compounds used in the bullet. Production has yet to commence on a large scale, but we a small stock ready for use - about one hundred. By our estimation, we should have production facilities secured and staffed in two weeks time. One concern I have, however, is security - our enemies may conduct an assault with intentions of stealing our secrets.”

Quinlan had told me this earlier in the day, and I had been elated at the news - there is a lot you can do with one hundred bullets, after all. I nodded as Quinlan brought up his concerns - I shared them, frankly. “Frederick, do you think you could spare some trustworthy men to secure the Laboratory and the Production Facilities? Once we field these weapons, the Plegians will undoubtedly want to get their hands on some for themselves.”

Frederick nods. “Of course. I had anticipated such a concern, and have been instructing a number of recruits for such purposes.”

In addition to handling the security and personal needs of Chrom and Lissa, Frederick also handled the training for palace security staff - everyone that serves as a guardsman for the castle goes through
I nod, telling him to work with Quinlan and Thomus to secure their facilities as soon as possible. “Good, now, Thomus, what is the status on the rifles themselves?”

He cracks a wry smile, then reaches for a cloth bag that he had brought with him. A rifle shaped bag. Seeing the thing, a wicked grin forces its way onto my face. He hands me the bag, and I open it up.

It’s wonderful - a polished wooden stock, grip and handguard with a burnished steel receiver, barrel, magazine, bolt and trigger assembly. It looked a whole lot like the iconic world war one springfield rifle.

It should - I had based the damn thing on it.

I had decided to forgo trying to implement a semi-automatic action in the initial design phase - better to keep things as simple as possible for the smiths in the initial run.

Still grinning like a madman, I ask “Does it work?”

Thomus simply hands me a bullet, and, with a smile matching my own, says “Why don’t you see for yourself?” He gestures to a full face helmet he had brought with him. We really shouldn’t. It would be loud, and it will attract a whole lot of attention.

But I really want to.

I motion for him to go on, and he places the helmet on a table at the side of the room. Behind the helmet, he places a bag of sand.

I chamber the round, and everyone quietens. This was the culmination of our labours. This would be the weapon that destroys the Grimleal. I line up the shot. The sights are clear, but whether they are aligned properly, I could not tell.

I pull the trigger, and with a glorious bang, the helmet is punctured clean through.

I let out a cackle. It works! It works beyond my wildest expectations! The council erupts into a frenzy of cheers, and I return to my seat. “How many are ready?”

Thomus, still coming down from the excitement, says “Only three as of yet. We’re moving to more extensive production right now. By my estimates, we should be able to construct two every week with the budget we have currently.”

That’s wonderful news - even a single squad of riflemen would tip the balance of power squarely within our hands. At this rate, we’ll have enough rifles for about one new squad every month.

Alright, time to move on. “Now, Miriel and I have been plotting. We were already planning on a diplomatic visit to Regna Ferox, and then a raid into Plegia, but we didn’t really have an idea of how we were going to go about it. That’s no longer a problem.”

I ended up with the first rifle, even as uncoordinated as I was, I still had the most know-how and experience with guns out of anyone. I gave a bit of consideration to who else should get one, and in the end, I decided that Virion would get the second - he already had great upper body strength from handling longbows, and his eyes were already well accustomed to aiming ranged weapons at targets.

The third, however, was a bit of a dilemma - the Shepherds didn’t have any other archers, so there
wasn’t any obvious picks. Miriel and our healers were best suited being left for magic, and most of the melee fighters didn’t have the eyes for it.

The exception being our two pegasus riders. Cordelia and Sumia both have excellent vision - it’s pretty much a requirement for the Pegasus Knights, given all the aerial reconnaissance they do. Unfortunately, Sumia’s a bit too clumsy for it, so that leaves Cordelia as our only other option.

This was the dilemma - Pegasus Knights are seriously useful support units: their mounts let them scout extremely effectively and they could transport people or supplies quickly and through otherwise impassable terrain. Not to mention how effective they were at picking off fleeing targets.

The problem was that Pegasi and guns simply do not mix. We’ve tried - but they simply do not work together. My theory is that Pegasi have some sort of hard-coded flight or fight response to loud bangs. We spent ten bullets testing the theory. I had been hoping that they would develop some sort of resistance to the effect, but all we had to show for it was an extremely stressed flying horse and some experience in shooting for Cordelia.

But, the end result is that if we want Cordelia to be our third rifleman, she’ll have to give up the Pegasus - at least temporarily. It’s not ideal, but I don’t see any other options. Maybe once we get a steady supply of ammunition we’ll be able to seriously try and get some flying dragoons.

In other news, we’re set to depart for Ferox in a couple of days. Our goals for the trip are to secure a discrete route into Plegia, and to alert the Khans to the situation with the Grimleal. Ideally, we’d get at least one of them on the council, but I’m not too certain whether that’d be feasible.

Of course, the main goal - Miriel’s plan - is foremost. If we succeed, we’ll be saddling Plegia with a serious disadvantage going into the war.

At this point, open war is pretty much inevitable - between Gangrel stoking the Plegian populace, along with waging his own shadow war, and the Ylissean nobility calling for Plegian heads after the sacking of Themis, only Emmeryn and her staunchest of supporters stood opposed to it.

Her support among the nobility was weakening by the day, despite how well liked she was by the general populace. Regardless, there isn’t much they could do about it. Unless she decided to step down and grant the title to Chrom or Lissa, she’d remain Exalt for the foreseeable future.

And, honestly, knowing Emmeryn, she might just give the title up, if her subjects wanted her to. Of course, provided she doesn’t get killed by the Plegians first. Despite everything, I do honestly hope she survives the war. She truly is a great peacetime leader.

It’s just a shame that peace between Plegia and Ylisse can not exist so long as the Grimleal are intact.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Alright, so I pretty badly overestimated how much writing I'd get done in the lead-up to exams, so this update got delayed quite a bit. Over the next while, I'm planning on rolling out some revisions to the first two chapters (I'm pretty unhappy with how I handled dialogue tags, particularly in the first chapter), but the plot should remain unchanged. As for the next one, now that I'm done with University for the year, I should be able to get it written much faster - Expect it by the tenth.
The rifles were by no means perfect. They were actually rather poor by my world’s standard; the ejection mechanism jammed sometimes, the bolt would catch if you pulled it back at the wrong angle, the magazine had a bad habit of falling out, and the sights - initially, at least - were horribly aligned for anything outside of spitting distance. There will undoubtedly be more problems, but those were just the few that Cordelia, Virion and I discovered during our short practice with the things. Thankfully, Virion had taken it upon himself to calibrate the sights. I didn’t have experience doing it, so I figured he’d be best at it. We used about twenty bullets each for some very quick and dirty training - Virion and Cordelia are both somewhat capable with the things, now. I would have preferred a far more rigorous program, but our plan hinges on having riflemen for the attack, so it will have to do.

Virion has quite the knack for sniping - as I would have expected, but Cordelia is far less capable than I was hoping. She’s got all of the procedures already memorised, and can do a field strip and cleaning faster than I can, but she’ll be hard pressed to hit anything outside of fifteen meters. Then again, I’m not exactly good with it, either, and I’ve had about ten times as much experience than both of them combined.

I finished up cleaning out the barrel of my own rifle, replacing it into the metal case I had procured for the weapons. I put the heavy steel lock in place and snapped the shackle shut. It wasn’t flawless protection, but hopefully it would deter opportunists from making off with the weapons.

Inwardly, I went through my mental list of the things that needed to be done for the coming trip; rifle practice - check, plans for approaching the Feroxi Khans - check, notify the royal battlemages that we’ll be taking a company of their finest - check.

I had let Miriel handle the last one - head battlemage won’t like us taking his men out no matter how good our plan is, but Miriel is a hard person to say no to given her habit of simply rolling right over people with a torrent of technical language.

I paused for consideration. We really should have our plan fully ironed out by now, but even just now I thought of four additional edge cases that we need to account for. I shook my head, I’ll have to track down Miriel for her help on this. The mission isn’t for a few weeks, so we still have plenty of time for adjustments.

Regna Ferox is not a tourist destination. The weather is cold, the people are quick to draw their weapons, and the landscape is pretty much entirely comprised of snowy forests. Having said all of that, if there’s one good thing to say about the country, it’s that they sure know how to make some damn good booze.

Aforementioned booze was provided to us by the hospitality of the ruling Khan, Basilio, whom I was currently in discussions with regarding the Grimleal situation.

“I can see where you’re coming from. We’ve been having problems with Plegian bastards coming across our borders, causing troubles with the village folk. If you say they’re doing some sort of black magic to bring their evil god back to life, I’d believe you. What do you want from me?”

He hadn’t taken much convincing. I take another sip of the Feroxi Firewine - the drink tasted much closer to whiskey than any sort of wine I’d ever had. “Not a terrible amount. We want either you or a
representative of yours on our council, access to Regna Ferox’s Saltpetre, and your personal assurances of Regna Ferox’s military aid when things come to war.”

“Saltpetre? What in Naga’s name do you need that for?” He shakes his head, as if clearing away his questions. “It doesn’t matter, you’ll have it. I don’t have any issues with the other two, either.”

“Great, have it sent to the royal academy. Magister Quinlan is handling it. If necessary, he’ll have means to cover the cost of delivery.”

Ylisse sold much of it’s food to Regna Ferox - the country was almost entirely dependant on imports to not starve during the harsh winters. As such, Regna Ferox is extremely interested in maintaining Ylissean stability, and it came as no surprise to me that they were willing to grant our requests. Now that we’ve secured a constant stream of Saltpetre, Quinlan should have no further troubles manufacturing munitions on a larger scale. We won’t start to see the returns from our investment for a month or so, but when we do, the Ylissean military will quickly become the best equipped in the world.

Standing up, I offer my hand to the Khan. “It’s settled, then. If I may ask, who do you intend on putting on the council?”

He grasps my hand firmly, but not crushingly. Shaking it, he smirks. “Why, this would be the perfect opportunity to rid myself of the gigantic pain in my arse that is the East-Khan.” He lets out a thunderous belly laugh at his own joke. “You’ll be leading a mission into Plegia next, right? I’ve got two people you’ll want to take with you. I won’t be able to kick Grimleal arse for you personally, but I would be satisfied with my people doing it in my place.”

At his words, two familiar figures enter the room - Lon’qu and Olivia. I was pleasantly surprised - I’d resigned myself to not being able to recruit the pair.

After some short introductions, he told Olivia to go fetch Flavia and meet us at our caravan. We’ve got a tight schedule to keep if we want to hit the timeframe for our plan, so we’ll be leaving directly for Plegia without staying the night.

Saying my goodbyes, I leave the warm interior of the fortress for the harsh winds of the Feroxi autumn. I rejoin our caravan - comprised of the Shepherds and about a hundred of Ylisse’s foremost combat mages.

The mages were one of the integral parts of Miriel’s plan - after all, a surefire way to deal with enemy mages is with a greater number of your own mages. The other part of the plan was the conversation that the Hierarch ‘accidentally’ overheard between Lissa and Chrom.

It was amazing what you could achieve with a little misdirection, really.

I hop into my cart, ceasing my musings. We’re just about ready to set off. I’ll be working on our contingency plans with Miriel while we travel - the last time we went into an operation without them went poorly, so we certainly won’t be making that mistake again.

It helps that Miriel has taken it upon herself to help me with planning - while tactics is by no means her speciality, she’s no slouch, either. The company is nice, too.

Forget about Regna Ferox not being a tourist destination - Plegia takes the cake. The unrelenting heat and dryness of the desert is far more intolerable than the comparatively mild cold.
Fortunately, we will not be in Plegia for much longer, if all goes to plan. After our attack, we’ll be hightailing it back to Ylisse - we likely won’t have too much choice in the matter, given that we’ll almost certainly have much of Plegia hunting for our heads, but at least we’d be home.

Our target? The uppermost echelons of the Grimleal faith - during the Grimleal faith’s holy day, of all times. The equivalent from my world would be assassinating the Pope and all of the Cardinals on Easter Day. Not exactly a nice thing to do, but these guys aren’t exactly nice people.

In all, there’s about sixty people we aim to have dead by the end of the holy day - spread all over the country. Far too many for just the Shepherds to take out; hence us taking the battlemages with us.

We’d split up into many groups several days ago, each headed to a different city or town to deal with a different set of Grimleal. My group was assigned to the Grimleal holy city - the one at the base of Grima’s skeleton - and was the largest by consequence.

The plan for my group’s attack was simplicity itself - walk up to our targets, posing as worshippers, and then shoot the bastards in the face. Normally, such a brazen attack would be tantamount to suicide by Dark Mage, but the trick is in the false intelligence we’ve fed to the Hierarch.

Chrom and Lissa made sure to lead the Hierarch to believe that we’d instead be attacking Gangrel with some new form of magic, and all we had to do was step back and wait for the king to pull the combat Dark Mages for his own protection - leaving the Grimleal far more vulnerable.

The feint takes advantage of Gangrel’s not inconsiderable paranoia and greed both - he believes that we’re attacking him with the full might of the Ylissean Battlemages, so he pulls most of the Dark Mages from the holy day rituals in order to counter any attacks we would make and crush the Ylissean magical capability in one fell swoop.

In the distance, I see a glint of sunlight reflecting off of metal - that must be Vaike. I had sent Gaius and him to the city in order to establish an idea of the place - possible escape routes, vantage points, wide open places, possible kill zones - that sort of thing.

I turn to the rest of the group - Virion and Cordelia - and motion for them to pack up. They had been fiddling with their rifles - cleaning and inspecting them, in their words. They had picked up the habit during the journey to Regna Ferox. Frankly, it was a good one for them to get into - understanding how to maintain and repair their weapon is an invaluable skill for any soldier.

Gaius and Vaike arrive soon after, and begin to lay out their observations. “The city is a cesspool. There’s beggars and the destitute laying in every nook and cranny. I doubt there’s a side-street in the city that doesn’t have one set of eyes or another in it.”

Vaike nods, agreeing with Gaius’ assessment. “The city itself is a maze - there’s two main streets that meet at a central plaza, but everything else is just a mess. We’ll have trouble getting around on our own.”

I give it some thought. An urban jungle was not what I had been expecting from the Plegian holy city. Our escape plan may have to be adjusted. “Do you two have possible escape routes memorised? From what you say, just hoofing it won’t be enough.”

Gaius shook his head. “I wasn’t dressed the part. A trader going into the slums? That would’ve drawn attention I didn’t want.” Vaike shook his head too.

“Damn, we’ll have to improvise. How many of you brought a compass?” Gaius and Cordelia both bring their own out. That means three compasses - including my own - between the five of us.
“Ok, we’ll play it by ear. Once the hit goes down, we split up - everyone sticks with a compass, and we all head in opposite directions. Gaius, you head south-east, Cordelia, you’re headed south-west, and I’ll head north. Any questions?”

Everyone shakes their heads. We all split off and make camp for the night.

I notice the glint of a mirror down the street. Gaius is set up in a building overlooking the central plaza. His job is to signal us information on the Grimleal. I counted the flashes - ten total. There’s ten targets, then. Three bullets each with change. The second set of flashes begins after a few moments - twenty. That means twenty non-magical guardsmen. No more flashes came - that means there’s no guards that are obviously mages.

I sign to Cordelia and Virion, conveying the information. They each carried their rifles, hidden underneath their cloaks. The pair are posing as lovers having a romantic tryst in an alleyway - Virion’s idea, for certain. I’m playing the part of a beggar, down on his luck.

I get moving, and soon after, the other two follow. Ahead, I see the Grimleal giving blessings - or are they curses? - to the faithful. We move into our positions. It’s almost time. If we mess this up, there’s no telling when our next chance would be. The crowd is still rather loose, but more people are drifting in constantly.

Absently, I observe the guardsmen for the Grimleal. Warriors - as Gaius said, no Dark Mages. It looks like our ploy worked, then. I take a quick count - confirming the figure as twenty. Too many to reliably shoot everyone.

On the other side of the crowd, I see Vaike feigning drunkenness. He’s shouting gibberish at passerbys, but I keep an ear peeled for the signal phrase. We’d needed some way to coordinate our shots to happen at once, and I’m quite proud of this solution.

The plaza is quickly filling with faithful. Much longer and we won’t be able to get a clear shot. Then, Vaike says it - much louder than the rest of his nonsense “The bird is in the hand!”

Three shots ring out, silencing the plaza. Three bodies fall bonelessly to the ground, each with a hole through their head or chest. In moments, the three highest positions in the Grimleal faith are left vacant.

A fourth and fifth shot follow soon after, and I quickly add my own - nailing my second target in the chest. The crowd panics at this point, and the Grimleal are ducking for cover. Virion fires another two shots in quick succession. I spy a Grimleal being ushered into a nearby building. He drops dead after a shot from me.

The crowd is scattering, but the guardsmen are still being kept from reaching us by the press of the faithful fleeing the scene. I notice Cordelia firing another shot, and do a quick count of the bodies on the ground - nine Grimleal and a guardsman. We’re missing one! I frantically look about. We’re just about out of time - much longer and we’ll have a tough time getting away.

There! He’s being escorted from the plaza by a ring of heavily armoured knights. Not a problem - I line up and fire off four bullets in rapid succession.

The first hit a knight in the back. A puf of gore splattered onto the Grimleal, and he staggered. The second hit the knight to the right of the Grimleal, and he was down likewise. My third went through the chest of the Grimleal and into the shoulder of the knight in front, and the Fourth shattered the helmet of the knight to the left of the Grimleal. In an instant, four of Plegia’s finest had been crippled.
or killed, and the final of the Grimleal was dead.

That’s all of them - then; the Grimleal are left leaderless. I idly note that Validar is among the bodies on the ground - one of the others must have got him.

It’s time to go. I make a sign to Vaike, he bellows the signal phrase and we scatter.

I was unable to escape without a tail, however - four men-at-arms had followed me north, and were now chasing me through the streets. Virion had followed me, and Vaike had followed Cordelia.

“Any bullets left?” I huff. I’d used all seven of mine back in the plaza. I hadn’t had the chance to reload.

“I’ve jammed! I’d need a bit to sort it out. We’ll have to deal with this lot the old-fashioned way!” he said with a dry smile. We speed up, headed through a tight alleyway. Our tails follow, screaming curses - of the mundane variety - at us. I make a sign - we’ll deal with them at the next corner.

We round the corner and slide to a halt. I ready my spellbook, and Virion draws a jewelled dagger. He’d struggled to use the thing to cut bread the night before - it was far too dull to be of much use.

I cock an eyebrow at him. The dandy probably expected me to do all the work. I flung three fireballs at our pursuers as they rounded the corner. They all dropped to the ground - two dead, one crippled.

The fourth made for me, but I was already dancing backwards. Virion’s dagger came up and was buried into the lad’s throat. The four of them couldn’t have been more than twenty, and they had been particularly zealous in their pursuit of us.

It was almost a shame, but I couldn’t bring myself to feel sympathetic for the doomsday cultists. Virion withdrew his dagger, and wiped the tool clean on the soldier’s shoulder. I noted that despite the dull edges, it held a wicked point.

I peek my head around the corner, and Virion begins to unjam his rifle. There are no pursuers in sight, but I can hear the shouting of soldiers looking for us.

“We need to get moving. We want to be gone before they think to cordon the city.”

“Right.” He jerks the casing, and the jam comes free. It’s been deformed somehow - the brass had been split into a jagged ‘Y’ shape. Virion hums, and brings it up to his eyes for inspection. “Curious.”

“Pocket it, we’ll take a look at it later.”

We had joined back up with everyone else at the rendezvous point later that day. There had been no major incidents to speak of, and everyone had got out of the city pretty much scot free.

We wasted little time in making for the Ylissean border. The few Plegian patrols that we encountered were evaded without trouble. We’re set to meet back up with the rest of the Shepherds at the ruins of Themis. A small outpost had been set up there before we departed, and it was the most convenient spot to reprovision for the trip back to Ylisstol.

We had ridden all day and well into the night. Sometime during the afternoon we made it out of the desert and into the badlands. The night held a full moon, so we had ridden for several more hours after the sun had set before we broke for camp in a wide gully between two hills.
We had to forgo a fire to keep the Plegians off of our trail, but the camp still held an air of merriment. I passed a pouch filled with dried meats around. “Today was a resounding success. The plan went without a hitch! Well done, everyone.”

There was a bark of cheer from Vaike, who had his mouth full of half-chewed jerky. Gaius leaned backwards, popping a sucker into his mouth from his own stash.

“We’re just that good, Bubbles. Well, maybe I’m just that good. Not too sure about his lordliness over there.” He leaned further backwards, smirking at Virion, before promptly falling off his seat.

Cordelia stifled a chuckle, until she could no longer contain herself and broke into laughter. Virion, Vaike and I promptly joined in.

He got back up, dusting himself off, then muttered “Yeah, laugh it up, Chuckleheads.”

The conversation moved onwards, but we turned in for the night not long afterwards. The following days went much the same; we spent the days and much of the nights travelling, only stopping for rest deep in the wilderness.

Eventually, the badlands gave way to a mountain range, and the mountain range for the rolling hillsides and flat plains of the Themis province. We will not be the first to arrive - indeed, the holy city was deep in the country: we would be among the last.

Our arrival was met with bad news, however. “Robin! Thank Naga, you’ve arrived.” It was Libra - he had lead a team, I recall.

I looked around the outpost - people bustled about from place to place, carrying supplies to carts, yet the outpost itself was in shambles - some of the tents barely looked to be intact. I also noted a distinct lack of anybody not from our own expedition into Plegia.

“What’s going on here? Where’s the outpost staff?”

“Dead or in the infirmary, I’m afraid. There’s an emergency. You’re needed in the war tent.”

An emergency? Just what I needed. I wave for Virion and Cordelia to follow. Vaike and Gaius take our horses to be taken care of. Libra leads us to a frayed tent. Inside is an oaken table with a map spread across and pins in various places. I take note of the people already inside - Miriel, Stahl and Lissa.

“What’s going on?”

Lissa visibly relaxes, as if a load has been lifted from her shoulder “Oh, Robin! Thank goodness you’re here. It’s not good news.” She motions for Miriel to proceed.

“Stahl’s group was the first to arrive - he found the outpost almost deserted. Speaking with the survivors, he found that several battalions of the Plegian military had rushed through on a straight angle to the Capital. This was two days ago. By estimates, they should be beginning to lay siege either today or tomorrow. A rider was sent to warn the capital, and scouts were dispatched to keep an eye on them. Lissa has been in command, and she gave the orders to wait for more of the Shepherds to arrive. We are only waiting on Chrom and Flavia’s group, and about twenty of the Battlemages sent to the deeper regions of the country.”

That means that along with the two team leaders, Frederick, Kellam, Olivia and Lon’qu were yet to arrive. I pause for consideration. A retaliatory strike was not something we had deemed particularly likely so soon after our assassinations. This would have had to have been planned by Plegia well in
advance.

“Worrying. Chrom and Flavia should also be arriving sometime today or tomorrow, barring complications, correct?” at Mirel’s nod, I continue “Then we should wait for them to arrive. The capital is prepared for an extended siege - the extra day will not make much difference.”

I examine the map on the table - it’s a chart of the Plegians’ movements. As Miriel said, they’re headed directly for Ylissotol. From the reports, the Plegian force numbers in the several thousand - not something a group of commandos with a company of mages can take head on.

“The Plegian force itself is too large for us to take on directly. However, that does not mean we cannot be of assistance - a force this size is reliant on it’s command staff to get anything done with any form of competency. If we were to attack the leadership directly, we would cripple the army’s ability to lay siege to Ylissotol.”

Miriel nods “An apt observation. I had come to a similar conclusion. We have been preparing for such an attack. Riders have been sent to rally the provincial militae for a siege breaking action to capitalize on our offense. A rider has also been sent to inform Khan Basilio of the situation.”

“We will sort out the specifics later, then. How did the missions go?”

As bad as an the Plegians laying siege to Ylissotol is, it isn’t disastrous. The city is among the best defended on the continent - any siege will take weeks, if not months to bear fruit. Frankly, for the Plegians to head directly for the Capital is a tactically poor move - they’ve left themselves wide open to flanking maneuvers from the other Ylissean provinces’ forces.

“All teams succeeded in eliminating their primary targets. Twelve secondary targets escaped.”

We had designated the Grimleal as primary or secondary targets in relation to their importance within the church - the result of Ylisse’ remaining intelligence assets within Plegia. Secondary targets were small fry - acolytes, small-town leaders - not of overall consequence. All of our targets within the holy city were primary targets. The fact that we have succeed in taking out all of the primary targets is massive - the Grimleal would have been well and truly crippled from such a blow.

“Casualties?”

“Twelve of the Battlemages died. Sully, Stahl and twenty of the mages were injured, but, bar four of the mages, they’ve since made full recoveries.”

I lean on the table. This operation was closer to a complete success than we had ever dared to expect! Even if Chrom and Flavia were to report total failures, the operation as a whole would still have done better than our most generous predictions!

Miriel is holding back a smile, but her eyes held a joyous sheen. We’ve really outdone ourselves with this one. A smile of my own breaks free, and I say “That is tremendous. Truly. Well done, everyone. Alright, I’m going to start planning our next move. Cordelia, can you get me a comprehensive report on the status of our available forces?”

Cordelia gives a sharp salute and leaves the tent. I turn to Miriel “I assume you have collated our intelligence so far?”

She nods and hands me a sheaf of papers, I begin to flip through them, familiarizing myself with the situation in greater detail. “Lissa, I need to to give the orders to be ready to leave at any moment, if you haven’t already.”
“Sure thing. I won’t be of much use here, so I’m going to go help out at the healer’s tent.” Stahl makes excuses of his own and also leaves.

“Virion, take a look around and see if the outpost has any bullets for us. I’d requested some to be made available for our arrival here, but with things as they are I’m unsure whether they’re here.”

If there are bullets available, one of our many contingencies will have payed off. Funnily enough, we had given this order in anticipation of having a large force of Plegians on our tail coming into Ylisse, rather than our current situation.

“Say no more, my friend. I’ll leave the strategizing to you two.” He gave me a wink before swiftly leaving the tent with a smug grin on his face.

Now alone in the tent, Miriel and I sat at the table. I finished reading the reports - not the worst news, but by no means good: the Plegian force had faced several provincial peasant militias on their way towards Ylissotl. While the force was by no means slowed down in any significant capacity, they were suffering not insignificant amounts of attrition.

Our scouts have reported Plegian casualties in excess of five hundred - over a tenth of their force. Sadly, militiamen and peasant casualties were far greater. Undoubtedly, there would be a similar amount of wounded that the Plegians now had to care for.

I replace the reports in their sheaf and steeple my hands. “Alright, here’s what I’m thinking. We play this fast and hard - blitzkrieg style. We use battlemage support to sow disarray in their ranks, before sweeping in with our cavalrymen and Pegasi to remove the commanders.”

Miriel taps her chin, and consults our troop roster. “I am unfamiliar with the term, but the idea is sound. However, I do not believe we have sufficient cavalry at hand to achieve this - our sum being Frederick, Sully, Stahl and Sumia.”

“It means ‘lightning war’, but yes, I agree. Do we have additional warhorses?”

Miriel consults another page - our inventory, no doubt. “We have six. Who would you have ride them?”

“Who has experience fighting from horseback? If I’m not mistaken, Chrom does - so that’s one.”

“Not many else. If we are to proceed with your idea, we will have to account for our cavalry force’s inexperience.”

“We’d best decide quickly and start on drills as soon as possible. Hm. What are your thoughts on Myself, Libra, Kellam, Cordelia and Virion? Having rifle support would surely make up for the experience deficiency.”

“A good idea, but Kellam is with Chrom’s group - he will have insufficient time to practice.” she pauses, face twisted in consideration. “I would nominate myself in his place - mounted spellcasting is something I have dabbled with in the past. And of course, the plan would hinge on having ammunition available. How many bullets do you have left?”

“Twelve between the three of us - barring any extra from the outpost. Enough to be worth using, even if only as a last resort, but by no means ideal.”

“Hm. I believe that to be suitable. We may have to adjust our planning in the future, but for now let’s get to training on horseback while we still have light.”
Neither Chrom nor Flavia arrived that day, but everyone did end up with some form of basic competency for fighting on horseback. Miriel and Cordelia were clearly the best at it, whereas Virion, Libra and myself were far more mediocre.

Virion did end up finding the delivery - thankfully, the Plegian had done little beyond defeating the inhabitants of the outpost before moving on. The supplies consisted of a crate full of ammunition and three bayonets fitted for our rifles. Basilio had made good on his promise to provide Quinlan with Saltpetre far earlier than I had expected, apparently - there had to be at least five hundred bullets in that thing!

The ammunition was a godsend - it allowed the three of us to acclimatize our horses to gunshots in addition to becoming more accustomed to firing from horseback. We’re by no means good at it yet, but we do have experience with it now.

The bayonets, too will be immensely useful, as they would prevent the need to switch to a melee weapon in the event the rifle jams or runs empty. They’re fairly short, and fit onto a rail on the underside of the barrel, but a quick test showed they could easily punch through a steel link hauberk with a leather jerkin layered on top.

Of course, I suggested Virion and Cordelia pack a backup sword just in case they lose their rifles, but that hopefully won’t be necessary.

I finish up cleaning my rifle, packing it away. I’d given orders to store the rifles in our personal tents rather than the armory as precautionary misdirection against thieves. I don’t think there’s too much risk, but better safe than sorry.

Leaving the armory tent, I made my way through the outpost towards my own tent. Dinner had been before sundown, so the group of us had forgone food beyond some jerky for more practice.

I think I’ve got a bit more of it somewhere, I’ll probably finish it up before bed. Coming to my destination, I open my tent flap only to find someone already inside.

“Miriel? What are you doing here?”

She’s sitting at my desk, two bowls of steaming broth next to her. I enter, laying the case against the far wall. The officers tents are rather spacious, so it isn’t particularly cramped even with two people inside.

“I brought dinner. One of the mages was kind enough to keep some warm for us, but I suspected you would opt for more jerky instead.”

She hands me a spoon and a bowl, and I take a seat on my bed. I raise an eyebrow, and try to stop a sardonic grin from showing “So you’ve taken it upon yourself to stifle my bad habits, then?”

There’s a flash of an emotion I don’t quite catch on Miriel’s face, before she schools her feature and replies “Quite. One mustn’t forget nutrition in favour of convenience. Doing so is detrimental to the maintenance and growth of musculature - a necessity in our line of work, unfortunately.”

I take a spoonful of the broth. It’s rather bland, as usual. Too bad we don’t have access to spices to make this a bit more tolerable…

I pause, having an idea. Necessity is the mother of invention, after all. I place the bowl on my side table, and begin to rummage in my pack.

“What are you seeking?”
“It’s a surprise. We’re in the need of a little bit of celebration after the mission we just pulled off, after all.”

“Celebration? What do you mean?”

Finding the bottle in the depths of my pack, I pull out my bottle of Feroxi Firewine with a murmured ‘ta-da’. “Alcohol - the tried and tested method of having a good time across the multiverse.”

“Becoming inebriated in the middle of a defacto war seems like poor judgement to me.”

“Ah, but you’re thinking about it the wrong way - we cannot remain sober throughout the entirety of the war: that would be ever so detrimental to our morale, so therefore, it is our moral duty to have a good time tonight as celebration for a job well-done!”

I uncork the bottle, and motion for Miriel to come over. I add a nip to each of our broths. Miriel seemed ready to object for a moment, but allowed me to. I taste a spoonful of the broth - much more palatable.

Miriel sits next to me on the bed, and the broth begins to go down far more easily, and after a few minutes we’re both finished. Once we’re finished, I pull out two metal cups, adding a nip to each. Too bad I don’t have any ice - this stuff is very nice.

Maybe Flavia could hook me up with more. Handing Miriel a cup, I raise mine “To a successful mission!”

She lets out a small giggle, before saying “To a successful mission!” We clink our cups together, and I knock back mine, Miriel following my lead. She grimaces as afterward, but she managed it.

I refill our cups, and Miriel giggles at something. “What?” I take a sip of mine, slowing down.

She giggles again, “I’ve just realised something.”

“And what’s that?”

“I’ve never done this before. The rest of the Shepherds go out drinking sometimes, but it’s not something I go along with…” She takes a sip of her own “I didn’t expect to enjoy it quite so much.”

Her cheeks are rosy now. Yeah, if she’s never drunk heavily, two nips of this stuff would hit pretty hard. I can feel my own face flushing, too. I pause for a moment - a new body means a new constitution. I probably won’t be able to handle as much as normal. We’d better go easy.

I recork the bottle, putting it back into my pack. Miriel seems slightly disappointed at that, but she simply takes another sip and it fades. “Drinking with friends is always better than drinking with colleagues. Besides, the rest of the Shepherds probably drink beer - this stuff is way better.”

“Friends…” She takes another sip “I like you, Robin. I think that may be it.”

“Sure, I like you too. You really haven’t gone drinking before?”

“No, not really. I’ve had wines at academy balls and dinners that had required attendance, but other than that, not really. I guess I’ve never seen the appeal.”

“We’ll have to fix that the next time we get the chance. First round’s on me!”

“I would enjoy that, I think. Maybe for the celebration after we break the Plegians’ siege? Morale is important after all.”
I let out a bark of laughter, and Miriel bursts into a fit of giggles. We quieten down and finish off our drinks, settling down into a companionable silence. My mind begins to wander.

If Chrom doesn’t arrive tomorrow we’ll have to decide whether we go ahead without him - the plan would benefit from his and Frederick’s presence, but we could definitely still pull it off without them.

We’ll have to make the call whether trying to break the Plegians early is worth the increased risk being without two of our cavalrymen would carry. I’m leaning towards waiting - even if we ended up delaying our attack for several days.

That would also come with the benefit of allowing Virion, Cordelia and myself more practice firing from horseback - we certainly have the ammunition for it, and having even a trio of competent dragoons would be a serious force multiplier in any engagement.

What would be even better, on the other hand, is a squad of flying dragoons. I’m not sure whether we’ll be able to get it to work with pegasi, but we can always try wyverns or griffons. The sheer versatility such a group would afford us is astounding.

That’s not even considering the possibility of using other types of munitions! What if we were to develop a sort of napalm bomb we could drop from our fliers? They would serve for battlefield control above all others - we could simply drop a couple of bombs and the enemy’s line would be split in half!

We could use them for naval engagements, too - the ships of this world are wooden! Im-

I was interrupted from my musings by Miriel leaning on my side. She’d fallen asleep. I smile, taking the cup from her loose hands and placing it alongside mine on my bedside table. I’ll either have to wake her up or find a different place to sleep, but first, I want to finish that thought…

Right. Wooden ships are extremely vulnerable to napalm. Napalm may be outside of our chemical capabilities, so what about greek fire?

I woke with a pounding headache and a wretchedly dry throat. I was thinking about something important before I fell asleep, what was it?

Something about aircraft carriers and griffons, I think? With a start, I realise that I’m not alone in my bed. Miriel is pressed into my side with an arm draped across my chest.

Oh. It was one of those mornings, then. Thankfully, our modesties were both preserved, so nothing drastic seems to have happened.

I give her a nudge on the shoulder “Wake up, Miriel.”

She comes to her senses, and separates herself from me. I get up and rummage around in my pack, pulling out two of my waterskins. I hand one to Miriel and uncork the other. “Drink up. It’ll do your head a favour.” I drain the skin, and Miriel follows.

Miriel makes to say something, but is interrupted by the ring of the bell signalling breakfast. We’d slept in, then. “You’d better go, see you at breakfast?”

She says nothing, but nods before leaving. I take a look at myself in the small mirror on my desk. I’m too rough to be presentable. I quickly change, tidy up my hair, and shave my face before leaving for the breakfast tent - with a quick detour to relieve myself.
I see Virion leaving his own tent as I go, and he gives me a wickedly sly grin. Crap. He knows - or rather, he thinks he knows. I enter the mess tent and serve myself breakfast - sausage, bread and egg. Not quite the breakfast of champions, but much better fare than what I’d been living on over the past weeks.

I take a seat at my usual table, and soon after, Virion sits across from me, the same shit eating grin still plastered across his face.

“So, you and Mir-”

I cut him off with a jerk of my hand. “Nothing happened, and I will not have you spreading rumours.”

“Nothing? I’d hardly call that nothing. Why, it’s almost scandalous! Truly, well done, Robin. She’s quite the catch. Not my type, but I can see the appeal.”

“Virion. I’m going to say this once more, and I want to be very clear about this. Nothing happened. Miriel and I had celebratory drinks last night, and, quite by accident, we both fell asleep before Miriel could depart.”

“Celebratory drinks, hey? You sly dog, Robin! I’ll have to use that line myself!”

I buried my head in my hands, letting out a groan. Cordelia sat next to Virion, and said “What have you said that has left Robin in such a state?”

“Oh, I was just discussing what I saw from my tent this morning!”

“And what would that be?”

“Why, Miriel exiting Robin’s tent in quite the bedraggled state.”

Cordelia seems to go off into her own world for a moment, before a wide smile bursts onto her face. She leans forward and places a hand under her chin. “Tell me more.”

Of course the hopeless romantic and the shameless dandy would be interested in my love life. I shake my head and finish up my breakfast as the pair devolve into increasingly wild speculations as to what had occurred.

I see Miriel enter the tent, looking refreshed. I get up to wash my plate up, and she goes to get her food. I pull her aside once I’m done. “I’d advise staying away from Virion and Cordelia. They’ve got their own ideas as to what happened last night, unless you wish to be subjected to that.”

She raises an eyebrow at me. “I’d best disabuse them of any notions they may have, then.”

I shake my head. I’m eager to see her try, but not hopeful she’ll have any success,

It had not succeeded, and now, the entire camp believes we’re a pair. Or at least that we had done the dirty last night.

Basically, it was a mess. We hadn’t had a chance to speak privately about it yet - I’d spent the daytime hours either being drilled by Sully and Stahl on mounted combat or practicing our shooting.

At about an hour before dusk, Flavia’s team had arrived. They had succeeded in taking out all seven of their targets, but not without cost - Lon’qu had a nasty Nosferatu burn on his right arm and shoulder from one of the Grimleal. Olivia had also suffered an arrow wound, but Flavia’s field
surgery had handled it, apparently.

Lon’qu was quickly ushered into the healer’s tent, and Olivia likewise was ordered to be checked out, just in case. A runner came about half an hour later and delivered me healers’ prognoses. Olivia had been healed by Libra, and was out and about already. Lissa’s assessment of Lon’qu is that he’d recover fully in about two weeks, but until then, he’ll be benched.

Poor guy. Lissa probably took his case from Libra rather insistently.

I briefed Flavia on the situation at hand, and informed her that Lissa had sent a rider to Basilio a few days ago. We won’t be able to expect Feroxi reinforcements for our attack, but they’ll help us in the aftermath.

She said that she would be ready to help with any infantry attack, but she is, by her words ‘like a half-blind drunkard not past her fifteenth winter’ when it comes to mounted combat.

I finally managed to get some time to speak with Miriel after dusk. We had decided to meet in the war tent to draw up contingencies for our attack. We weren’t able to sort out anything solid, but we began doing the broad strokes.

We’d just finished up, and she was about to leave, when I said “We should talk.”

She froze. “About what?” She turned to face me, head cocked slightly.

“Everyone has made the assumption that we’re an item. Sorry about that.”

“Indeed they have. What do you have to be sorry for?”

“It was… improper... of me to offer drinks. The place I’m from has far different social customs - drinking alone with a female friend is not a definitive sign of romantic entanglement there.”

“Is this situation so detrimental? After all, I said to you that I liked you, and you replied in kind.”

I pause. That did happen, didn’t it? I had taken her words to mean platonically, and my reply had been the same. But was there the potential for something more?

I slump in my chair. I needed a drink for this. I stew for a moment, considering my feelings, before coming to a decision.

“Fuck it. Sure, let’s be partners.”
We spoke no more on the topic after that. Miriel left the tent without so much as another word. I’m not too sure how I feel about this - I’m already having second thoughts. Maybe I was a little too hasty? It doesn’t matter. There’s a war on and an apocalypse on the horizon - I can worry about it later.

I exit the tent and make my way to bed. Gossip notwithstanding, I’d say today was a very productive day. The competency of us three riflemen is rapidly improving - unusually quickly, perhaps.

Then again, we had been training fairly intensively, so maybe not. We’ve gone through a significant amount of ammunition - over a hundred bullets each. It was well worth it, but we can’t really afford to keep up this pace.

Our practice revealed a few problems with the rifles that we hadn’t really had issues with until now. Most prominently was the severe unreliability of the ejection mechanism - we estimated that one in fifteen casings failed to eject for one reason or another.

I hadn’t had the chance to sit down and really investigate the root of the issue, but it’s a big problem - clearing a jam takes a few seconds that could be fatal in a combat situation. The next big problem with the things are the magazines. Frankly, they’re terribly made - some barely fit, while others are very loose. There’s a whole litany of problems caused by this; magazines falling out, getting stuck during ejection, bullets getting stuck inside or not fitting at all.

The quality is all over the shop. We’ve each got one or two that we know work well, and there’s a pile of about ten that simply do not work at all sitting in the armory waiting to be reclaimed.

There’s a bunch of smaller problems, too - the bolt is a bit too tight, the sling swivels are awkwardly placed, the barrel is poorly rifled, the stock is just a bit too short, the trigger guard is just a bit too close to the trigger - the list goes on.

Most of the problems should be a breeze to fix with even just a basic refurbish - I have few doubts that a mark two-point-oh would improve the design dramatically, but some of the others may be more tough to fix without first improving our manufacturing methods.

Most of the metal parts in the rifle were cast rather than machined, and all of the wooden parts were hand carved. A notable exception was the barrel - that was forged over a rod that had the reverse image of the rifling.

Unfortunately, I’m entirely unfamiliar with the particulars of metallurgy when it comes to firearms, so the gun is made from the same grade of steel used in a knight’s shield. I know that different parts of guns are usually made from different alloys, but this one is made from the same type throughout.

There’s likely to be issues with corrosion and wear further down the line, but for now everything’s holding together. Since Quinlan managed to figure out the recipe for smokeless powder, we haven’t had many issues with barrel fouling yet, either.

We invested a significant sum in creating the reusable casts in the hopes that is would give the rifles a set of standardized parts that we could replace as necessary. But, from the looks of things, at least some of those casts will have to be either replaced or modified.

Entering my tent, I pack away my things and settle into bed. Tomorrow would be much the same as today, even if Chrom arrives. I’m out like a light, and I wake at dawn the next day. I quickly set
about my routine - breakfast, reports, planning, training, then lunch.

As I was finishing up my meal, a runner flagged me down. He informs me Chrom has just arrived. It’s almost go time, then - I finish up and track him down for a report.

“Chrom! How went the mission?” He looks absolutely exhausted, but otherwise unharmed. As he walked, I noticed he was heavily favouring one side - the hike across Plegia wouldn’t have done his leg any good.

“It was hell, but we succeeded without losing anybody. All targets have been eliminated.”

Behind Chrom, I see Frederick escorting Kellam to the medical tent. He had his arm held stiffly against his side and was having trouble walking. Frederick looked battered and bruised, but without any serious injury.

Chrom’s expression was weary, but he held a satisfied smile at being able to report a job well done.

“That is good to hear. Unfortunately things haven’t been well on the home front. As we speak, Plegia is laying siege to Ylisstol. By our estimates, they would only have started yesterday.”

Hearing the bad news, Chrom’s expression drops. “You have a plan, I assume?”

“Yeah. I’ll bring you up to speed with it later. For now, you need to relax and recover - we’ll need you in top fighting shape for our attack.”

He wasn’t happy about being relegated to bedrest for the day, but acquiesced after I insisted. I briefed Frederick on the plan right away. He found the concept of a blitzkrieg attack novel, but was happy to give it a try. He also took over from Sully and Stahl in teaching Libra, Miriel, Cordelia, Virion and myself how to ride.

While Sully and Stahl were both passable teachers, Frederick was leagues ahead of them. Our technique only got better and, by the end of the day, Frederick had deemed us skilled enough to be taking part in the battle without running the risk of being a hindrance to the other riders. It’s not exactly glowing praise, but Frederick rarely, if ever, provides anything of the sort.

At the crack of dawn the next day, the outpost was almost packed up and we were just about ready to depart. The latest reports showed that the Plegians had indeed began their siege, but Ylisstol was holding fast. The morning’s reports also mentioned that the Plegian attackers were falling to some new form of magic from the defenders. The scouts found that key Plegian personnel would suffer an acute case of sudden death, usually signaled by a distant bang and a geyser of blood or an exploding head.

My first thought was that Thomus had fitted some personnel with sniper rifles, but there were several problems with that theory. For a start, there was no way that the rifles that we’re using had the accuracy to be used outside of a few hundred meters - far below the distance from Ylisstol to the Plegian camp.

The second issue being the fact that our bullets simply weren’t powerful enough to cause such dramatic trauma - exploding heads simply was not possible for us yet.

I had given him more advanced designs - one that springs to mind was one that drew from modern sniper rifle build philosophies, but used manufacturing methods that had been available at the start of the first world war. It was pretty amateur stuff, if I had to be honest, but it would have been functional in theory. Of course, even this wouldn’t explain the results we’re seeing.
Maybe this really was a new type of magic?

Seeing a runner flag me down and give the all clear, I signal for the procession to depart. I’m riding, rather than sitting in a cart this time - there was no more intelligence for me to plan on, or contingencies to think up.

Before my arrival in this world, I’d never even seen a horse in person before, but now, I work with them almost every day. There were a lot of things I missed about my old life; not being thrust into mortal danger on a regular basis and not having the Sword of Damocles in the form of and eldritch god hanging above my head were foremost among them.

But there were plenty of smaller things, too - music, showers, toilet paper and the food. Music was probably the one thing I’d pay the most to have back. In my old life, I’d be listening to music pretty much all the time, but here, I could count the amount of times on one hand.

Ylisse has many things, but good music is not among them. It has got to the point where I’ve almost always got a song stuck in my head anyway - it isn’t quite a replacement, but it’s better than nothing.

I’ve gotten some odd looks from people when they see me murmuring the words of an eighties anthem or some pop banger, but I honestly couldn’t care less.

Our journey towards the capital was without incident. Once or twice a day I would get a report from our scouts updating me on the progress of the siege. Things have pretty much ground to a halt. For some reason, the typical Plegian siege tactic of utilising Dark Magic bombardment to break the city’s defenses was not being utilised. Instead, the Plegians were building siege engines outside the capital from the surrounding forests.

Why hadn’t they just brought their own? Or, if resources were a problem, built them from pillaged Ylissean resources before beginning the siege?

What if they were they holding out for something - someone? Was if this was just an elaborate ruse to draw the people that destroyed their church into a trap? We couldn’t know for sure, but in any case, we can’t allow the city to remain blockaded.

It was a two day journey at Ylisstol at the pace we were setting, and both passed without incident. I had briefed Chrom on the plan - like Frederick, he was intrigued by the idea of a blitzkrieg attack.

As it stands now, the plan is to lead our assault with a heavy, concentrated bombardment from our mages, before following with a cavalry charge focused towards breaking through to the Plegians’ command staff. Our other melee fighters would remain in reserve, to be used if a distraction is necessary to disengage.

After we arrived at the edge of the forest near Ylisstol, the personnel not taking part in the attack split - support and managerial staff, a few healers, and the infirm. Scouts delivered the most recent intelligence on the Plegian position, and I planned accordingly.

The Plegians were set up between the crests of two hills, a few hundred meters out from the capital. The forest was about fifty meters away from the base of the furthest hill. They’d launched a probing attack yesterday, and were likely preparing for a more serious attempt today.

I pull up beside Miriel, handing her the report. “I don’t like it. This entire siege seems horribly coordinated. I think this is a trap.”

Miriel flips through the report. “You’ve said this before. I think they are simply that incompetent. Not every general is tactically or organizationally adept.”
“I wouldn’t be so quick to dismiss the possibility - after all, that may be exactly what they want us to think.”

“We have already taken precautions against the possibility of a trap - that is why our non-mounted forces will remain hidden. I believe you are wearing yourself out with this, Robin. Put it aside, we have already accounted for it.”

I sigh. Maybe I really was just thinking too hard about this. “You’re probably right. Now, what are your thoughts on the direction we should attack from?”

The discussion moved on, and soon after, we had nailed down the specifics of our attack. We decided to move through the forests until the Plegians are directly between us and the city. After that, we will move to the hill directly behind the Plegian encampment, and the mages will bombard the Plegians from the crest.

As best we can tell, this will give us the least resistance for when we attempt to break through to the command staff - the bulk of the Plegian force was situated on the side of the camp facing Ylisstol as of the latest reports.

“Mages, fire!”

At my mark, the signaller repeated my command, and our mages began their bombardment. We had caught the Plegians with their pants down - they hadn’t realised we were attacking until the first of the mages had crested the hill.

A deluge of Arcthunder and Elthunder was launched towards the rallying troops. The effects were drastic - our target area was littered with the bodies of electrocuted soldiers. A few of the Plegians’ tents had been torched in the strike, and the soldiers were swarming about without any semblance of coordination.

I spied officers shouting trying to form their soldiers up, but they didn’t seem to be having luck. Better capitalize on that, then.

“Cavalry, charge!”

We were off like a shot. Frederick led the charge with Sully and Stahl as his wingmen. The less experienced riders in the group were further back. We came into the area we had bombarded, charging through the rallying area without resistance. We came into the camp proper, and finally met the enemy - one officer and a handful of troops.

The officer suffered a bullet through the chest courtesy of Virion, and the rest of the group were similarly dispatched without trouble. We gained our momentum back through the main thoroughfare of the camp, and before long, were in the heart of the camp.

The mages had began secondary incendiary bombardments at this point, aimed at keeping the enemy from rallying. It wasn’t danger close, but it was still quite harrowing to have fireballs whizzing past overhead.

We found the command tent without trouble. “Riflemen, fire!” At my mark twenty bullets were fired in rapid succession, peppering the tent. There were some momentary lulls while we cleared jams, but it was a near constant stream of bullets.
“Libra, check the tent.” He dismounted and pulled up the tattered tent flap.

“Four dead. One general, one messenger, two commanders.” Libra looked sickened.

“Reports indicated four commanders. We’re not done yet.”

He remounted, and we continued sowing chaos throughout the camp. We found one of the other two commanders trying to rally his troops despite the continuing bombardment. Chrom’s lance disabused him of such notions rather permanently.

Unfortunately, we couldn’t confirm the death or continued life of the final commander before the bombardment ceased and we had to withdraw or risk severe reprisal. We vacated the camp without incident.

As we disengaged, I looked back. The camp was in ruins - there was not a tent that wasn’t set on fire, and bodies carpeted the ground. Soldiers still swarmed about without so much as a hint of cohesion. We hadn’t suffered a single injury on our side, and yet we had crippled the Plegian command.

In all, another resounding success. We promptly made our way to the rendezvous point and distanced ourselves from the Plegian camp.

I maintained a vigil throughout the night, receiving reports on the developments in regards to the siege and strategizing for a follow-up strike should it be necessary. Reports showed that the Plegians were disengaging, however, so that was looking increasingly unlikely to be the case.

Miriel had retired several hours ago, but we had developed several plans and appropriate contingencies before that point.

Another runner entered my tent, handed me a report, then promptly left. I opened it - it detailed a group of Plegian deserters that had been spotted to the east. Nothing pertinent for the time being.

I sigh, rubbing my eyes with the heels of my palms. I should probably turn in. I pack away my papers and begin to prepare for bed when I hear an electronic crackle behind me accompanied by a flash of yellow light.

Shit! An assassin!

In one motion I draw my dagger and lunge for the intruder. What I see, however, isn’t the dark mage that I was expecting. Instead, a tall man was materializing from nothing under a sheen of tesselated golden-yellow triangles. He was holding neither weapon nor spell catalyst.

I stumble, taken aback. The man has a pair of sleek metallic limbs.

What?

Are those… prosthetics? They certainly look rather futuristic.

I turn my gaze to his face. He’s wearing a set of glasses planted firmly in front of a pair of brown eyes and the hat of a Ylissian mage. A lock of blond hair hung from beneath the hat.

My dagger lowers. He’s one of ours? No… that’s some advanced tech he’s got there. That must have been using an invisibility cloak.
With a start, I realise who I’m looking at. It’s Laurent. He looks to be in his forties, but it’s definitely him.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

This isn’t the doomed timeline after all. Whatever my alternate did must have messed with the placement of the future children. It also means that in another timeline I lost to Grima...

“So, I failed, then?”

“No, your current foe is not the reason I am here.”

What? So this is the doomed timeline after all. What could possibly warrant sending someone back in time more than Grima, though? That doesn’t bode well for the future at all.

“Wh-” I swallow nervously. “Why are you here, then?”

Something flashes across Laurent’s face before he regains his stoic composure. “Grima was dealt with without trouble, but there is a greater threat on the horizon. Forty to sixty years is the timeframe you instructed me to give. The resulting war concluded with the complete and utter annihilation of life on this planet.”

My eyes widen. Fuck. War means an enemy state - or at least an organization with the capabilities to wage war. That could be pretty much any of antagonists from most of the Fire Emblem games.

“Who?”

Laurent’s voice was perfectly level, and his face shaped into a perfectly expressionless mask. It was rather disconcerting. “We don’t know. They had technology far surpassing our own, however.”

That rules out someone from the Fire Emblem world, then. And someone that far surpasses the tech Laurent has? That’s bad. Real bad. “What do you know about them?”

“When your future self assigned me this mission I was given an extremely strict set of information that I could reveal to you. I can’t say much, but I can say that Emmeryn would have died two days ago if I had not intervened. I can say that we didn’t have any other options past this plan. I was also instructed to deliver this package. Beyond this, I will not say any more.”

He places a pair of unmarked black leather A3 binders on my desk - both are about fifteen centimetres thick.

“Really? You can’t even say how their tech surpassed yours? And what’s inside these, anyway?”

“I cannot say, and I was not informed. I will not be staying - I will be travelling to a different timeline immediately.” He turns to leave, put pauses at the door. “Goodbye, Robin. We will not see each other again.”

I move to stop him, but he had already vanished under his invisibility cloak. Fucking hell, that was a bombshell and a half. I step outside and flag down a runner, instructing him to summon Miriel immediately.

Moving back inside, I open one of the binders to a random page. It’s a printed set of technical
specifications for a... I don’t know, actually. It’s tubular and is on the millimetre scale, but beyond that, I can’t discern a purpose.

I flip the page, looking for associated documentation. It’s a design for a vacuum tube. Tech? Laurent gave me a binder full of tech? I page through the binder some more, finding detailed designs for other devices - all things that I did not recall the make of in my initial technical package.

That’s a lot of designs… I flip to the last one in the binder. It’s numbered one-thousand and fifty-four, and is labelled ‘Mark III Nuclear Bomb - Fat Man’.

I blink. That glorious bastard - he’s actually gone and done it. My designs for nukes were limited to speculation; this is the real deal - in complete and exacting detail. I let out a bark of laughter at the absurdity of the entire situation - an alternate reality version of myself from the future just sent me the plans for a nuclear weapon via time travel!

I exhale sharply, snapping the binder shut. The ramifications of this are, frankly, huge. Alright; plans - what’s going to change?

Well, if we were outmatched even with the future-tech that Laurent had, we need to focus our tech development pretty hard. But how? By the looks of things, I don’t have designs for any of the futuretech that Laurent had. Even if we were to exhaust this binder within five years, we won’t have nearly enough time for advancement even up to that level - let alone surpassing it.

I crack open the other binder, hoping for more advanced designs, only to find that it contained nothing but pages full of words and accompanying diagrams. Skimming, I find that this binder is full of scientific theory - the page I’m on specifies the properties and applications of down quarks in great detail. It’s a little above my head, and while it’s certainly a boon, it doesn’t solve my problems.

I start paging through it some more. The further into the tome I get, the more obtuse the concepts get - Chronological hypo-impedance resulting from trans-dimensional macro-contamination? Preventing temporal capacitance with fifth-dimensional stabilizer arrays? Intra-dimensional interdiction matrices as the product of super-luminal atomic hyper-deliverance?

What on earth? Did whoever titled these documents just rip them straight from science fiction? It sure doesn’t sound like any actual science that I’ve ever heard of, but there seems to be a lot to do with dimensions and time. Did my alternate self give me the theory behind dimensional and time technology? I close the binder and slump in my chair.

What about Laurent? Obviously, Miriel has to be the mother, but blond hair means there’s three options for the father - myself, Vaike and Libra. Barring any unusual developments, it seems most likely that I’m the father. That would also make a twisted sort of sense - why wouldn’t I send my own son back in time to warn his father about the perilous future?

Miriel enters the tent, looking bedraggled. “The runner said it was important, what’s happened?”

“You recall how the second generation Shepherds would have travelled to an alternate timeline before my intervention?”

Immediately serious, Miriel draws up a chair and sits across from me. “Yes.”

“Our future son just travelled through time to deliver some very bad news.”

She immediately stiffens. “A fell proposition, to be sure.” She begins to continue, but stops herself, motioning for me to explain.
“Sometime in the next forty to sixty years there will be a threat capable of waging war on us and destroying life on this planet completely and utterly.” I sink further into my chair. “Said threat also possesses technology that far surpasses technology that was mere fiction in my old world.”

Miriel freezes, before leaning forward and producing a inkpot, quill and notebook. “I need you to describe to me your encounter with him in as complete detail as you can.”

She then proceeds to grill me on what happened in excruciating detail - what was he wearing? Did his arms make sounds as he moved? What was the feel of his magical signature? How did you know he was our son? All the while she made pages of notes on my responses. Eventually, her questioning stopped and she began to draw conclusions from her notes. “Well, the most obvious thing is that sometime in the future you have the ability to travel back in time. I have doubts that it was an event caused by Naga, given that he said he would be travelling to a different timeline.”

I nod. “Yeah - maybe these invaders make use of temporal technology and our future selves reverse engineer it? Then again, if they did, what would be stopping the enemy from simply travelling back to when we were born and smothering us in our cribs?”

“A possibility, but as you say, it doesn’t seem likely. What about the prosthetics? What could you tell about them?”

“They were far more advanced than anything that we had back in my world - they looked to be at least on par with, if not greater than a natural arm. They didn’t have any maker’s mark that I could see. Other than that, they’re a mystery to me.”

Miriel turns the page of her notebook. “If they stole that tech from the invaders it would suggest a human enemy.”

I shake my head. “We don’t know that they did - for all we know, they could have been developed by us in the future.” I pause, considering for a moment. “There is another explanation - the second binder contains the theory behind concepts related to time and dimensions. I am beginning to suspect that our alternate selves had access to dimensional and temporal technology both. That would explain where they got their advanced tech, too - they took it from some other dimension that had already developed it.”

She shuts her notebook, and moves over to the binders sitting on my desk. “If it is as you say, then that seems possible. If it were true, however, why did they not just obtain some weapon capable of destroying these enemies?” She opens the one containing the blueprints to the first page. There’s a foreword that I’d missed in my haste to see the contents of the package.

“Maybe they tried but couldn’t find anything?”

“A worrying proposition.” Reading aloud, Miriel says. “Contained within this binder is every design that a civilization would need to advance themselves to the level of technology that Robin’s home world had at the end of ‘World War Two’.”

The note lacked a signature of any kind. I shake my head. “Very good reasons? What on Earth could they be?”

Quietly smiling at my unfamiliar turn of phrase, Miriel says. “Perhaps these invaders have technology that is a direct counter to thiers? They could be intending for us to develop along different lines.”
Shaking my head, “That doesn’t explain why the designs for technology from my own time were not included - World War Two was more than seventy years ago when I left.” I open the second binder, finding another foreword. “Contained within this binder is a collection of theory that is necessary to develop an advantage that surpasses that of the enemy’s.”

Miriel and I share a look. “Whoever wrote these was not much for talk.” she said.

“Laurent was tight-lipped, too. I reckon that my alternate self may have deliberately limited the information we could get for one reason or another.”

“And what do you suspect those reasons to be?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he wanted to limit the contamination his timeline had on this one? Maybe even knowing that the enemy is would bring it towards us more quickly?” I shake my head, closing the binder.

“Both are possibilities. We may never find out, however. We will have to dramatically expand our industrial capacity as soon as possible. A few dozen workers in a few warehouses will not be sufficient for this task.”

“Yeah… Let’s familiarize ourselves with these documents. I want to know exactly what sort of tech we’ve got access to.”

I open the first book, looking at each of the designs in turn. I filled Miriel in on the purpose and strategic implications of each piece of technology. Most of them she was already at least somewhat familiar with from my original information packages, but some of the more obscure designs warranted additional clarification - chainsaws and the Enigma machines, among others.

We had scarcely made it a quarter of the way through the first book before another messenger entered the tent, the rays of the dawn sunlight shining in behind him. “Urgent report for Sir Robin!” He handed me the sealed report, and promptly hurried out of the tent, red faced. Put out by the runner’s strange behaviour, I opened the report.

Reading it, I let out a sigh of relief. “The Plegians have dispersed as of…” I stick my head out of the tent, gauging the time. “About twenty minutes ago. The force has fractured - most of it is headed westward towards the border. There are several smaller groups that have headed in other directions, also.”

“They will have to be hunted down. The chance that opportunistic assassins or saboteurs are within their numbers is too great to risk.”

Pulling out a piece of parchment and writing implements, I say “I agree. I’ll write up some deployment orders right now. We need to act while we still have a bead on their location.”

I quickly wrote the orders, and left the tent, annoyed that the runner left before I could relay them. I flagged down a nearby watchman and handed him the scroll, ordering its delivery to either Chrom or Frederick.

Returning to my tent, I let out a yawn. I hadn’t meant to pull an all-nighter, but Laurent just had to drop everything on me. Miriel had resumed examining the design for a B-17 Flying Fortress, muttering under her breath about how such a thing could not possibly fly.

I began to rifle through my bags, looking for a pouch. Finding it, I also pulled out two pewter mugs and a waterskin. I placed the two cups on my desk and opened the pouch. Coffee - or ‘reinvigoration draught’ as this world calls it, was expensive. Thankfully, Chrom pays very well, and I can afford to
start my day with a cup or two. My supply was just about used up during our trip to Plegia, but now seems like an appropriate time to use the last of it.

I heap a spoonful into each cup, and replace the bag. Unfortunately, I haven’t found the time to procure a strainer, so I’ve got to settle for a bit of coffee ground in my drink. I fill each cup with water and reach for my spell tome, applying a fire spell to heat the drink to a more palatable temperature.

I stir the coffee. Among all of my habits, preparing a cup of joe every morning wasn’t one that I expected to retain when I woke up here - even if I was using less-than-mundane means to do so. It was a comfort - just a little bit of normalcy that I get to savour every day before launching straight back into it.

I hand a cup to Miriel “Coffee. It’ll wake you up.”

She closes the binder, placing it safely out of the way of any spills and then takes the cup. “Coffee?” She inhales, smelling the drink. “This smells like a reinvigoration draught.”

“It’s customary to start the day with a coffee where I’m from. But yeah, it’s made from the same stuff as the draughts, but prepared a bit differently.”

We sink into a companionable silence for a time, each sipping at our drinks.

Miriel breaks the silence “What do you make of the entire situation?”

“What do you mean? The whole future enemy deal? It sounds like a massive pain in the ass, to be perfectly honest. I just wanted to deal with Grima and then retire in comfort, but no - it looks like I’ve been signed on for life.”

Miriel sighs, an equally sour tone entering into her voice “It does seem that way… ‘forty to sixty years’ is a particularly difficult time frame. But I was more referring to the fact that apocalypse seems to follow you around - first Grima, and now this?”

Seeing a perfect opportunity, my mouth curls into a wry grin “Once is chance, twice is a coincidence, three times is enemy action. I’m not worried quite yet.”

Not understanding the reference, Miriel deadpans “A wise maxim. I’ll have to write it down somewhere.”

We broke camp soon after and returned to Ylisstol promptly. I had not had the chance to talk to anyone else about the situation before Chrom, Frederick and I were all immediately escorted to the war room on our arrival. Inside, we were met by Phila and two of her captains. Emmeryn and Knight-Commander Edgar were nowhere to be seen.

Phila looked to have aged twenty years since last I saw her - heavy grey bags hung from her eyes, and her once flat face now sported a set of wrinkles. “Chrom, Frederick. It does me good to see you again. I know not what delayed you so, but much has transpired in your absence.” She collapses into her chair, motioning at her captains. They pack up their work and hastily vacate the room. “Edgar is dead. He fell leading a delaying attack to buy us enough time to secure the city.”

Chrom and Frederick look sullen at the news. I’d never really talked to the man, so it doesn’t phase me terribly. Chrom speaks up “Where is Emmeryn? Is she working with the healers currently?”
Phila sinks into her chair further, as if the weight of the world was on her shoulders. “She was, however, she over-exerted herself trying to heal a fatally injured child. She’s asleep and has not yet awoken. The priesthood and mage’s college both expect she will not awaken for some time. She is stable, however.”

Crap… Exhausting your signature - depleting your ‘mana’, in essence - was serious business. A coma is probably the least of Emmeryn’s problems. But didn’t Laurent say that if he had not intervened that Emmeryn would be dead? Maybe the coma was Laurent’s doing, and without it, Emmeryn would have worked herself to death?

That’s terribly… irresponsible of Emmeryn. I mean, I knew she was pacifistic to a fault, but this is just too far. Doesn’t she understand that an entire country is depending on her leadership?

Chrom takes a seat, adopting the thinker pose. “The rules of succession state that if the current Exalt is no longer physically capable of ruling, the title will pass to the next in line for the duration of the Exalt’s indisposition.”

That’s… not bad, actually. Emmeryn would be extremely obstructionist when it comes to war with Plegia. If she were to be put in a coma for the duration of the conflict, then the problem would be solved, no ‘accidents’ or forced retirements necessary.

I mean, Emmeryn’s a nice person, but if it comes down to it, I’d chose ensuring Grima’s death over her continued life, even if it mean destroying my friendships with the Shepherds.

Readying himself, Chrom stands, and begins speaking. “Frederick, you’re promoted to Knight-Commander, Robin, you’re officially now the Grand Tactician of Ylisse. Effective immediately. Congratulations on the promotions, you two. The first order of business is the Plegian situation. Phila, I need you to get me a full assessment of Ylisse’s current aerial capabilities. Approach your report with war against Plegia in mind.”

Phila snaps to her feet with a sharp salute, and departs for the Pegasus roost.

“Robin -”

“Hold on a second, I’ve got a rather important report.”

Unbothered by my interruption, despite Frederick’s stiff look, Chrom motions for me to continue. I explain the situation regarding Laurent to him.

Chrom slumps. “We need to have a council meeting at soon as reasonably possible. Bringing the Feroxi Khans up to speed should be a priority, too. Ylisse will not be able to weather this storm on her own. But otherwise, Plegia and Grima should take priority.” He pauses to rally himself. “Robin, I need you to start drawing up plans for war with Plegia. Gangrel has shown himself to be a mad dog that must be put down.”

“Way ahead of you, bud. What are the goals for the campaign? Total annexation? Destruction of the Plegian war machine? Gangrel’s head?”

Chrom stops, seemingly taken aback by my forthrightness. “Hmm. If it were any other country, I’d settle for the latter two, but Plegia has shown itself to be belligerent time and again. No. It’s time for Ylissean administration to bring it to heel. Annexation is the only option.”
Preparing for a campaign is no easy task. Especially given the fact that I’m essentially a complete novice. Thankfully, being the Grand Tactician - a formerly vacant office, given Emmeryn’s tendencies - comes with the authority to recruit as many support staff as I need.

Naturally, I’d picked up Miriel. At her recommendation, I also poached some administrative staff from the university. They were happy to accept the change of pace and the perks that came with working for a direct subordinate of the Exalt.

With my newfound power, I’ve been quietly reforming many of the archaic systems within the Ylissean military. Thankfully, Frederick and Chrom both seem to trust my judgement when it comes to these matters, so they were happy to push through the changes once I explained my reasoning.

Now, the Ylissean peasant military at least pays it’s conscripts and their families. It was a comparatively small amount, especially considering Ylisse’s wealth, but it was more than they would earn doing fieldwork.

In addition, there was a very clear chain of promotion for valorous, smart or skilled conscripts. I managed to sneak in a noble title a few ranks up that chain, so hopefully we’ll see some semblance of a meritocracy emerge.

Unfortunately, going straight for a full meritocratic system would dislodge a lot of very influential - and frankly, not very skilled - nobles from their positions high up in the food chain. Basically, it would cause a massive ruckus and upset the order of things - not something I want to do right before a war, especially considering the fact that many of these nobles have ties to traditional wartime production - horses, iron, steel and, smithing.

I did manage to institute a rulebook for all healers under the command of the Ylissean military. The church is free to practice bad medicine, but anybody in my army will either form up and conform to best practices or have the book thrown at them.

It’s a thick book, and I’m willing to bet that after the first few suffer such a fate, the rest will get in line.

Ylisse is moving into a war economy now, and our advanced technology production facilities are rapidly expanding. It’s concentrated in Ylisstol currently, but we’ve expanded more than fifty-fold - Chrom has been throwing the full weight of his support behind my tech, and it really shows.

Thomus and his team have taken our feedback and combined it with the more detailed blueprint from the new information packet, the mark two rifle - dubbed ‘The Everyman’ by his team - has already started production.

Initial prototypes are very promising - the metallurgical details from the new packet seems to have improved the build quality greatly, and a few design tweaks have solved the ejection problem almost completely.

Quinlan and his team have been absolutely devouring the second binder - which has been magically copied several times. He’s already optimized our gunpowder and blasting cap recipes and production methodologies with the new information, and is currently working on getting electric and petrochemical production together. It’s going slowly, but it’s vital work.

Thankfully, Ylisse has major deposits of coal, and the northern tundras of Regna Ferox has oilfields. Of course, Plegia has plenty of oil too, so we’ll definitely be appropriating that for ourselves when we annex them.
Frederick and his order of knights have been busy pushing recruitment and training said recruits. He tells me that the promise of payment upon the conclusion of the campaign has done wonders for morale, and that the platoon of riflemen and the four squads of dragoons that have already been trained are an absolute terror on the field.

Phila has been working closely with Cordelia in pursuit of flying dragoons. There has been progress, but it’s slow going. Virion has been helping Frederick out with training the ground-bound riflemen.

Ammunition is basically a non-issue at this point. A second saltpetre mine has been founded in Regna Ferox, and production from the existing one has increased significantly. It’s to the point that each day a caravan that has a cart filled with barrels of the stuff will arrive.

We’ve got an excess, to be sure, but we haven’t had the opportunity to look into heavier munitions quite yet - mortars are next on the list, but Thomus has been preoccupied with the Everyman. He’s put a few men on the job, but he tells me that they’ve been having trouble with the numbers. Aerodynamics and projectile trajectories aren’t something a craftsman from this time would be able to understand right away.

Another one of his teams has been working on napalm munitions to be dropped by our Pegasi riders. They’ve hit a roadblock with the petroleum and gelling agent, but that was to be expected given that it was being handled by Quinlan’s petrochemical team. They’re not certain whether it will be ready for the start of the war, but things looked to be moving along as expected.

Our border situation has been vastly improved under Chrom’s leadership. At my recommendation, barbed wire production contracts were granted to industrial provinces in the east, and a border picket was established on the western border.

The wire was instrumental in deterring small intrusions and slowing down larger ones - especially at night. Ylisse has enough watchmen at key passages in the mountains to be able to spot an incursion and alert a nearby rapid response force to head off the force before it can do any damage.

Reports show that Plegian bandit penetration into our core provinces has dropped to almost zero, so it’s worked like a charm.

Feroxi industry has picked up the slack when it comes to the more medieval products normally produced by the blacksmiths that were offered these contracts. Flavia and Basilio were both very happy to see their trade deficit start to shrink.

As expected, Regna Ferox threw their support behind Ylisse in regards to the ‘forty year crisis’ - as we’ve taken to calling it. They’ve been delivered copies of the most pertinent designs and theories. Flavia tells me that their smiths plan on taking on their own approach to the rifles. They don’t expect to have many ready for the war with Plegia, but a different take on the designs and production could only be a good thing.

I’ve made recommendations to both Flavia and Thomus to assign a liaison to each other with the goals of sharing knowledge.

In other news, a run of pistols based off of the 1911 design have been made. They’re not in regular production, but I’ve provided one to each member of the Council and Shepherds with a quick crash course on shooting.

They’ve already proven their worth by stopping an assassination attempt on Lissa dead in its tracks, so I’m glad to have done so. I guess the assassin wasn’t expecting the princess to dish out a face full of .45 ACP.
We’re expecting to be ready to leave for Plegia within the next few weeks. Emmeryn has been out for almost two months at this point. She’s been sustained by the best of Ylisse’s healers, but she’s showing no sign of recovering anytime soon. Chrom and Lissa were hit pretty hard by it, but they’re heartened that she’s at least still alive.

I’ve been working closely with Miriel these last couple of months, and we’ve managed to transform my initially bare-bones plan into a comprehensive set of stratagems and contingencies for complete and utter annihilation of the Plegian state.

If all goes to plan, this will be a complete gutter stomp.
Our campaign made good time for the first few weeks - our riflemen and dragoons served as high-impact shock troops and line breakers that absolutely destroyed anything that resembled a hard target on the expanse of the Plegian badlands. Things started to slow down once we began arriving at the first of the Plegian garrisons - essentially kasbah; complete with sheer sandstone walls and plenty of archers.

The Plegian strategy has been to dig in as hard as possible and hope to outlast us. Considering that Plegia is a barren wasteland, and Ylisse produces the most food on the continent, it’s either poorly conceived, or a bid for time.

The parts of the badlands we’ve captured already are almost uninhabited, and the few tribes that do live here are no friends of the Plegian state. The land also holds a key strategic resource for our warmachine: Saltpetre. We’ve diverted some of our combat engineers in order to establish mines, and shipped in workers from Regna Ferox to man them. We’ve got a steady stream of the stuff headed back into Ylisse and Regna Ferox, and a steady flow of food and supplies headed back towards us.

The first prototypes of the Feroxi rifle have been made, and from what I hear, they’re plagued with problems - I’m doubtful they’ll be seeing a deployment until the very latest stages of the war, at the absolute earliest.

Given our excess of Saltpetre, we’ve stepped forward research and development of mortars - it should be just the trick we need to crack these forts. The latest estimates give me a timeframe of a few weeks for the first set of prototype models.

Thanks to the simple construction of the mortars themselves - merely a baseplate, firing tube, firing pin and stand - we’re planning on producing a bunch of the things and then working to refine our ammunition as we go. The idea is that even if the rounds aren’t accurate at all, a repeated massed firing should serve just fine for our purposes.

Our current strategy with the forts is to use our marksmen to take out as many of the enemy soldiers manning the walls as possible, before moving forward with conventional medieval siege engines. We’ve had success so far, but it’s really slowed our campaign down - which, I suspect, is Plegia’s plan.

Regna Ferox has been holding fast in the north - the latest reports say that Plegia has focused the bulk of their attention towards breaking through Regna Ferox’s version of the Great Wall. Thankfully, they haven’t had success yet.

Otherwise, I’ve fallen into a routine: wake up for breakfast with the command staff, work with Miriel and Frederick to refine our plans with the latest intel, break for lunch with Miriel, return to planning and give a few marching orders, then retire. Miriel and I have also fallen into the habit of working our way through the second binder that Laurent gave us - the one containing the technical theory.

A deeper perusal a few months ago revealed that the binder contains - among other things - in-depth information about dimensional technology. Specifically, technology used for travel to other dimensions. That particular factoid confirmed a few of our suspicions about Laurent.

To say that it’s heavy reading is a pretty big understatement. Thankfully, consultation with Miriel has sped along both of our understanding quite significantly. It seems that the tech draws from both magical and technological roots - given our respective fields of expertise, it’s likely that collaboration
is pretty much a requirement if we want to get anywhere close to understanding it.

A runner entered the war tent, shaking me from my contemplation. He handed me a sealed message, then left the tent. I break the seal, giving the gist of message to Frederick and Miriel. “Scouts have spotted a group headed directly for us. Looks to be around fifty strong. Dressed like dark-mages. They’re not in combat formation, and holding at a slow pace.”

Frederick cocked an eyebrow. “A ploy?”

I shake my head. “A possibility, but why Dark Mages? Plegia has only sparsely utilized them in this campaign so far. I think this bears closer investigation.”

I knew from my own foreknowledge that the Dark Mages didn’t have a good relationship with the Plegian State and the Grimleal church - despite their theoretical close ties with both organizations. Could this be a splinter group?

Coming to a decision, I begin writing orders. “We’ll send an envoy. I’ve got the suspicion that this group might be refugees. Also allocate a few rifleman squads to keep in the wings just in case their intentions are less than savoury.” I punctuate my declaration with my stamp of office, and leave the tent to deliver the message to a runner.

I’ll likely find out more in a few hours, but in the meantime, there’s more planning to do - after all, this garrison isn’t going to besiege itself.

As expected, a report lands on my desk a few hours later with an update on the situation. As I suspected, the group were Dark Mages seeking asylum in Ylisse.

Normally, I’d be rather hesitant to grant such a request to what are essentially enemy soldiers - especially when the lot of them are within rifle shot - but given what I know about the Dark Mage situation, I’m willing to at least hear them out.

Then again, the extent of my knowledge is what amounts to second hand accounts from Henry and Tharja - which, for all I know, could have been voided by my interference. In the end, I decided that this required a personal touch - and with Chrom and Lissa out on missions, the responsibility falls to either Frederick or I.

Frederick was, strangely enough, more than willing to allow me to handle the situation. I mean, I’ve built up a good working relationship with the man over the last few months, but I’m a bit surprised that he trusts me enough to allow complete autonomy in this matter.

Then again, fifty refugees is practically a drop in the bucket, so maybe not. The mages had been stopped some way out from our camp, so I was riding there with an accompanying guard detail.

That was another change that I’ve had to deal with recently - with my new position, I’m now important enough to warrant a dedicated squad whose only job is to ensure my continued life. I understand, of course, but it’s rather jarring.

The other major change is the near-complete lack of missions that I’ve led personally. Instead, my time has been consumed planning and organizing on the rear lines. It’s to be expected - the battlefield is no place for a grand strategist, but it’s just another change that I’m dealing with.

And, honestly, it’s not an unwelcome one.
We’re coming up on the refugees now. True to the reports, the group looks to be about fifty-strong, and comprised entirely of dark mages. What the reports didn’t tell me, however, was the state of the group - they looked haggard. I couldn’t see a supply wagon among them. Had they been travelling without supplies?

The envoy I sent earlier flags me down as I approach. He’s standing with what must be the leader of the group. I dismount and the envoy makes his excuses, returning to his own horse.

It hardly even surprises me when I turn to find that the leader of the group is none other than Tharja. “Robin. You’re the leader of this group, I assume?”

She wrings her hands, seemingly distracted by something. “That’s me…” she trails off, an intense look in her eyes.

Internally, I groan. It seems that I couldn’t avoid her infatuation with Robin. “Look, what exactly are you wanting from us?”

A thin smile appears on her face. “Nothing much… most of us just want to live our lives without being thrown into the meat grinder. If that means defecting to an enemy state… Well, none of us have any compunction with it.” she pauses to swallow “especially if that state was the one that got rid of those damnable Grimleal.”

I feign confusion. “I thought you Dark mages were all in tight with the Grimleal?”

Tharja chuckles lowly “While it’s true that there are many with close ties, some of us only view the Church as a hindrance to our work… There’s only so many times you can be called out to assist with a mass sacrifice before your patience wears thin, after all.”

I shake my head. “I’m going to need more than that. What assurance can you give me that you aren’t agents looking to sabotage the Ylissean war effort?” I’m not expecting anything from her, and I’ve prepared a solution already, but it couldn’t hurt to ask. Of course, I also don’t suspect Tharja personally of being an agent, but that doesn’t speak for the rest of her group.

Tharja’s smile takes on a wicked edge “I’ve got just the curse for that” she croons, and I suppress a shudder, motioning for her to explain. “It’s a truth curse - a fell thing, but it’ll give you a minute to ask me anything you desire. If I lie, my soul is forfeit.”

That doesn’t allay my concerns at all - looks like I’ll be going with the backup plan, then. “That won’t be necessary. I do have a solution, however. You’ll be escorted into Ylisse where the group of you will be held in an internment camp for the duration of the war. You’ll be free to either stay in Ylisse or return to Plegia once the war has concluded.”

Shortly after Chrom came into power, I ordered the creation of internment camps for Plegian citizens. Plegia has already shown a propensity for saboteurs and assassins, so any Plegians that we had reason to believe could be foreign agents were rounded up by local authorities and sent to the camps.

It was an easy sell to the nobility - many of them hold Plegians in a dim light after the sacking of Themis - and once he saw that he’d be in hot water with the nobility if he blocked it, Chrom was happy to rubber-stamp the initiative.

I don’t want the stain that comes with human rights abuses on my reputation - that would not be conducive to getting things done, after all - so I made doubly sure that the conditions of the camps were good. It’s a rather heavy-handed solution, but frankly, I think it’s necessary in order to mitigate any damage that Plegia could cause to us.
Tharja seems taken aback that I declined her offer “Our needs would be provided for, I assume?”

“Certainly. Now, I must be going - I’ll leave you with my envoy to take care of the details.” I turn away before she can get in another word. The last thing I want right now is a hanger-on in the form of a psychotic dark-mage stalker - hopefully she gets the message.

I walk over to the envoy, filling him in on the details. He’ll be acting as a liaison between our two groups for the time being, but I don’t foresee any issues that he couldn’t resolve personally.

As I mount back up to return to camp, Tharja comes running towards me. She was stopped by my guardsmen before she got anywhere close to me. I quickly motion for them to stand down, and they lower their weapons. “What is it?” It looks like it was too much to hope she got the message.

Tharja jerks her arms free of the two guards that grabbed her. “I have a request of you.”

“Since you’re asking me and not the envoy, I assume it’s a personal one. What is it?”

She her posture shifts into something far more lurid than before, and her voice drops so that I have to strain to hear her. “I want to come with you. If trust is an issue, my offer from before remains open.” She ends her sentence by licking her lips - she’s not even trying to be subtle.

“Why? What purpose would you be serving within the war machine? I have no use for a bed-warmer.” If she wants to play the sex card, I can throw it right back into her face.

Immediately, her face reddens and her posture crumples. “I-” She swallows, voice wavering. “I am a master of curses. I could serve as a bodyguard against magical threats.”

I pause. She’s not wrong - dark magic has utility that anima magic simply lacks. Personality flaws aside, Tharja was one of the more powerful magical units in the game - having her running defense against potential assassins would be very useful indeed.

I sigh - out loud this time - maybe I was a bit too rude there. “I might just take you up on that. What do you need for the truth curse?” There’s no point in giving away my foreknowledge to her at this point, so it’s best to act as if I don’t trust her yet. “Of course, our own magical technicians will be confirming that what you perform is actually as you say it is, so don’t go trying anything sly.”

The curse was a rather simple affair, and our own magical experts confirmed to the best of their ability that the curse worked as advertised. I asked Tharja several questions, and her answers satisfied any doubts I had towards her loyalty.

“Final question. Why exactly did you want to accompany me?”

This was something that had been bugging me since we first spoke - I was under the impression from the games that Tharja was infatuated with Robin because he was the vessel for Grima. If that’s the case, does this mean that Grima could still use this body for his resurrection despite it containing a different consciousness?

Tharja doesn’t meet my gaze and mumbles something about my soul.

“I didn’t catch that, come again?”

“I said, your soul. It’s… captivating. I’ve never seen anything like it!”
“Soul? Do you mean signature, or are you talking about something else?”

Rallying herself, she injects bravado into her voice “Signature? Is that what you Ylissean hedge mages call it? I’m talking about the source of our magical power. The one held on a plane separate from the physical.”

“We’re talking about the same thing, then. What do you mean by captivating?”

She smirks “Oh, I thought you said that was your last question?” At my thoroughly unimpressed look, she quickly changes track and answers the question. “It looks alien - unlike anything I’ve ever seen before. It’s also like a whirlpool of energy - most people’s souls are calm, but yours is always in flux. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that you had lived out in one of the Dead Spots for most of your life and your soul is still adjusting to being in a magic rich environment.”

We’ve passed a few of the Dead Spots on our campaign already - they’re pretty much anathema to anybody with magical competency. The magical plane there is almost like a black hole - sucking energy away from everything that goes within its bounds. In the physical realm, they can easily be identified by the sudden complete lack of vegetation within their bounds. In all, they’re not type of place anything stays alive for long inside.

Our magical experts tell me that they are the result of ancient rituals of extreme power that went awry, permanently scarring the magical plane. I remember reading something along those lines in the game, but this goes far beyond that.

I guess this also means that whatever about being a vessel for Grima that attracted Tharja to Robin in the games is absent in me? Does that mean that I couldn’t be used for his resurrection? I guess there’s no way to know for sure. Safest bet would be to act as if it could and take measures to prevent such an occurrence.

It’s also quite alarming how accurately Tharja has pegged my situation. While mundane Earth certainly wouldn’t be like a Dead Spot, I can definitely imagine it would have a similar effect on my signature - if I even had one back then.

Time to end this, then. “Alright, I’m satisfied. Welcome to the team, Tharja. For the time being you’re assigned to my personal security detail. You’ll be working behind the scenes to prevent any form of magical assassination. Your direct superior will be myself - you’re going to be working separately from the other squad. Any questions?”

Maybe I’m being a bit too hasty here - after all, I’ve only really known her for a few hours - but I know from my foreknowledge that Tharja is, at her core, an extremely dedicated person. And, best as I can tell, she’s now dedicated to my survival - and that makes for one hell of a bodyguard.

If she was taken aback by my sudden acceptance, she doesn’t show it. “I’ll need a workshop and supplies before I get started…” she trails off, posing her statement as a request.

“You can have a tent for the first one, for the second, you can appropriate a squad of scouts and draw from my own discretionary funds - within reason, of course.” I poke my head out of the tent and wave a squire over to me.

“Lad, who’re you working under?”

He looks to be scarcely fourteen, and he barely managed to answer without stuttering. “Sir Frederick, Sir.”

“Good, he won’t mind me borrowing you. Name?” That’s a bald-faced lie - he absolutely would
mind, but I can’t be bothered finding another squire. At least I know who to apologise to, now.

“Jonesly, Sir.”

“Alright Jonesly, you’re going to be spending the rest of the day helping Miss Tharja here get set up. Finish up whatever you’re doing now, then show her where everything is. She’ll need a tent - size four - and you’ll have to show her how to withdraw discretionary funds from my personal budget.”

I turn back to Tharja. “We’ll speak more over dinner. Get Jonesly to show you where it is if you need.” With that, I leave, getting back to work.

For the most part, Tharja has been surprisingly well behaved - it seems that my initial shortness with her effectively communicated that I’m not interested in a relationship. While her work hasn’t shown dividends yet, I’m sure it’s only a matter of time. I did make a point of apologising to her at dinner that night, but we haven’t really spoken with each other outside of a professional context since.

The past few months have been an absolute slog. Plegia used the time bought with her outer regions to strengthen her inner defenses considerably. The introduction of mortars broke all of our ongoing sieges promptly, but mortars aren’t helping with the ‘butcher and bolt’ methodology the Plegian commandos have adopted.

It seems that it’s every other day that a supply train is ambushed, a base is infiltrated or a mine is collapsed. Thankfully, our weapons haven’t yet fallen into enemy hands in any significant numbers, but it’s only a matter of time. I’ve ordered out convoys to be strengthened in a bid to reduce attrition. Only time will tell if it works out.

But, the noose is tightening around Plegia’s neck. Regna Ferox has begun moving in from the north at a prodigious rate - without even having a significant technological advantage. Our intelligence suggests a major shortage of manpower within the Plegian army: losses within the opening bouts of the war were enormous. It’s only a matter of time before we’re knocking down Gangrel’s castle.

Really, the only thing left to do is to keep on taking forts, inching our way closer to Gangrel’s stronghold province by province. That, and to keep an eye out for any tricky stratagems that Plegia may try and pull.

Things continued as they had for the next few months - Plegia was slowly whittled down by a force with absolute technological dominance on one side, and a force that outnumbered their own several times over on the other. At one point, the Plegian navy attempted a surprise attack against a Feroxi port, but they simply did not have the numbers to hold the city - it was a distraction, at best.

True to all projections, Plegia was brought low, and eventually, we were laying siege to Gangrel’s castle. True to the games, it was a squat square fort in the traditional medieval fashion made from thick hewn stone. Normally, such a construction would be a nightmare to take.

I’ve got a sneaking suspicion that we won’t have any such problems. “All units, fire!”

At my command, the signaller echoed my call. I had decided to take to the field for what would likely be the final battle of the war. Soon after the command was received, a cascade of shells were launched. We were about a kilometer away from the castle. The Feroxi horde held a picket some distance out, so there was little chance of Gangrel escaping his fate.

A wave of explosions rippled across the fort. “Hit good! Fire for effect!” Once more, the signaller
repeated my commands, and the mortar teams began firing as rapidly as they were able.

The drum of mortar fire continued for almost an hour, and bit by bit, the castle was reduced to rubble under a hail of explosive and prototype incendiary shells. We had decided to utilise all of our available ammunition in order to send a message: Plegia’s time is over - and if anyone begs to differ, we have the capability to destroy them completely and utterly. Eventually, the ammunition ran dry and the bombardment ceased. The silence that followed was chilling. In the distance, Gangrel’s castle was no more than a field rubble and cloud of dust.

“All right, close the picket!”

At my command, the picket began closing in on the castle, making sure that nobody was attempting to hide in the surrounding plains. Soon enough, we were at the site of the former castle.

Our attack had well and truly flattened it. Beside me, a footsoldier exclaimed “What matter of ungodly power has this man unleashed upon this world? There’s no honour in this…” I pay his remark no mind, but I note that many others are in a similar state of shock.

I take a deep breath, absorbing the scene. “Love the smell of napalm in the mornin’. Smells like… Victory.” And what a victory this was. Complete and decisive annihilation of the Plegian command without a single Ylissean or Feroxi life lost.

I turn to a squad near me. Unfortunately, the reference had flown right over their head, and they were looking at me with something resembling abject horror. “Right! You lot! I need you to start looking for bodies - if we can confirm who exactly we caught in this, it’ll be a PR hit! Now, get going!”

In the end, we found the bodies of almost all of the remaining Plegian command. They had sequestered themselves in a warded bunker underneath the castle. Their protections had saved them from the brunt of the explosive shells, and the flames from our incendiary shells, but they had failed to account for the smoke produced by our munitions and had suffocated some time into the barrage.

Honestly, it’s better this way - if all we were left with was a red paste plattered underneath a stone column, we would have no way of knowing whether we actually killed the people we were looking for.

The war quickly wrapped up after our display - the remain hold-outs surrendered, and soon after, we controlled the entire country unconditionally.

The following conferences between Chrom and his council - which included me, incidentally - and the Feroxi Khans were a tedious but necessary step in determining what direction Plegia would take in the future. There was talk of installing a puppet leadership, but that never really gained much traction - complete and total annexation was pretty much a certainty at this point.

While Ylisse certainly did the lion’s share of the work in the war, Regna Ferox by no means did nothing - meaning that they are entitled to at least some of the country. I put forth a proposal that would give Regna Ferox the northernmost reaches of the country - the most fertile regions of the country; plains, grassland and mountainside - and Ylisse the remaining portions - the Saltpetre rich badlands, the oil rich desert, and the lucrative trading ports.

The Khans, ignorant to the value of oil, thought they were getting a great deal. Though, that isn’t to say that they aren’t - with the new land, Regna Ferox would be able to produce more food by itself, lessening its reliance on Ylisse to a degree.
With both sides satisfied by the arrangement - after I explained the value of our side of the deal to Chrom - the deal was quickly settled, and we set about integrating our new conquests into our respective kingdoms.

Things went remarkably well - the Plegian people were receptive to Ylissean administration after chafing under the harsh diktats of the late Mad King. We quickly outlawed the Grimleal - no use in giving any chance for that organisation to resurrect itself, after all. There was some friction - particularly from the conservative sector, but the responsible parties were quickly satisfied. Or failing that, silenced.

Such occurrences were a rarity, however. Most were content with the new way of things, and soon enough, most of the Ylissean army was headed back home - Plegia was officially not our department anymore. For the foreseeable future, the administration of the region will be left to a handful of noble houses. It’s not an ideal solution, but it’s the way of things for now - best not rock the boat too much just yet.

As our forces disbanded, we estimated that almost a third of recruited peasant population expressed a desire to remain in the army. We retained those that we deemed of particular value, but most we turned away - we couldn’t afford to keep a standing army of that size with the pay that we gave.

With the end of the war, my personal security detail shrunk from being a dedicated squad and Tharja, to just Tharja. Normally, it would have been cut back entirely, but I made the decision that having an expert on dark magic close to hand would be useful - especially considering the possibility we may need to disrupt rituals performed by the remaining Grima worshippers in the future.

If there’s one other good thing that come from this war, it’d be the rapid development of Ylissean industry. Over the course of the past few months, Ylisstol has rapidly become a major industrial centre rivalling the provinces in the east.

While we aren’t quite at the point I’d call ‘industrialized’ things are certainly moving in that direction - massive assembly lines manned by hundreds of smiths dot the worker’s district. While progress has been made on the electricity and petrochemical front, neither technology is at a level where we will be seeing major dividends just yet.

Despite the war having been officially over for almost a month now, I have been working almost non-stop since the war started. Thankfully, things are finally winding down now.

I lay on my back, staring at the ceiling of my chambers. I should be going for dinner right about now, but I honestly just can’t be bothered with it. We only arrived back in Ylisstol yesterday - a few days behind the rest of the army.

The war was a total drain on my energy - there’s only so many of those damnable forts you can lay siege to before you stop feeling invested in the whole thing. I roll over, burying my face in my pillows.

I feel like I should be feeling… I don’t know, euphoric? By all measures, that campaign was a success above all others - one that will go down in history. But I’m just not feeling it, and I can’t really articulate why.

Come to think of it, I’m not feeling much of anything, lately. Since I’ve arrived in this world, my life has been nothing but work, work, and even more work. I guess impending doom really has a way of motivating a man.

I can’t even remember the last time I took some time off. When was it? Maybe that time I shared a
drink with Miriel? We never did end up going out drinking together, either. How about before that?

I don’t even know. Have I really been working non-stop since I arrived here? Come to think of it, yeah, I have. I guess that explains why I’m feeling so out of it - almost ten months without a break will do that to a man. I’ve always been a hard worker, but I’ve never really had problems switching off - not to this extent, anyway.

Pulling myself out of bed, I set about making myself presentable. Now that I see the problem, and have a clear line of action towards solving it, getting myself motivated to fix it was a piece of cake.


Simplicity itself.

“Knock knock.” I rap my knuckles against Miriel’s door. In my slump, I’d ended up missing dinner, but knowing Miriel, she had too.

After a few moments, she appeared. “Hello, Robin. What can I do for you?”

Were I back in my old world, I would be inviting her to come with me to a restaurant, but - to the best of my knowledge - such establishments don’t exist in Ylisse. So, I’ve had to settle for something a bit more in-house.

“I was a bit preoccupied and missed dinner. I thought I might ask if you wanted to get something with me?”

At my proposition, Miriel smiled “Coincidentally, I was about to get something myself. Your company would be most welcome.”

I return the smile, and offer her my arm. She takes it, and we begin walking towards the kitchens. “So, considering our victory, I decided that a bit of celebration was in order.”

“I was under the presumption that celebrations were scheduled for the weekend?”

I held back a grin. “I think you’ll find my brand of celebration far more palatable.” I pulled out the bottle of Feroxi Firewine that I had been keeping in my coat.

With a wide smile Miriel laughed “Oh! So this is one of those kinds of celebrations?”

I replaced the bottle back within my coat as we entered the kitchens. Finding some leftovers being kept warm on the fires, we each plated a meal for ourselves and left for the nearby terrace.

We sat on a bench under the moonlit sky, looking out on the city in quiet conversation. We each had a cup of the Firewine, but unlike last time, we refrained from going too fast.

“So, we eliminate one threat, only for another to take its place, then?”

Miriel shakes her head. “No, unlike Grima, the threat described by Laurent is by no means imminent. We have decades before we have to face it.”

“That doesn’t mean we don’t have to prepare for it, tho-” I stop myself. Here I am, trying to take a break, but I’m talking about work with Miriel. “Actually. It doesn’t matter. Let’s talk about something else.”
If she was off put by my sudden change of subject, she doesn’t show it. “Like what?”

I swirl my drink around my cup, contemplating. “How about… You. We’ve been working together for a while now, but we haven’t really talked much about anything but work. What do you enjoy doing when you’re trying to take a break from things?”

She takes a sip from her drink. “Well, when I’m not doing work for the Council or with you, I’m doing work for the academy. Other than that… not too much. Reading is something I’ve always enjoyed, but even then, I’m typically reading for work.”

I finish the last of my meal, setting my plate aside. “You don’t ever want to just drop everything? Do something else for a bit?”

She shifts in her seat, putting her own plate with mine. “Sometimes. Sometimes I wish I could just spend all day in the lab, experimenting - creating new applications for magic, and understanding the world around me. But there’s always something that takes precedent. What do you want to do?”

I let out a breath. “Isn’t that just the question. A lot of the things I loved doing aren’t really an option in this world… The few things that I can do? Well, they’re work now.”

“I sympathise. I suspect I know why you asked me out here, now.” At my questioning look, she explains. “A lot of the Shepherds have expressed concern to me that you’ve been working yourself too hard. I believe that you’re ‘burnt-out’, as they say.”

I try to hold back a grimace. “That obvious, huh? Yeah. I think you’ve hit the nail on the head with that one.”

She downs the rest of her drink and moves in closer to me on the bench. “Now, you’ve accepted my proposition for partnership, but with the war going on we haven’t had the opportunity to engage in the customary activities of couples.” Without further ado, she leans in next to me, resting her head on my shoulder.

I relax, my posture slackening, and I wrap my arm around her frame. “Yeah. I haven’t had the opportunity to do a lot of things…”

Voice low, she asks “Tell me about your world.”

I finish my drink. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve lived in my world, and I’ve seen the technologies from yours, but I haven’t an idea about what actually living in a place with such wondrous technologies would be like. I’m curious.”

“Honestly? This world doesn’t even begin to compare. Sure, you’ve got magic, but that’s nothing when you consider the technology.” I swallow, my voice breaking. “But most of all? It was peaceful. The average person never has to pick up a weapon in their lives. The last major war is almost not even within living memory.”

“Truly? A world without conflict?”

“No, not at all. There was conflict all the time, but it was all limited in scale - especially compared to the World Wars. The most jarring difference between the worlds is definitely the technology, however. Our cities were sprawling metropolises of glass and steel towers, reaching far into the sky. Our homes were lit with the power of electricity - allowing for light comparable to that of the day at all hours. Our food was kept fresh through the use of refrigeration, allowing for produce to be shipped all around the globe - even if a food was out of season, you could still obtain it. That’s just
the tip of the iceberg, too.”

“The few things you have introduced have redefined war. I can scarcely even think what an entire suite of devices intended for peacetime would do to change one’s life. What are these ‘World Wars’ you speak of, however? I remember one of Laurent’s binders mentioning the second one.”

“Well, as the name suggests, they were conflicts on a global scale - with death tolls to match: they killed around a hundred million combined. Both were well before my time, however.”

At the mention of the death toll, she stiffens. “A h- hundred million? Just how many people lived in your world? There can’t even be a million people in Archanea - let alone a hundred million!”

“Hmm… I think it was around seven billion when I left? That’s seven thousand million, by the way.”

She shakes her head, shrinking into my side. “The casual manner with which you say these things does me no good. I cannot even comprehend how such a volume of people could exist in one world.”

“Yet. For all we know, we might be able to use Laurent’s tech to pay my home a visit. Maybe I could show you around my hometown - I think you’d like it.”

“If we could return to your home, would you go back to your old life?”

I stop. I hadn’t even considered it before she asked the question. Would I? I mean, there’s a lot of things that I miss from my old life, but there’s some things that I have now that I didn’t have before. Importance. Purpose. Companionship.

“No. I don’t think I would. I mean, I might go back to get my stuff and say goodbye to my family, but I don’t think I would stay there.” Coming to a realisation, I let out a weak bark of laughter. “For all I know, I could be presumed dead and my family has already moved on and my stuff has already been taken. No, I don’t think I would go back.”

Miriel says nothing, but wraps her arms around me. I sink into her embrace, taking comfort in it’s warmth. We sit there in silence, holding each other for some time. Eventually, Miriel shifts, and I turn to look at her.

Our gazes meet. Abruptly, I realise how close we are to each other. Wordlessly, we each lean in and share a ghost of a kiss. It wasn’t anything intense - merely a brushing of lips, but with it came the actualization of my feelings for Miriel - I did truly care for her.

We return to staring out at the city in silence. Not long after, Miriel yawns, and we each get up to turn in for the night. By mutual agreement, we hold each other closely as we walk and make a quick detour on our way back to our quarters to the kitchen to return our plates.

Soon after, we reach her door, and I turn to bid her farewell. Before I say anything, Miriel has opened her door “Would you like to stay the night?”

I smile. “I’d love to.”

I wake up the following morning cradling Miriel’s smaller frame. Nothing lurid had happened last night, but this is perhaps the most I’ve enjoyed myself since I arrived. At my stirring, she presses herself into my chest, head tucked under my chin.
Smiling, I close my eyes and go back to sleep.

Work can wait.
With the war over, I soon found a startling lack of work to fill my days with. So, I decided it would be most productive for Miriel and I to be concentrating our efforts on technological developments. Our combined expertise helped move the various ongoing projects forward at a far more rapid pace than was possible before.

The remnants of Virion’s academic circles had arrived sometime during the war, and the additional brainpower had been put to good use - I’m told that their team was the one responsible for the incendiary shells we tested during the final battle.

Unfortunately - or perhaps fortunately, depending on one’s perspective - Emmeryn had yet to wake from her coma. Her attending clerics have not yet given up hope that she would wake back up, but they don’t have any idea when that might happen.

Citing convenience and tradition, Miriel asked to move in with me a few weeks after our dinner. I saw no reason to decline, so we went ahead with it. With our newfound proximity, we ended up sharing meals with each other most days.

Given that Archanea was divided squarely between Regna Ferox and Ylisse, trade between the two states was at an all time high - with an increasing amount of Ylissean industry being used for state projects, many businesses began exporting their large-scale smithing work out to Regna Ferox. The increase in industrial activity also caused a notable spike in the trade of raw materials - metals in particular.

This trade boom was only helped by the signing of a tariff-free trade deal for most products between Ylisse and Regna Ferox. The imposition of anti-price-fixing laws kept the guilds from exploiting this for their own benefit. The standard of living for the average peasant rapidly rose as labour became in increasingly high demand to keep up with the increasing need for factory workers.

Soon enough, our developments in the fields of petrochemistry and electricity paid dividends. The first coal-fuelled power plant came online in Ylisstol a few months after the conclusion of the war. Regna Ferox followed with one of their own a number of weeks later.

Lightbulbs were at first considered a luxury item, but as our manufacturing capabilities improved, they became available to all but the poorest. Our lines of blacksmiths were soon optimized with more advanced machinery, allowing for more rapid and efficient production of goods.

An edited version of Laurent’s binders were released to the general public once the first of our printing-presses were functional. This was an unpopular decision - especially among the guilds - as it allowed any old craftsman out in the boonies to make money hand over fist by undercutting the guilds selling the new products. The packets were edited to not contain any information on military or dimensional technology, so we weren’t really showing our hand to enemy states. What this did allow, on the other hand, was a flourishing of private enterprises: no longer were guilds in complete control of their respective markets - they had to be competitive now.

By around twelve months after the end of the war, I estimated that we were roughly on par with the industrial capabilities of nineteenth century England. With the rapid technological revolution came the unprecedented flourishing of Ylissean and Feroxi society - quality of life was at an all-time high.

Things continued along these lines for some time; Miriel and I would dedicate our time developing new technologies, the production of those technologies would be outsourced to Ylissean or Feroxi
companies, the increase in economic activity leads to rising wealth, rinse and repeat. On a personal level, things have settled into a sort of domestic bliss between Miriel and I. We haven’t quite tied the knot officially just yet, but at this point it’s pretty much just a formality.

The other Shepherds have not been idle, either. Gaius has teamed up with Frederick in training the next generation of Ylisse’s Wet-workers - highly-skilled, technologically adept assassins, saboteurs, commandos and spies.

In addition to working with Gaius, Frederick has been dedicated to modernizing the Ylissean army, along with training tacticians and officers in the new way of things. He’s had to consult with me frequently on that end, and has convinced me to write a treatise on the topic to assist with the training.

Sumia and Cordelia have been working closely with Phila in integrating the new technologies into the Pegasus knights. Last I heard, they had finally had success in getting the Pegasi used to being around firearms.

Sully and Stahl were now highly-decorated knights, thanks to their work during the war. With their newfound influence, they led the charge in modernising the rest of the knights. There was a significant amount of resistance from the traditionalist faction, but the naysayers have been diminishing lately.

Seeing the success of modern medical practices firsthand during the war, Libra had taken it upon himself to propagate the techniques throughout the clerical community wherever possible. There were many other like-minded clerics that had similar experience from the war, so, barring some traditionalist hold-outs, the new way of things was pretty much set.

Lon’qu and Olivia had returned to Khan Basilio’s service soon after the conclusion of the war. Last I saw them, they were still valued retainers within Khan Basilio’s staff.

Cherche had arrived with the rest of the Rosannite scholars, along with several other staff from Virion’s house. She took to working with Virion to improve Ylisse’s intelligence network. He’s been working closely with his own former spymaster to build a comprehensive system of sources and agents spread across the continent. Of particular focus is Plegia - given the volatile nature of the region, the last thing we want are some traditionalist yahoos getting too big for their britches and trying something with a dark ritual.

While Tharja may have joined up because of her interest in me, she definitely stayed because of the great pay and operational freedom. She began working with Virion as a dark magic expert, and put together a team of other like-minded dark mages interested in making sure that Grima stays underground. They’ve been examining the remnants of Grima with the goal of developing a more permanent sealing solution. Conventional wisdom would dictate that death would be sufficient, but conventional wisdom does not exactly apply when working with eldritch gods.

Vaike had decided he wanted to see more of the continent, and had set out on a journey a few months after the war. He’d managed to talk Panne into coming with him. I haven’t heard much of the two of late, but I’m sure they’ll turn back up eventually.

Kellam had shackled up with Maribelle not too long after we got back, and the pair have been leading efforts to rebuild Themis. Things have been going well on that front, and the city it quickly becoming a major trading hub once more.

Chrom has been occupied running the country, and by all accounts he’s doing a stellar job of it. Of course, he isn’t exactly shy to ask my position on things, either. Strangely enough, he remains a
bachelor - undoubtedly a result of the butterfly effect, but what could possibly have led to this result?

Through my influence of Chrom, I’ve been able to steer Ylisse away from some of the pitfalls that my own world had fallen into - monopolistic guilds, labourer exploitation by factory owners, excessively high taxation and protectionist economic policy being the most notable among them. Regna Ferox has been having issues with a few of these, but a few memos to Khan Basilio with some advice helped clear up the most egregious of the problems.

Lissa has been working with Libra, leading charitable healing missions out to remote communities. They’ve spent a lot of time running outreach programs in Plegia - where magical healing is at a much greater premium. From what I hear, they’re very popular with the locals. Honestly, they’ve done a great deal towards abating negative sentiment towards Ylisseans among the average Plegian.

Currently, I was working on developing primitive logic circuits. The short-term goal was a simple calculator, but this would be the groundwork for the first computers. I was jumping the gun on this a little - most of the technology wasn’t even fully developed yet - but the device would jumpstart a revolution.

Not that we aren’t already in the midst of one. Or several, come to think of it.

I replace my soldering iron in the fire, allowing it to heat back up. I’d had to cludge the tool together myself, but it wasn’t too much trouble - it was essentially just a pointed copper rod and a thick insulated handle. As I do so, however, there’s a knock on the door to my workshop. I remove my work gloves, moving to open the door.

I’m greeted by Lissa, who’s looking rather ragged. “Robin, come quick! Emmeryn has awoken!” Without waiting for a reply, she sprints off, presumably towards her sister.

Well. This is a bit of a wrench in my plans. I doubt Emmeryn will look kindly on the war or the current state of affairs in Plegia. If she were to resume the Exalted throne, and begin meddling in things… Or, worse yet, cease all military development.

I return to my workshop, swiftly packing everything away. I need to minimize the damage done here. If things don’t work out favourably, I may need to relocate to Regna Ferox. We’ve got a hard time-limit here - we can’t afford to indulge a pacifist.

Entering Emmeryn’s chamber, I’m greeted by the rest of the Ylissean high command - Chrom, Frederick and Phila. Lissa is sitting on the side of Emmeryn’s bed, hugging her sister tightly. Emmeryn is sitting upright, reciprocating Lissa’s affection.

Immediately, I’m struck by how gaunt Emmeryn’s face was. Not only that, but her frame was practically skeletal. Her skin looked papery, and was whiter than the pristine sheets she lay on. She looked as if she would fall and shatter in as much as a light breeze.

Noticing my entrance, Emmeryn raised a questioning eyebrow. She looked to be about to say something, but Chrom cut her off. “Robin! Good, everyone’s here.” Seeing Emmeryn’s mounting confusion, he explains “Robin is Ylisse’s Lead Tactician. He’s an integral part of high command.”

Emmeryn’s face takes on a darker tone. “Lead Tactician? Ylisse is a nation of peace - I left that position vacant for a reason. Just what have you been up to in my absence, brother?” You could hear a pin drop in the silence that followed. I noticed Frederick twitch ever so slightly - if you didn’t know the man, you’d have missed it.

Chrom straightened, and with a perfectly level voice, replied “I’d thank you to not criticize me
without knowing the context for my actions. Much has changed since you fell asleep, sister.”

Emmeryn’s tone became saccharine, and her face twisted into an ever-so-slight sneer. “Oh? Please indulge me, then.”

Chrom exhaled, and he buried his head into his palm. “I can see that you’re in one of your moods. I think it would be best if Lissa and I were to bring Emmeryn up to speed in private.” Hearing the dismissal, Frederick, Phila and I all turned to leave. As I was leaving, Chrom stopped me. “Robin, I’ve been meaning to speak to you for a while now about something - lunch tomorrow?”

He formed the symbol for ‘important’ with his hand, hidden from Emmeryn’s view. Understanding the message, I gave an affirmative, then departed from the room. That meeting will undoubtedly be about Emmeryn.

Returning to my workshop, I considered what I just witnessed. That was one hell of a spat - especially considering it was in front of colleagues. Since when have Chrom and Emmeryn been so hostile? She had just woken up, too!

From my read on Frederick, I’d say he’s firmly on Chrom’s side. Phila, however, is a bit more difficult. I haven’t worked with her very much, but from what I could tell, she was pretty torn. Lissa looked to be horrified that her siblings were fighting at all.

What if there were a schism in the Ylissean leadership? Where would things fall? Chrom’s got the backing of at least two of high command, and likely has the backing of the peasantry. Emmeryn, on the other hand, has the ability to win over Phila and Lissa at the very least. I’ve got no doubt that a few promises would get the support of the guilds, and she’s already got a lot of friends among the nobility - a department that Chrom is lacking sorely in.

Chrom had repealed the law that allowed unilateral action by the other members of the Exalted family against the exalt a while back, so if Chrom stays in power, she’ll be unable to do too much of anything legally. There’s a serious chance of civil war if things go poorly here - despite her flaws, Emmeryn was still very popular. It would certainly be out of character for Emmeryn to go to such extremes, but I’m unwilling to discount the possibility.

While technically, the Exaltedness is meant to return to Emmeryn upon her awakening, the clause that gave Chrom the Exaltedness in the first place was intended to be used in cases that would last at most a few weeks - the law is unclear concerning cases where the Exalt is indisposed for a length of time approaching two years.

To say that Emmeryn was unhappy with the current state of affairs was a dire understatement. Even situated in a different wing of the castle, I had heard the shouting match between her and Chrom that had happened once she found out about the war. Despite her frail appearance, apparently she had enough energy to be shouting down a battle-hardened warrior.

I knocked on the door to Chrom’s sunroom. It was time for our meeting. He answered with something that vaguely sounded like a ‘come in’, and I made my way inside. What greeted me was a shuttered room lit by a sole electric light, and Chrom cradling a brown bottle that almost certainly contained alcohol.

I sunk into the chair opposite him. Looks like I’ll have to get lunch afterwards, then. “That bad, huh?”
Chrom let out a heavy breath, and took a swig of his drink. “Worse.” Seeing that he was about to go for another, I pried the bottle from his grasp. He didn’t protest, but sunk into his chair like a scolded child.

“Fill me in. Where’s she at?”

“Angry.”

Seeing that he wasn’t about to elaborate, I frowned. “I guessed that much from your shouting match. I could hear it from my workshop - I’ll be surprised if there isn’t a single person in the city who hasn’t heard about it by the end of the month.” I spied the stopper for the bottle laying under the table, and recorked the bottle without ado.

Chrom deflated even further at that. “I mean, I expected her to be angry. But she doesn’t even care that what we did was justified.”

“What did she say about our military developments?”

“We didn’t even get to talk about that. She demanded I step down from my position.”

I cradle my forehead in my hands. This was a complete mess. ‘I’m barely even surprised. You’re not planning on doing it, are you?’

He shook his head. “No. I mean, I considered it for a time - if only to repair my relationship with her. But there’s more important things on the line here. And, well, Emm and I have been butting heads for years now.”

“You think this will just go away if we ignore her?”

“If only. No, this is something that she’ll hold onto.”

I stood up, going about reopening the shutters. It was a great day outside, and some fresh air is bound to help. “Alright. Plan of action - how are we going to minimize damage?”

Chrom begins to perk up, but the daylight only highlights how drained he looks. “You have an idea, then?”

“Right now? No. But I’m thinking of one.” Assassination is out of the picture - even if I could pull it off without revealing who was behind it to Chrom, all we’d have then is a martyr; Emmeryn would no doubt begin agitating before I could get everything together. How about a smear campaign? No, that would cast the entire administration in a bad light by association. “At the core of things, we want to minimize the influence that Emmeryn has. That means going after her allies, and the people she can easily sway to her side.”

Chrom nods in agreement. “I see where you’re going. Who do you have in mind?”

“We’ve done a lot to diminish the influence of the guilds already - finish them off, and the new mercantile class will be firmly on our side. The focus of our attention, however, should be the nobility. Emmeryn has close friends in high places - if we make the nobility irrelevant to politics, her influence among them will be worthless to her. The third faction we may have to deal with is the Church of Naga. Dismantling the it in entirety would likely do more damage to you than her, so separating them from all matters of state will have to suffice.”

Frowning, Chrom hums in contemplation. “You’re proposing some drastic changes to the current way of things. How do we know such a system would even work? And if not the nobility, who
would be able to handle matters of government on a provincial level?"

I smile, having led Chrom to exactly where I wanted him. “It just so happens that my homeland has done away with all three factions almost entirely. It was for the betterment of the everyman - you remember the standard of living I’ve described to you? This was a major stepping-stone on the road towards that. As for the second, I believe a representative democracy on a provincial level would work best.”

While a representative democracy on a federal level would be theoretically superior, there’s pretty much no way I’d be able to convince Chrom of the merits of such a system. Besides, the system we have now works well enough, and I’ve no intentions of accidentally ousting myself from my position of power until the enemy Laurent described has been dealt with. Having principals is all well and good, but sometimes they must be abandoned temporarily to deal with a greater threat.

Coming to a decision, Chrom nods to himself. “Write up a plan of action. Get it to me, and I’ll set about implementing it. Truly, thank you for this, Robin. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” He extends a hand, and I take it. He pulls me into a one-armed hug, patting me on the back.

Miriel and I had the basics of the plan devised and delivered by the end of the day. We quickly fell back into older habits, and working together we were able to draft it very quickly. By the week’s end, we had a complete plan filled with contingencies and counter-stratagems all dedicated to diminishing Emmeryn’s influence.

Thankfully, Emmeryn was still very much confined to her bed for the time being, so her ability to agitate was limited. But, she had already hosted meetings with a number of the nobility. Whether they were simply friendly catch-ups or insurrectionist planning sessions is unknown, but it’s best to assume the worst.

The guilds - who were already in a perilous position - were the first faction to fall. Under the guise of legislation aimed towards economic stimulation and anti-monopolisation laws, we removed much of the legal authority the guilds had. Now, they were nothing more than well-established corporations and trade unions. The guilds were howling the entire way, but nobody paided them much mind - the open market had already proven itself many times over.

The Church of Naga was the next to go. Already, they only held a tenuous amount of influence in matters of state, but new legislation removed the last vestiges of authority. There was a bit of grumbling, but the fact that Chrom was credited with vanquished the Church’s only competitor on the continent gave him quite a bit of leeway with the higher-ups.

The nobility, however, was a different story. The entire system of provincial governance was practically based on the noble houses - prying them out of things would either be an extremely bloody or painfully slow process. I doubted Chrom would be comfortable with the first, so it was up to Miriel and I to devise a concise way to remove them from power. Were it up to me, I’d simply throw the lot of them at Walhart, hoping enough died to warrant a new system, but that’s simply not an option.

Instead, we’re planning on gradually wearing away at their powers, and transferring them to elected public officials. We’ll start small, working our way upwards until the noble class are simply very rich and connected socialites. Hopefully some clever marketing will convince a few of them to take up venture capitalism or philanthropy as well.
For the most part, things went according to plan - Emmeryn found herself without meaningful allies in the guilds and the Church, and the influence of the nobility in policy was steadily declining. Mind you, the Nobility were kicking and screaming every step of the way, but Chrom being wildly popular among the military, mercantile class, and peasantry meant they had few allies to able to help them do anything about it.

In the nobility’s place was a budding representative democracy - they only had as much power as the Nobility once had, but it allowed the peasantry influence on local matters. Of course, this only made Chrom even more popular among the peasantry - some even hailed him as a saint, despite his relative lack of piety.

A clamour attracted my attention - it seems that the test is about to begin. Military development had continued despite Emmeryn’s protests, and high-powered artillery cannons were now going through a rigorous testing phase. The viewing platform was situated at the top of a hill overlooking an empty field some ways away from Ylissotol. There was no major roads or hunting spots near this area, so the risk of accidentally hitting someone was minimal.

At one end of the field was the cannon - fitted with a massive five-meter long barrel, it fired three-hundred millimetre, three-hundred and forty kilogram high-explosive rounds. It was large enough to require a crew of twelve to fire at its maximum rate - this time there will only be a single firing, so only four were present.

The gun was an almost direct reproduction of the British twelve-inch howitzer used in world-war one - in essence, it was a very big gun - one that will make whatever poor bastard it hits sorry they ever crawled out of whatever hole they came from. The target for this exercise was a condemned garrison situated on the opposite side of the field - some eight kilometres away.

I tore my view from the cannon - it seemed they weren’t quite ready yet. Looking about the platform, I notice a new arrival making her way towards me.

It was Emmeryn - who was ignoring the natterings of her medical attendant. While her health had made strides since she had awoken, she still required a cane to get around. She sits on the chair next to me without ceremony and, seemingly coming to her patience’s end, she dismisses her attendants.

I turn towards her, raising an eyebrow. What was she doing here?

“Forgive me, Robin. I’ve been meaning to have a discussion with you for some time now. I was planning on attending one of these demonstrations at some point anyway, so I figured I would do the both at once.”

“No, it’s fine. What were you wanting to-” A din distracted the both of us. I turned to the cannon and noticed that the signalling flag had been raised. “Never mind that, the test is starting.” I direct her attention towards the fort and the cannon.

I leaned in, anticipating the firing. Emmeryn seemed somewhat uninterested - perhaps she didn’t know what was about to happen?

As the moments passed, the tension in air of the viewing platform mounted. This wasn’t the first time this design had been tested - two men had lost their lives, and six had been injured on that occasion due a particularly catastrophic failure. There hadn’t been another accident that resulted in death in the two tests that had happened since, but the possibility was ever-present.
All of a sudden, there was resounding boom as the cannon fired. Emmeryn jumped in her seat, not expecting the noise. The shell flew through the air with a distinct whistle, and collided with it’s target, detonating in a glorious explosion. The derelict fort was no more - though it was obscured by a cloud of dust, there was no way for it to be still intact after that.

Around us, the scientists erupted into cheers - a success! Despite myself, a wide grin broke onto my face. These cannons will form an impenetrable coastal defense for Ylisse and Regna Ferox: even two stationed in a port city would deter any would-be invader - lest they wish to advance through ten kilometres of open ocean suffering under a continued barrage of fire.

Beside me, Emmeryn seemed to have paled at the display. Her jaw was agape, unbelieving.

Seeing that she would need some time to process what she had seen, I moved to give the scientists congratulations. They took the praise graciously, and departed the platform to inspect the cannon and fort soon after.

I turned back to Emmeryn, only to find her marching towards me, anxiety etched deeply upon her face. “What in the nine hells was that?!?”

Internally, I sigh - a hysterical Emmeryn is not something I want to deal with. “That, was a siege cannon. It propels explosive steel projectiles at a speed greater than that of sound into its target. As was just demonstrated, it is extremely effective at what it does.”

She sputtered “Effective?! You just levelled a fort from across an empty plain without so much as a single man going near the thing!”

“I am aware. As I said, it is very effective at what it does.” She began pacing back and forth, leaning heavily into her cane. She was very clearly in a great deal of distress, but I’m really not seeing what’s so distressing. “This is how we waged war back in my world. If we want security, Ylisse must be strong, else others will seek to take what we have from us.”

Suddenly, she stopped. She slowly turned to me, primal fear visible in her eyes. “You mean that thing isn’t one of a kind?” she spat.

I scratched my head in puzzlement. Why on Earth was she under the impression that it was? “No - not at all. Guns similar to these dotted the shores and forts of my homeland. I intend to achieve a similar thing here in Archanea.”

She let out a squeak of abject terror, then collapsed into a chair. She held her head in her hands, muttering inaudibly. Leaving her to her thoughts, I moved to depart the platform.

Behind me, Emmeryn calls out. “You are an evil man, Robin. I hope you understand that.”

I smile. While I hadn’t expected her to insult me so, I had certainly prepared for it. “Oh, didn’t you know? Good and evil are simply matters of perspective. Perhaps from another’s perspective, it is you who is evil.” With that parting shot, I left the platform. After all, I wanted to see the effect the test had on the cannon.

While that line may have been a bit of a cliche back in my world, it should be rather novel to Emmeryn. Hopefully it’ll give her some pause before she goes about working against me.

The cannons - along with several smaller variants suitable for use as field guns - were ready for
widespread deployment a few months after the test Emmeryn and I viewed. I haven’t been approached by her since then, nor have I sought her out. Chatter from the palace servants tell me that she has been secluding herself to her private rooms.

If she wants to hide away from the world, all the better - there’s little chance of her interfering with things that way.

Soon enough, lucrative production contracts for the cannons were being signed, and they were being installed along the western coast. This particular project was a joint Ylissean-Feroxi venture, so both countries were enjoying the benefits.

Before the year was out, the entire western coast and several other key maritime locations had been heavily fortified. Our intelligence suggested that Valm was looking to Archanea as it’s next conquest, so nobody was willing to skimp on defenses.

Of course, this is fairly in-line with the timeline of the games - I had been somewhat hopeful that the decisive end to the war with Plegia may warn Walhart off, but that seems to not have been the case.

The first prototypes of steam locomotives are also going through their own testing phase currently. Already, railways are being constructed between key industrial and economic centres. If all goes well, we’ll have trains running within the next few months - the advancement in transportation would do wonders for the economy and our industry both.

The lack of infrastructure in the transportation department has given us troubles in the past - the coastal guns had to be transported in many pieces on heavy carriages drawn by many horses, then assembled on-site.

As far as our own naval capabilities go, ironclads are being developed in the extensive Plegian shipyards. The local population was extremely happy to be the recipients of the contract, but honestly, there aren’t too many other options for us. While deployment is still some time out, I’m told things are progressing nicely.

On an infantry level, our kit has progressed nicely. We’ve developed many of the explosives that were available in the first world-war; grenades, dynamite and mines most notably. While these aren’t something we’re planning on equipping every soldier with, they’ll be powerful tools in the arsenal of our special forces.

Valm has invaded.

Though, I’d probably use the term lightly - they failed to even make it to the shoreline before they were annihilated completely. Our cannons had held their fire until the ships were about four kilometres away - both to completely and utterly ensure that there would be no escape, and to disguise the extent of our cannon’s range.

As far as our response to the attack, a full-scale invasion simply isn’t in the cards. Ylisse’s treasury has been drained from the extensive technological developments, relatively low taxes, in addition to the previous war with Plegia. While we’re nowhere near an economic collapse, funding an invasion would take funds away from other vital projects - potentially putting us back years.

That doesn’t mean we’re not going to respond, however - I haven’t forgotten my promise to Virion to help free his homeland. Instead, we’ll be sending our agents to destabilize the region - incite and train guerillas, raid Valmese military strong points, destroy key strategic resources, assassinate key
personnel - and so on.

The Valmese empire is already on the brink of shattering. Hopefully our meddling will push things over the edge. Already, we’ve got almost a thousand agents ready to send over - many are commandos trained for long missions without chance of reinforcement, but some are purpose-trained saboteurs and assassins.

Some of the Shepherds will be going too - Gaius, Virion, Panne, Vaike, Cherche and Cordelia have already signed up. I’m under the impression that Virion plans on stoking the local resistance present in Rosanne. I’m sure they’ll have many stories to tell when the get back, but I’m going to be staying here in Ylisse - I’m simply too central to administering our technological developments.

I’m drawn from my thoughts by a knock at the workshop door. I set aside the designs I was examining to answer. I’m greeted by Miriel. Confused, I look out the window - it couldn’t be time for lunch yet, could it?

Seeing my confusion, she explains “The Shepherds headed to Valm are departing today. I suspected you had forgotten.”

“That’s today? Crap.” I hurriedly set about packing everything away. “Thanks. I would have hated to miss seeing Virion off.” Finishing up, we make our way to the gates of the palace.

Seeing us, Virion calls out “Robin!”

He greets us with a smile, and I extend a hand. “Virion. Don’t have too much fun with the local wenches, hey?” He grasps it, and I pull him into a one-armed hug.

“Hah! You obviously don’t know me well enough, friend!” His face takes on a cheeky grin, and he pulls me to the side, talking in a low tone. “You better hurry up and make it official between you and Miriel - I either want to come back to an invitation to your wedding, or stories about how great it was!”

Seeing an opportunity, the slightest curl of a smile works its way onto my face. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry too much about that.”

“Hmm? And why’s that?”

Grinning fully now “Well, I’m far more concerned that my dear friend will never find that special someone to settle down with!”

Feigning injury, he clasps his chest dramatically “You wound me so, Robin! Have you no faith?” I burst into light-hearted laughter at his display, and he follows soon after.

Calming down, Virion’s face takes on a serious expression. “I’m going to miss our little chats over tea. Alas, this is work that must be done, and I trust that you’ll be able to provide us with excellent support from the home front.”

“You can count on it. After all, who else am I going to get tea from? Stay safe, Virion.”

“Hah! Rest assured, I intend on coming through this alive - I’ve got a country to run, after all.”

Bidding our farewells, I move to say goodbye with the other Shepherds. We exchange pleasantries, and soon enough, the caravan has departed.
The trip to Valm took several months, even with fair conditions. We didn’t receive the first report until nearly eight months after our forces had began to depart. Each month, we would receive another report updating us on the situation. We would send the messenger back with another load of supplies - explosives, mostly. Of course, appropriate measures were taken to prevent an accidental detonation.

Things were tough for them at first - finding a base of operations somewhere along the coast was the first priority. They had ended up deciding on an unsettled bay that featured an abandoned mine dug into a nearby hill.

However, with the base established, things began going much smoother. Commando raids were launched with success beyond their wildest expectations - a single team of four had demolished an entire citadel thanks to liberal use of dynamite.

A plethora of assassinations against key Valmese personnel were conducted; mines, sniper rifles and creative use of dynamite were the weapons of choice. I’m told that the possibility of their general suddenly exploding at any moment was quite the morale drain among the Valmese regulars.

Sabotage was also utilised extensively - Valm soon found their horse population in a steep decline thanks to widespread poisoning of feed. Not only that, but mines of valuable metals were collapsed, leading to costly and time-consuming delays on equipment.

The local populations were successfully incited to guerilla warfare, and soon enough, Valm found that it was rapidly losing control of all of its non-core territories. Worse yet, they couldn’t even trust their own soldiers - our infiltrators had a knack for compromising things at the worst possible moment: barracks were demolished on the eve of a major operation while the soldiers slept, mission-critical supplies were inexplicably found in the hands the rebels and skilled leaders were murdered in their sleep.

In all, it was a bad time to be Walhart. Our agents haven’t yet managed to orchestrate his demise, but Pheros and Excellus had been removed early on in the game. The source of Excellus’ teleportation - a magical ring - had been recovered, and was being shipped to us for examination.

On the home front, our developments have picked up pace considerably due to the completion of rail-lines between our industrial centres. By my estimates, we’re approaching world-war one levels of technology across the board. Radio is still in the development phase currently, but once it’s ready the exchange of information across the continent will start to pick up considerably.

Already, we’re seeing a population boom; with the rising levels of wealth families can afford to feed more mouths. Combined with the advanced medical techniques propagating throughout the clerical community infant mortality has seen a notable decline, leading to a dramatic uptick of successful births.

Also in the developmental phase is the combustion engine - once our techs get the hang of it, we’ll start to see early automobiles enter into the testing phase. Also with the advances in engine technology, we’ll start to be able to look at flight - if we can get something like a b-seventeen within the next year or two, we’ll be able to very effectively project power into Valm.

Looking at the chemical side of things, Magister Quinlan and his teams have made great strides - already we have access to advanced polymers and other complex synthetic materials. With the relative lack of other pressing work, he’s turned his attention towards a nuclear program. While our initial estimates deemed that this was a goal not achievable with any amount of expediency,
Laurent’s packages have changed that assessment dramatically.

Quinlan’s most optimistic estimates are four months for the first reactor, and six months for the first bomb. Frankly, I think those are a touch too generous, but his more realistic estimates seem much more in line - nine and fifteen months respectively.

While the empty Plegian desert may seem like a good site for the reactor, I’m leaning more towards nuclear test site - no use putting an extremely valuable strategic resource within the potential reach of a theoretical resurgent Grimleal.

On that front, things have been quiet. Tharja has taken over expanding the information network in Virion’s place - it’s not what I would have pegged her to be interested in doing, but she seems capable enough. While there has been the odd die-hard fanatic we’ve had to take care of, it seems that our initial strikes effectively destroyed the Grimleal.

A sharp rap on my door pulls me out of my reverie. I consult my watch - five-forty. Too early for Miriel to be home, then. I set aside the book I had been trying to read, and move to answer.

I’m greeted by Emmeryn. She no longer carried a cane, no was accompanied by any medical personnel. Honestly, she looked just fine - it seems she’s made a full recovery, then. While I should be happy for her, our last interaction had ended rather poorly, and we haven’t spoken in several months.

I lean into the doorframe, the door only slightly ajar and blocking her view into my apartment. I raise an eyebrow at her, expectantly.

She swallows stiffly. ‘I’m sorry.’

I suppress a wicked smile. “Sorry for what, precisely?”

“I… I shouldn’t have said the things I did last we spoke. To be perfectly honest, I was somewhat terrified of the entire situation. I… I overreacted.” She bowed her head. From my read of her, she was being entirely sincere.

“Apology accepted. If I might ask, what changed your mind? Or do you still think of me as evil?”

Horrified, she gasps “No! Not at all!” She lets out a steadying breath. “I’ve done a lot of thinking over the past few months. That, and I’ve taken a trip through the country. Ylisse is the most prosperous it has ever been - and we have you to thank for it. People everywhere are happier than ever - and Ylisse is waging war on a foreign power as we speak! That made me think hard about… well, everything.”

Internally, my train of thought is completely derailed. Did I really manage to get through to Emmeryn? That’s… completely unexpected, actually. I had expected her to hold fast onto her extreme pacifism until to her dying breath.

She continues “As much as it pained me to admit it to myself, I think your idea of ‘peace through overwhelming power’ has merit.” She chuckles, self deprecatingly “Some leader I am, huh?”

“I wouldn’t stress too much about it. You managed to pull Ylisse from the brink of collapse after your father badly over-extended the country. That’s not nothing - be proud of that, if nothing else.”

She perked up at this “Thanks, Robin. For being so understanding.” She lets out a sigh. “I’ve got a few more apologies to make. Perhaps we’ll speak again sometime soon?”
Sure. Good luck with things.”

We received confirmation of Walhart’s death a few months later. Apparently, he’d become immensely paranoid - for good reason, too. However, his stronghold was no match for a platoon of determined commandos with more dynamite than self-preservation.

Despite the long odds, they made it out of there with only minimal losses, and with Walhart’s death, his empire shattered. Virion stepped up to fill the power vacuum, and Rosanne went from a tiny dukedom to the larged power on the continent almost overnight.

Apparently, having close ties with the leaders of the country responsible for liberating the continent convinced many of the leaderless smaller powers to acquiesce to his rule. The other major powers were Chon’sin - whom Yen’fay still ruled - and the Valmese remnants - core territories that had joined Valm decades ago.

The Valmese remnants, despite occupying a fertile and mineral rich area, was a paper tiger of an empire - it was now led by a simpering man who lacked any sort of ambition. Even if they had someone with drive on the throne, they would be in no position to cause any trouble - almost all strategic resources had been thoroughly sabotaged by the end of things.

As far as Chon’sin goes, they had snapped up many of the fiefdoms that had been held by smaller feudal lords. Currently, the country is in the throes of a famine caused by severe drought, so immediate action was unlikely on their end.

There were also a number of smaller powers on the continent - mostly countries that had either retained or reclaimed their independence. Even taken collectively, they wouldn’t qualify as a major power.

We’ve sent a shipment of radio gear along with some techs to get things set up in Rosanne. With the country’s new coastal territory, we now have a solid candidate for a trading partner on the Valmese continent. There are plans being drafted up to introduce Rosanne to the economic, scientific and military deals that had been signed between Ylisse and Regna Ferox. While we haven’t proposed their inclusion to the Khans yet, Chrom is confident they’ll jump at the opportunity.

The construction of Quinlan’s reactor is going along very well. It’s positioned deep in the wilderness to the east of Ylissitol. His latest estimates are another two months until it’ll be ready to use. His teams have been very thoroughly studying the documentation Laurent provided in the meantime. They’re confident that they’ve got the hang of things.

Other teams have been working on the litany of other gear that’s necessary for safe nuclear operations. I’ve been told that all’s going according to schedule, and that the primitive computer I had made some months ago proved extremely useful in their understanding of the machines.

Hopefully, we’ll start to see their widespread development in the near future.

On the dimensional technology front, Miriel and I have finally made our way through Laurent’s binders in entirety. Our understanding is still developing, but we’ve got the basics.

As far as our alternate selves could tell, reality exists within a thirty-seventh dimensional array, with each cell of the array containing a dimension entirely separate from its neighbors. Things like the physical and magical planes in this reality were present within the same cell.
In between the cells was what was referred to as ‘non-existence’. Essentially, a non-place where the concepts of time, space, reality, distance, speed, mass, energy and so on did not exist. Of course, this fact muddies the concept of ‘adjacency’ between cells of the array immensely - after all, if neither space or distance existed between cells, then travelling between non-adjacent cells should be theoretically indistinguishable from travelling between adjacent cells.

But that’s somewhat irrelevant at this point. Travelling between cells requires one to create a bridge of reality across the non-reality. The means by which one achieves this phenomenon is a nastily complex piece of thirty-seventh dimensional mathemagic.

That is to say, the method by which our alternate selves managed to cross between dimensions was a magical device that required both immense amounts of power, and a devilish level of precision - precision that we could only reasonably achieve with a computer.

There’s still a lot we don’t understand yet, obviously, but it’s something that we’ve been steadily chipping away at for a long time now. A functional device is a long way off at this point - hell, even a prototype is far out of our reach.

But, we’re working at it. There’ve been many warnings spread across the binder about improper use of dimensional technology - contaminating the non-reality with reality is something that we’ve been told is particularly bad news.

The binder didn’t go over specifics, but there’s almost certainly very big fish out there - we don’t want to go making a splash.
I enter the war room and I’m greeted by Frederick, Phila, Chrom, Emmeryn and Lissa. Everyone’s face held a dire expression. I don’t know what this is about, but I had received maximum-priority summons.

That means that whatever it is, it’s bad - and extremely urgent. Has the invasion that Laurent warned us about come early?

Seeing my entrance, Chrom begins. “Good, everyone’s here. I’ll get right down to it. Approximately ninety minutes ago, our magical security team detected an event of some unknown sort. Four minutes later, a second event of the same sort was detected. The team suspected infiltrators, so a sweep of the castle grounds was conducted. They did not find any. More worrying was what they did not find: the Fire Emblem and Sable both are currently missing. We’re looking at a potential summoning event here, people.”

My gut drops. They were held inside one of the most secure vaults on the continent! How could they have possibly been stolen?! I let out a breath. “Get on the radio to Basilio. He needs to know so he can take measures to protect Gules. So long as we can keep at least one of the gems out of the hands of whoever’s behind this, they won’t be able to complete the ritual.”

“I’ve already given the orders. We’ll hear back shortly. I’ve also ordered the cordoning of the city - anybody coming out will be thoroughly searched, but I suspect it is too late.”

Frederick speaks up “What about Sable? Have you contacted the eastern garrison?” Sable had been removed from Plegia with the conclusion of the war - instead, it was being held within a mountain fortress in the far east of Ylisse. The place was pretty much unassailable by any conventional force.

Chrom shakes his head. “No, they don’t have a radio yet. A messenger has been dispatched, but they won’t reach them before the week is out. We’ll just hope that whatever plans they have made fall through on that end. Going forward, we’ll have to plan assuming that they’ve already stolen it - along with Azure and Vert.”

Phila frowns. “What I want to know is how the thieves managed to so deeply infiltrate our defenses. If they can simply reuse whatever trick they used here, the defenses around Gules will be worthless.”

I consider the problem. From what Chrom has said, we can guess that their method is magical in nature - the crux of the issue being the mechanics of how it works. Is it some form of advanced invisibility curse? No - they wouldn’t be able to get past the vault door. How about incorporeality? That doesn’t solve the issue of them infiltrating the castle without being spotted. Both at once? It would be a stretch - in my experience, it’s not often that different spells of that sort play well together - but it is one possible explanation.

No - the simplest explanation: teleportation. If the infiltrators could simply teleport to the inside of the vault and then teleport back out, they’d have had little trouble making with Argent and the Fire Emblem. Obviously, Grimleal remnants of some sort are our number one suspect here, but since when have they had teleportation?

Suddenly, I come to an epiphany - they’ve always had it; Excellus was a grimleal agent! If they somehow reproduced his artefact - or even just replaced it with a replica cursed to appear genuine - then we would have never been the wiser.
A messenger bursts into the room, and hands Chrom a message. While he reads it, I explain my theories to the room. It is agreed that teleportation seems most likely, and that we should plan defenses accordingly.

Chrom tosses the message onto the table, his face a sharp frown. “We can’t raise Khan Basilio - best guess is that they’re busy dealing with invaders of their own.” The mood of the room takes a nosedive. In a matter of hours, we’ve gone from controlling three of the stones and the Fire Emblem, to potentially controlling none.

I steady myself. While we don’t know that the infiltrators have all of the stones yet, it would be foolish to act as if they did not. This is the very situation that we’ve sacrificed thousands of hours trying to avoid - contingency plan upon contingency plan had been created, yet not had accounted for the enemy pulling an ace out of their sleeve and snatching the stones in a matter of hours.

Alright. Think - what do they need to resurrect Grima? For one, they need the Fire Emblem and all five of the stones. Next, they need a mass sacrifice, and finally, they need a vessel.

The body I am inhabiting right now is the only compatible vessel that I know of - the culmination of years of selective breeding and eugenics by the Grimleal. But, we cannot rule out the possibility of there existing a second vessel.

As for the sacrifice, they used some sort of mental compulsion to ensure willing participants in the games - for all we know, they could have slipped their preparations past our precautions and have an entire country’s worth of people ready to go.

Just how did everything go so wrong so quickly? One minute the Grimleal were practically extinct, and now our most secure vaults have been infiltrated.

That’s not important now: we need a plan of action - and fast. Alright, first priority, ensure that this body cannot be used as a vessel for the summoning. That’s fairly simple - I can confine myself to the castle and allocate a set of guards to ensure that any form of mental coercion or control will be fruitless.

Next step: reclaim the Fire Emblem and stones. If we do so, we’ll be able to prevent the summoning from happening altogether, but even if we fail we’ll be needing it to awaken Chrom so that he can kill Grima. I’m not certain whether we’ll be capable of killing him conventionally even with our advanced tech, so we’ll be needing a surefire way of ending him in case our first plan falls through.

I explain the broad strokes of my plan to the room. Chrom was unhappy that I will be sidelining myself, but he accepted my reasoning in the end. We then moved on to nailing down the specifics of the plan. Once we devised an acceptable course of action, we all departed from the conference room.

I collapsed into my reading chair, exhausted. I’d been burning the candle at both ends lately, and the four-hour planning session had done me no favours. My role in things is officially over, all things going well: Chrom has just left to take some of the Shepherds and a battalion of Ylisse’s finest to the Grimleal temple with hopes of disrupting the ritual. Miriel would be joining them as the leader of a platoon of mages.

We have no evidence that it’s happening right now, but everyone agreed that it was the most likely course of action for the Grimleal. We also don’t know for certain that the ritual has to be done at the Grimleal temple, but given that the temple is literally built into Grima’s skeleton and that they have been preparing the temple for the ritual over centuries, I’d imagine that they’d at the very least try to perform it in that location.
I’m not completely in the dark, however; I’m patched into the radio network of the ground troops - it’s being piped through several relay stations along our train line back to the capital. Chrom’s team was scheduled to arrive in a few hours, so I’ve got time for a quick nap. I order my guard to wake me then, and promptly drift off.

I’m awoken by a tremor. I launch out of my seat, arms flailing. An earthquake? I grasp my chair, steadying myself, only to notice that the disturbance was strictly limited to the magical plane. I wobble before stumbling and falling to the ground. Absently, I hear shouts, but I’m too distracted by my inner turmoil.

The magical plane was like a sea in a hurricane - eddies and surges battered my perception, each a hammer blow bending my mind against an anvil. I groan, clasping my hands over my temples in a futile attempt to ward myself against the onslaught.

Something catches in my throat, and I begin hacking, unable to properly breath. The offending blockage comes free and splatters onto the floor with a wet slap. I attempt to stand back up, head still being wrought with whatever’s happening.

I notice that there’s a small puddle of blood on the floor. Is that mine? I prop my hand against the floor, raising myself up, only to slip and fall back down. The pain in my head intensifies. It feels like my brain is being pulled in two different directions - as if it was the object of some childish dispute.

My vision swims, and everything blurs together, like a smeared painting. What the hell is happening? Is it an attack? Once more, my breath catches, and I start coughing. The blockage doesn’t come free so easily this time, and my vision begins to darken.

A hand grasps my shoulder, and all of a sudden, the world is shorn in two. I hear the sound of a rip - all encompassing, as if it resonated from within myself - and I know no more.

I felt unbearable burning agony. It was as if someone had replaced my blood with napalm, yet it had lasted naught but an instant. I felt no pain thereafter.

I sat up, looking at my surroundings. I was in a desert, almost entirely flat as far as the eye could see. Was I in Plegia? Dotting the land were squat, brownish shrubs. More importantly, there was not a single sign of civilization in sight.

How had I got here? Teleportation? Did the Grimleal try and kidnap me for their ritual? Did it fail? Did it work?

Now would be a bad time to panic. I need to rejoin civilization - get myself back into containment if it isn’t too late. This was a bad situation if I had ever seen one - what on Earth was that psychic attack? Was it just me that was affected, or did it hit everyone? I grasped my head like I had a headache more out of habit than actual pain.

When my hand contacted my head, however, it made a decidedly metallic clang. Looking down at my body, I saw that I was covered head to toe in what appeared to be armour, only, rather than being bulky, as metal armour tended to be, it was instead as if it were a second skin. Yet, eerily, it felt as if I was wearing nothing at all.

I shoved my thoughts to the side and I stood. I need to keep a level head here. Behind me, there was a spring glistening in the morning sun. It had been nearly dusk when Chrom had departed - was I out
the entire night?

As I moved towards the pool, I noticed that there were some distinctly mechanical noises being made by the armour. For one, where was a constant whir coming from somewhere inside my breastplate – it sounded almost like a computer fan. There was also an odd sort of hum coming from, well, everywhere. What on earth?

As I examined my reflection, I absently noticed that the pond contained strange-looking yellow fish. My face was covered by what seemed to be a metal mask. Over my mouth and nose was a yellow box shaped protrusion fitted with what looked like a speaker grille. On my head I wore a yellow hard hat with an attached lamp.

My eyes, however, were black pits. No sclera, no iris. Just perfectly circular holes filled by glass lenses.

Camera lenses.

That’s… not Ylissean tech. What the fuck happened?

I tried to take a breath to compose myself, only to find that I couldn’t. I tried again, and yet, my breath never came. Okay, that’s worrying. Despite being unable to breathe, I didn’t feel as if I was suffocating.

Maybe the armour was some sort of exo-suit that fed oxygen directly into the blood?

Maybe whoever stole the Fire Emblem was actually the threat that Laurent described? That would at least give me a possible explanation as to who put me into my current situation - but no clue as to the why.

I tugged on the mask to try and remove it. It stayed put. I felt around for a release. There was none. My head was covered in a perfectly seamless metal shell. At least the hat came off. I started to pace, running my hands over the armour, looking for a way out - a latch, a lever - anything!

Failing to find one, I stopped. Camera lenses, no breathing, metal shell, mechanical noises. They all point to a set of - frankly, absurd - explanations. I sat back down and looked at my reflection. There were definitely cameras in place of my eyes – there was no doubt in my mind.

I examined my hands and could clearly see that they were entirely metallic – not just a layer of armour. There was no way they could not be entirely mechanical – to say otherwise was a simple denial of reality. I raised a clenched fist and roughly rapped my forehead a few times with my knuckles. The momentary light-headedness and pain that would normally accompany such an action was wholly absent.

Three possible explanations, then. In order of decreasing likelihood; I’m now inhabiting the body of a robot, I’m now a heavily augmented android, and, I’m stuck inside a highly advanced skin-tight mech suit.

The skin-tight mech fits the evidence the least - the frame of this body is noticeably taller and thinner than the frame of my previous body. Coincidentally, it’s a lot more similar to my original body - robotics aside.

Augmentation doesn’t seem particularly likely either - given my thinner frame. That leaves a wholly robotic body. I can’t say I’m enthused, but having already experienced a similar phenomenon has inured me to the situation somewhat.
Alright. A plan. I need to get back to civilization. Once again, I cast my vision about, looking for a landmark. On closer inspection, this doesn’t look like any part of Plegia I’ve seen - and I’ve seen more of that shithole than most.

It looked closer to a steppe than a desert, actually. From memory, Archanea doesn’t really have steppes. Am I on Valm? Some other continent?

A different world entirely?

I turn my attention towards the magical plane. Despite myself, I stagger. It felt as if the entire world was some sort of Dead Spot lite. The only magical energy was my own - even the shrubs, which would normally have held a trace of magic back in Archanea were completely devoid of it.

That settles it, then. I’m in a different world. Were I in the same world as Archanea, I would have been able to sense at least some magic - even if it were half way across the world. Instead, it’s looking like I’m the only thing with any sort of magical energy anywhere nearby.

I turn my attention towards my signature - or soul, as the dark mages call it. It’s definitely the same one that I had back in Archanea. That would suggest that whatever happened back there could have been my soul being ejected from that plane of existence.

How did I end up here though? Did I just drift through the multiverse until my soul found something to anchor itself to? And why did I end up in a machine rather than an organic body, if that were the case?

No… that makes sense, actually. An advanced machine with hardware mimicking human wetware would be an ideal candidate - there would be no soul already occupying the body for me to have to steal it from, but the hardware itself would remain roughly analogous to what I had already been running on.

That’s using the assumption that humans from mundane worlds like this one would still have souls, but I honestly don’t know whether that’s the case. If that were true, does that mean I’m alone on this planet? If there were a concentration of people with souls somewhere, I would be able to at least sense their existence - if not their direction - but I’m getting absolutely nothing from the magical plane here.

I examined the helmet I had removed earlier. It looked to be a typical twenty-first century mining helmet. When contrasted with the advanced tech the rest of me was made of, it looked rather out of place. I looked around for a clue as to what this body was made for - a manufacturers mark, a label, a serial number.

Outside the rim of the helmet, near the back was a few bullet points embossed into the material in fine script. It read ‘Von Neumann probe property of the Gate Conglomerate. Initial launch: June 2049. Generation number: 12’. Von Neumann probe? I don’t know what that is, but if this body is a probe, that suggests that I’m out in space somewhere.

I’m not sure what to make of the other parts, either. Initial launch? That would suggest there have been multiple launches, at least. Generation number, on the other hand? I don’t even know where to begin with that one.

At least, I can reasonably guess that whoever is responsible for the probe - the ‘Gate Conglomerate’ is human, or at the very least, writes in English.

Ok. Action plan - I need an action plan. I can’t just sit around forever thinking about my situation.
Goals - what do I want to do?

Not much - get back to Archanea and not die or become otherwise imprisoned. It’ll be bad news for me if the Gate Conglomerate comes knocking, wondering why their robot has gone rogue.

Not an easy task, then: I know the broad strokes of dimensional tech, but actually trying to make something will be a gamble at best. Not to mention I’ll be needing an industrial base - in all likelihood, I’ll be constructing it by myself.

It was at this point that I noticed the overlay that had been projected into my awareness. It was a subtle thing - a few words and a few icons of some sort. A heads-up display? What? What would a robot need one of those for?

The script was a few bullet points; ‘Fabrication progress: Not tasked’, ‘Frame integrity: Normal’, ‘Gate stability: Normal’. Fabrication? Did this body have an integrated fabricator? That would make my job easier, at least. Frame integrity was probably analogous to a health-bar. Gate stability, on the other hand - maybe it’s referring to the same gate that the Gate Conglomerate was named after?

I drew my attention to the icons. Once my focus was on one, a window appeared in my awareness. It wasn’t really in my vision - more that I instinctively knew the contents of the window and was interpreting it as seeing the window.

It was titled ‘Fabrication tasker’. I closed the window by focusing on the ‘x’ in a similar manner to how I had with the icon. The other two icons brought up windows titled ‘Gate storage’ and ‘Sensor suite’.

This worked a lot like microsoft windows. Why would there be a graphical user interface in a machine that for all intents and purposes was a robot? There’s definitely something going on that I’m not catching here.

Maybe it was my soul subconsciously translating the information this body was giving me into a format I could understand? That doesn’t seem entirely correct to me, but I’ve got no better explanation.

In any case, I’ve gotta get a handle on this.

With a clear path of action, I begin paging through the windows. The fabrications tasker was nothing more than a list of products, the constituent materials required, and an eta if I were to order it’s fabrication. The products themselves were fairly basic - autonomous turrets, autonomous stationary mining units, self-contained steam-powered electric generators. For the most part, it’s pretty sci-fi stuff, but nothing completely mind-blowing.

The gate storage tab was more interesting. The way I figured it, it’s referring to a sci-fi analog of a bag of holding. Storage space was labeled as ‘Available Volume’, but there weren’t any units to go along with it.

On a whim, I pick up a stone and will for it to go into storage. With an almost comical sucking sound, the stone disappears. In my interface, the volume has gone up by a few tenths of a unit, and the stone has appeared in my list.

With some more experimentation, I find all I’ve got to do is hold whatever I want stored in my hand and call the system to do the work for me. If I want to recall something from storage, all I’ve got to do is press the appropriate button in the window. The object doesn’t just appear in my hand, however. Instead, it gets put into some sort of holding area where I can then designate a nearby
position for the object to be placed.

When I tried to put the ground into my storage by pressing my palm flat against it, an error box that read ‘Designated Volume Outside of Acceptable Bounds’ appeared. Damn - there’s a limiting factor of some sort, then.

In terms of how much I can store… Well, I don’t know exactly, but I figure it’s on the scale of a few industrial warehouses. That was fairly surprising - how on earth can I fit that stuff? Compression tech? Dimensional tech? If it were the latter, I might be able to take a look to jumpstart my own tech. The former is a bit less interesting, but still something I want to look into.

The sensor suite was fairly bog-standard, but only drew more questions. My internal chronometer says the year is 2694 - more than six-hundred years after the initial launch written on my helmet? I put it aside - it’s not important right now.

What I figured from the rest of the readings is that this planet was very unlike earth. The atmospheric pressure was almost twice Earth’s average, and was comprised almost entirely of Oxygen and Nitrogen – almost zero Carbon Dioxide. The gravity sat at almost two g’s – not that I could even feel the difference.

Now more familiar with my own capabilities, I begin to set about implementing the plan I had drawn up in my head while I had been inspecting the fabrications tasker. First priority: industry.

Fortunately, I’ve got enough tools at my disposal to make this a comparatively easy process. Step number one is getting an electric generator running. Almost everything I can make runs off of the stuff, so it seems like an appropriate goal.

I don’t know exactly how time relativity works between dimensions, but my gut tells me that it’s fairly consistent - not that I’d have any way to know for sure. Given that I could potentially be stranded here for years while I figure out dimensional tech… Well, I just hope that everybody back home makes it through everything ok.

I have worked nonstop for almost a week now, and yet, I felt not even a hint of fatigue. It was a little disquieting, honestly. A few days ago, I managed to get some boilers and steam generators up and running and I finished setting up automatic drilling sites to use electric power about an hour ago.

Right now, I’ve got a solid factory belt full of raw copper and iron headed into automatic furnaces fed by a belt of coal. My steam generators were fed by pumps that tapped an aquifer I had discovered under the spring. Right now the material was simply stockpiling, but soon, I should have automatic assemblers turning the material into more advanced goods.

Around a day into my work, I had noticed strange dog-shaped creatures off in the distance. They were blue and kept close to the ground. I didn’t get a very close look before they had run off, but I know that there is at least some sort of fauna on this planet now.

Yesterday, they had returned and I managed to get a closer look at them: they were insectoid, and very clearly carnivorous. Their jaws were filled with almost comically large chitinous fangs. They hadn’t attacked, but they did seem to be looking around the place. I had taken to calling them Biters.

I’ve got blueprints for weapons too. After I first saw the natives, I had flash-forged a pistol and some magazines with my personal fabrication equipment. I don’t plan on making the first move, but I would not want them munching on me - metal skin or no.
Getting back to work, I started laying out the foundations for an autonomous assembler. I'll be needing integrated circuitry if I want to start looking at dimensional tech, so there's a few more steps to go.

I lapsed into an absent daydream. It wasn't stimulating work, so my mind wandered. I'd already thoroughly worked myself over for the mistakes I made in failing to account for the Grimleal having teleportation magic - hell, I hadn't even remembered that Excellus was a Grimleal mole until I really sat down and thought about it at the conference.

So, I instead think about Miriel. To say that I'm worried for her is a bit of an understatement - I mean, for all I know, she could be left for dead in a post-apocalyptic wasteland right now. I try to push my worries out of my mind - this was another topic I had worn myself with in the past week - yet it stubbornly refused to stop nagging at me, despite my being powerless to do anything to help her.

One of the things that I have very pointedly avoided considering - fortunately, with much success in this particular case - were the ramifications of my no longer being human. I have no doubt in my mind that once that catches up to me, I'll be in for a world of hurt, but there's work to do right now - no time for an existential crisis.

Something pulls at my attention. With a start, I jolt to awareness. It was dusk now, and off in the horizon was a pack of Biters, all charging towards me at a breakneck pace. Shit.

I fumble with my belt, pulling out my pistol. I spare a moment to consult my sensor suite - only six of them. I know my gun can put out about four bullets a second at the fastest and has ten in a magazine. I sure hope they die in one hit.

Shifting into a readied stance, I put the pond between myself and the Biters. They were about fifty meters away now. Forty. Thirty. I could see that they were far more insectoid than I had previously thought – they were covered entirely in what looked to be chitin plates. Twenty metres.

I squeezed the trigger once, then twice. The pistol let out a pair of claps and delivered the bullets squarely into my targets. The disgusting clicking noises the aliens made had turned into shrieks of pain. I fire two more bullets, and two I had already shot fell to the ground, dead.

They were almost upon me now. I hold down the trigger, and the gun begins firing automatically. Two more of them died in the rest of magazine. I quickly loaded another, but the rest were already upon me.

One bit my leg, its teeth shattered, but still punctured the metal. Its friend instead barrelled into me, knocking me to the ground. I had to fire three bullets into its underbelly before it stopped. Almost panicking now, I direct my fire to the last one, which had begun to claw at me with its fore legs.

It perishes under the hail of lead with a hideous screech.

I stand. My leg, though damaged, still seems to work just fine. I replace the empty magazine with a fresh one, and deliver another round of bullets into the corpses of the bugs, just to be safe.

Despite the set of finger sized punctures in my calf, I felt no pain. Looking around, the pond now had two biter corpses in it.

Damn, I had liked that pond. It had looked nice.

I moved and pulled the corpses out of it. As a result of the violence, the fish were nowhere to be seen and the pond had been stained an ugly shade of green. Fucking aliens. Why couldn’t they just have
left me alone?

Mentally, I add another few things to my to-do list. If the natives aren’t friendly - I doubt they are even intelligent, actually - I’m going to need some defenses.

Thankfully, my fabricator has no shortage of options.

I spent the next few weeks fortifying my compound and expanding my industrial capacity. The biter attacks slowly ramped up in intensity was the days passed. There has not been a day where there hasn’t been an attempted incursion of some sort – though they have yet to breach my walls. The automated turret system included in the fabrication package is a godsend – it is essentially a motion tracking camera strapped to a gun on a rig that allows a small computer to point the gun at things the camera and computer designate as hostile.

Not too difficult a task when everything hostile fits pretty much the same physical profile.

The next few months went essentially the same. I expanded the compound to accommodate something new; circuit factories, oil jacks, more mines – that sort of thing, then, the biter attacks would increase in both intensity and frequency, and repeat.

It’s got to the point where there’s a major biter offensive every few hours, and it’s starting to drive me insane. Metaphorically, of course. Once I properly fortified the compound the attacks started to include other types of biter – bigger versions of the basic Biters, and an alternate type that spit acidic phlegm.

Perhaps the Spitters were the alternate gender to the Biters? And maybe the bigger ones were part of some genetic caste system? Frankly, it’s beyond the scope of my ability to say for sure. I only hope I can get myself out of this hellhole before they overwhelm me.

Progress on the dimensional tech is going slowly – with the constantly increasing attacks, I’ve had to spend most of my time fortifying the compound. I’ve already automated restocking the turrets with ammunition - a belt and some robotic arms hooked up to a factory did the trick.

With petrochemical processing up and running as of a week ago, I got access to all sorts of useful materials. Once I realised that napalm was within my capabilities, the logical reaction is to load it into a sprayer and get myself some napalm turrets. The basic idea is the exact same as the normal turrets, but with napalm in place of bullets.

One thing lead to another, and I now have a twenty-meter death zone around my compound that is perpetually on fire. It’s done wonders for my defenses - I haven’t had to repair a turret for a couple of days now - but it’s not exactly pleasant. The air is constantly thick with ashes and smoke, and everything is coated in a oily layer of incinerated alien.

Thankfully, my machinery looks to have been designed with hostile environments in mind - there have been no issues stemming from the gunk yet.

It is a good thing that fire doesn’t bother me terribly much. Sure, too much heat for too long will probably start to mess with my circuits, but I can spend far more time than a human wading through fiery death.

I also patched up that puncture I got in the first biter attack. It’s literally just a steel patch welded to my leg, but at least I’m watertight again. Right now, I’m looking through the data that my radar dish
As far as I can tell, the Biters are a subterranean species that forages and hunts on the surface – like ants. Their colonies are these bulbous fleshy sacs that dot the surface. I can only assume that they’re all connected underground and that my drilling is causing them some major seismic problems – hence the attacks. Thing is, when I scanned underground to see if there were any tunnels under me, I found nothing – it’s solid rock all the way down to the aquifer that feeds my boilers.

The thing is, the Biters aren’t just numerous, they’re completely dominating the local ecosphere – the average density of biter colonies is about thirty per square kilometre. Besides the fish, I haven’t seen any other local fauna.

I think I need to deal with these colonies. The question is how I go about that. Pour napalm down the tunnels, maybe? But how am I going to get close enough to do that? Maybe if I build artillery to level the colonies from afar, then move in? Or better yet, why not just use artillery to turn the colonies’ exit into a burning hellscape?

Yeah… that sounds like it’d do the trick. I mean, this planet is already a shithole - it’s not as if I could make it any worse.

The last couple of months have been rough. I’ve been working constantly - there’s always another thing on the to-do list that needs doing. But, progress has been made. I’ve got enough of an industrial base that I should be able to construct whatever I need for the dimensional tech.

My signature has slowly been leaking magical power into the surrounding Dead Spot. It’s a bit of a worry - I’m only going to get a few tries at the ritual before I’m completely drained. Given that this plane doesn’t have magical energy just laying around for me to take, I really can’t afford it mess it up.

The way I measure it, I’m at around eighty percent of the magical power I had when I got here. If I know my magical theory right - and I very well might not - the bleed should be following an inverse trend. That means that the closer my magical power is to the surroundings, the less I should be loosing. This sort of bleed happens even in Archanea, but it’s nullified by the natural accumulation of energy that happens when there’s energy in surplus.

My compound is a wonderful thing. It’s a few thousand square metres of industry on top of a solid concrete base surrounded by three-meter-high concrete walls topped with steel barbed wire and turrets. Only napalm flamethrower and machine gun turrets currently, but, I’m accumulating laser turrets to add to that list right now.

What’s not so wonderful is the fact that I need so much defence. The biter onslaught has become nearly constant these last few weeks. The air was perpetually filled with the dying screams of the Biters punctuated by the staccato crack of my guns. Things have gotten to a ridiculous - if I wasn’t incinerating them, they would have buried my turrets in bodies at this point.

I’m honestly not sure whether they’re attacking me because I’ve been expanding, or because I’ve refused to yield to their offenses. Things started getting really bad about a week ago when I decided that I’d had enough and started to bombard their hives with napalm delivered by artillery.

It turned out that the Biters were not a subterranean species. Frankly, I’m not too sure what they are. Besides highly flammable, that is. The biter hives had no tunnels underneath them – I even did some
digging after burning a few to the ground to make sure.

What I do know, however, is that the hives are less like homes and more like incubation chambers, and are, in no uncertain terms, complete bullshit. They appear seemingly out of nowhere and output Biters at a frightening rate – one every second or so – and will continue outputting Biters even as my automated artillery system burns it to the ground.

On that note, I’ve figured out how to stop them from appearing.

Burn everything to the ground.

Tests of carpet bombing areas with napalm - courtesy of my artillery - have shown that hives won’t spawn while the land is burning. I guess that should have been a given but I honestly have very little idea how these things work.

I haven’t been able to get close enough to confirm it, but I suspect that the hives are a form of extremely rapidly growing fungus-like construct that grows from something akin to a spore.

On another note, I’m producing far more napalm than I know what to do with – despite using several hundred barrels a day. I’m not producing enough to carpet bomb the continent, but it’s getting frighteningly close to that point.

A few days ago I released a weather balloon into the atmosphere to do a survey of the planet’s geology and geography on a whole. As far as I know, there are four continents of about the same size as the one I am on, with islands spread between. Most of the planet is land, but not by too much.

What’s interesting, on the other hand, is that metallic rocks are much more prevalent than the more typical non-metallic variety – to the point that I estimate that almost seventy percent of the planet’s rock-like material is actually native metals.

That’s completely absurd, but, the readings don’t lie - if I hadn’t seen it with my own two eyes, I wouldn’t have believed it. I guess that would explain why my mines and smelteries have been so absurdly productive, though.

With everything that’s been going on, I haven’t had the chance to focus on dimensional tech nearly as much as I’d like. The amount of manual labour I’m having to do on a regular basis is far too high. Building more industry is fairly simple – the machines are self-assembling for the most part, but managing my electrical and data collection networks, along with doing all the of maintenance is simply too much.

I had given another look through the fabrication tasker, and had found a very simple and resource efficient drone design. The things are about thirty centimetres tall and the same wide filled with some basic tools attached to some robotic arms along with a communications node and some thrusters. They’re powered by some high capacity lithium-ion batteries – which I could produce almost endlessly thanks to the chemicals used to create the lithium compound being somewhat common waste products from my mining and refinement operations.

They seem like a massive help, so building a production line and recharge facilities are on the to-do list. Along with twenty other different things. I’ll get to it eventually, I guess.

While they would solve a lot of my recurring problems, it would still leave me with too much work. So, given that I’m now essentially software with a metaphysical component, I’ve been doing some experiments towards creating a secondary instance of myself.

It’s been… really easy, actually. Almost scarily so - there was a gui that had appeared as soon as I
had the notion. I haven’t actually gone through with it, yet, but I do have the design of something resembling a neural supercomputer that seems pretty much purpose-built to copy myself into. The idea is that I’ll have one instance of myself running administrative tasks through the use of the remote maintenance drones, while the other works on getting us out of this hellhole.

It’s not something I’m comfortable with - not in the slightest - but if I want to get back to Ylisse as fast as possible, it’s something I’ll have to do.
1. Interlude: Miriel

We had been too late to stop the ritual. The Grimleal had run circles around us with that damnable teleportation magic. When we arrived at the temple, we found not a soul alive. The rooms were dotted with Grimleal dark mages that had willingly given their lives for their god. Grima had already departed westward at that point, so thankfully, we did not have to contend with it while we retrieved the Fire Emblem and its associated sacred stones.

In one of the rooms, we found the corpse of a Manakete - a mystical race of draconic shapeshifters. The corpse was in its dragon form, and had not gone down without a fight. That had been the last piece of the puzzle.

We had previously received reports while we travelled that Robin had been kidnapped, despite his guard detail, so we were coming into this expecting them to have two out of the three pieces necessary to complete the ritual. The third - a magical sacrifice of sufficient power - was something we were counting on them to not yet have prepared.

Foolish, in hindsight.

Manaketes were a race with extreme magical potency - even a single one would have been enough to provide enough energy to kick-start the ritual.

Kick-start? An odd expression, where had I learnt it?

...Oh.

The awakening ritual had proceeded without trouble. The ‘risen’ detailed in Robin’s writings had started appearing throughout the countryside in small numbers, but did not deign to attempt to interrupt the ritual. Chrom had been judged worthy by Naga, and received her boon. The Falchion itself also benefited - holy power now coursed through the blade like electricity, imparting Naga’s wrath to all who would suffer to be cut by the edge.

It also made risen melt - a tactical advantage, to be sure.

The risen - fell apparitions conjured by Grima’s power - seemed to be far less powerful than those described by Robin. Perhaps Grima’s attention was focused on Valm? He was currently floating above an island between the two continents.

Civilian militia have been formed across the continent - small towns were the most vulnerable places to the risen threat. We’ve distributed firearms to these forces in the hope that it will allow them to adequately defend themselves.

Initial reports have been promising - the raiding and ambush tactics favoured by the risen were ineffective against prepared and well-equipped targets. Thankfully, the risen do not seem to have any special resistance to bullets - Robin and I had feared that the focused nature of the damage inflicted to the targets would render firearms ineffective against them, but that is not the case.

Currently, we were preparing to send a commando squad to deal with Grima himself. The Voice of Naga - a Manakete named Tiki - had arrived with a delegation from Valm a few weeks ago, and she tells us that she is able to use her connection to Naga to teleport sixteen of us onto Grima’s back.

It was my responsibility to plan the attack.
I slump at my desk, head resting in my hands. Robin had always had the more tactical mind between the two of us - my strengths lay in examining problems from multiple perspectives. We had complemented each other well, and I’m not confident that I’m up to the task on my own.

Our intelligence was better than average: from Robin’s notes, we know to expect ceaseless waves of powerful risen of a variety of types. Grima’s avatar itself would be extraordinarily tenacious with powerful dark magic at its disposal. Of course, that’s assuming that Robin’s information is correct, but at this point, he’s proven that’s a reasonable assumption.

His notes had also said whoever becomes the avatar of Grima was as good as dead. My feelings on the matter were… difficult. But, I cannot afford to allow myself to be distracted with this: the apocalypse supersedes matters of the heart in terms of importance.

How would Robin choose who to send?

I cast my mind back to the many planning sessions we had worked together through. Right. The first step is to identify the goal of the encounter - in this case, killing Grima. Well, sealing Grima - with Robin’s possession, we no longer have the ability to kill Grima for good. Unfortunately, we’ll just have to settle for Naga sealing Grima away through Chrom’s use of the Falchion.

The next step is to identify the things that need to happen in order for this goal to be achieved. I pause, considering the problem. Well, Chrom simply has to use the Falchion to kill Grima’s avatar, does he not? I consult Robin’s notes once more. Indeed - the risen are simply fodder: we do not have to concern ourselves with killing all of them.

Hmm… In that case, I may have something. What if we were to pair Chrom up with a Pegasus rider? He would then be able to simply fly to Grima’s avatar, unimpeded by whatever might lay in his way.

No… Chrom would need more support than that - from what Robin has written, Grima’s avatar will not go down so easily.

What if we were to also teleport up a field gun? Surely Grima would not be able to withstand the explosive shells? We’d have to account for the fact that the gun would likely not have a stable surface to fire off of…

I stand up, my plan coming together. A field gun would not work, but there are other options. I depart my office, making for Thomus. We’re going to need prototype gear for this, but I’m confident it will be effective.

The sixteen of us stood assembled, giving our gear one last check. The nature of the plan meant that beyond Chrom and the Pegasus rider, everyone else needed to be specially trained in the prototype weapon for this.

Chrom had insisted that the Shepherds be included in the ones to be trained. I figured that the potential risk would be balanced out by boost Chrom would receive to his morale. Not that I doubted the Exalt’s morale, but every little bit counts, I suppose.

The weapons were what Robin called ‘rocket launchers’. Tubes that launched explosive warheads propelled with a highly reactive propellant. Robin’s notes tell me that the weapon was intended for use against heavy armour, so I figure that it should do the trick against the avatar of Grima. We carried four warheads each. I would have preferred a greater amount, but there simply hadn’t been any more produced yet.
In addition to the rocket launchers, we all carried additional weapons to deal with the inevitable risen counterattack. The crux of the plan was rather simple, really: shoot the crap out of Grima’s avatar, then fly Chrom in to deliver the final blow.

Cordelia was the designated flier for this mission - she had been chosen over Sumia due to her greater competence at evasion. The people we trained with the rocket launchers were; Stahl, Sully, Vaike, Kellam, Gaius, Libra, seven of our best commando veterans from the missions in Valm and myself.

I’m not going to lie. My inclusion on this mission was purely out selfish desire for some amount of revenge against Grima for taking Robin from me.

But, I’m honestly beyond caring at this point.

Chrom starts making his way around the circle, sharing a few words with everyone. When he makes it to me, he opens his mouth to say something but instead closes it, a sad look on his face.

Pity. He pitied me. I…

I force back tears. Now was not the time for that. I hadn’t yet spoken personally with Chrom, but I know he and Robin had been somewhat close. I steady myself. “For Robin.” My voice betrayed none of my inner turmoil - that would be bad for morale at a time we cannot afford it.

He nods solemnly. “For Robin.” He replied in an equally level voice.

Recognising that there was nothing more to say, he moved onto the next person, leaving me to my thoughts.

Unbidden, a lump forms in my throat. No! Not now - I have a job to do. I force it down.

Thankfully, I’m drawn from my thoughts by Tiki clearing her throat. It seems we’re ready to go. She assumes the traditional prayer position, and petitions Naga for aid. An ethereal figure apparated above her. She begins to speak, but I’m too distracted to pay attention.

How pathetic - Naga herself appears before us to grant us her blessing in the coming fight, and I’m too stricken too even give her the courtesy of listening to her speech.

Were Naga more powerful, I would be angry with her for not intervening in the situation earlier - perhaps then, Robin would not be damned. But, with how weak she is from her previous bouts with Grima, it’s a wonder that she even has the power to appear before us - let alone teleport sixteen people halfway across an ocean.

My vision is obscured with a flash of white light. This must be it, then.

The light lasts for a few seconds, then fades. When it does, we’re at our destination - the back of the Fell dragon.

I whip my head around, assessing the battlefield. I notice the sigils where Robin had said risen would appear from - the closest is about eighty metres away. I also find Grima’s avatar - about one-hundred and fifty metres from us.

I immediately notice that the dragon’s back is pocked with craters about the size of a dinner plate. Was this all the damage our earlier bombardments had done? We had shelled the dragon thoroughly as it passed through our territory. While it’s not as bad as we feared - the most pessimistic of our analysts predicted that the shells would do no damage whatsoever - the wounds don’t appear to be
troubling the dragon very much.

As soon as we have our bearings, Chrom and Cordelia take off towards the avatar, and the rest of us drop into our formation with practiced ease. These launchers have an effective range of about two-hundred metres, so it’s going to be a fairly difficult shot to hit.

Thankfully, we had prepared to make such a shot intensively.

I go through the motions of preparing to fire. I line up my shot, and squeeze the trigger. Around me, thirteen other shots fire off in rapid succession. The projectiles zoom towards Grima’s avatar in the blink of an eye. There’s a tremendous flash, and a sound like snapping glass.

“Effect negative! Go for a second volley!” shouts one of the commandos.

We all fumble to reload our launchers. I spy the broken fragments of a ward crumbling to the ground - Grima blocked it! Around the avatar, the ground is covered in frothing molten copper. I notice the avatar itself has dropped to one knee, and is clutching it’s head. Good - we can hurt it, then.

Cordelia has reached Grima at this point, but she’s circling above, waiting for the second volley. We all line up our second shots, and with a squeeze of the trigger, mine is flying towards the target.

I trace it’s path with my vision - a miss. More shots follow - most go wide, but two hit.

The ones that do have a profound effect - even at this distance, I can see a pair of holes piercing straight through the torso of the avatar.

The same commando shouts again “Cease fire! The exalt’s going in!”

The few people who hadn’t yet shot stopped, and we wait with bated breath. I notice that only now have risen appeared at the sigils. They look similar to scarecrows, and are slowly shambling towards us - they’re not a threat just yet.

Chrom leaps from the Pegasus as it swoops low, plunging his sword into the avatar without ceremony.

All of a sudden, the previously still fell dragon bucks, and we are sent tumbling. I catch a glimpse of Chrom, and he’s anchored himself directly onto the dragon itself through the avatar with his divine blade.

Have we done it? The dragon rolls this time, and the lot of us are sent flying into the sky.

As I’m tossed into the open air, I see Robin’s body pinned to the fell dragon by the Falchion. With a blinding flash, the holy sword erupts in a pillar of divine energy.

A smile makes its way onto my face, even as I’m tumbling towards the ocean. We’ve done it. The fell dragon has been sealed once again.

I can see the ocean far below me, racing up towards me. I swallow. This is it, isn’t it?

I’m going to die.

My spellbook had been flung from my person in the initial tumble - I had no tools available to save
I release the stranglehold I had kept on my emotions. In that case, there is no more work for me to do. My tears are whipped away from my face by the passing wind.

Oh, Robin… Why did fate deign to take you from me so soon? For once in my life, I had felt companionship… Now free to wander, my mind was drawn towards all the things between us that we had yet to experience. Marriage. Family. Intimacy. The trip out to the town for a night of drinks that we never got around to doing.

Each regret was an icy spear stabbed into my gut. My tears only intensified, and I could no longer hold my sobs. I let out a wail that had been building over the course of the past week. Even in the throes of my grief, recognised it’s intensity.

I…

I don’t think I even want to live in this world anymore.

It’s just too much. Laurent’s enemies are on the horizon - how am I even supposed to get this world ready for a war of that magnitude? Without Robin’s expertise, our preparations will be crippled.

I don’t think I want to shoulder that burden.

At some point, my body had flipped such that I was facing upward. I was thankful, in a way - I wouldn’t have to deal with the anticipation of seeing the ocean edge ever so closer. I closed my eyes, welcoming of my fate.

Abruptly, my vision flashed to white.
Autonomous drones were a godsend: for once I have time to start experimenting with dimensional technology. I set a production line up to churn out the things, and before the day was out, I no longer had to dedicate any of my time towards maintenance or repairs.

The biggest time sink in that regard - my defenses - had benefited greatly from having a swarm keeping everything in perfect order. I’m glad for that: I estimate that change has increased the effectiveness of my defenses by around forty percent.

That’s given me a bit of breathing room - the Biters have shown no signs of ceasing their attacks, and if they continue to ramp up, I could be in some serious trouble. On that note, I’ve noticed a worrying trend.

The Biters are becoming increasingly fire resistant; my twenty-metre no-man’s-land has shrunk to fourteen over the course of the past few weeks. The Biter corpses themselves have also started to take much longer to incinerate.

There’s only a few possible explanations for it, and I like exactly zero of them. I don’t have any evidence for it, but I suspect the Biters to be capable of macro-evolution of a comparatively micro-scale.

I’m not exactly sure how - my mind jumps to a ludicrously short natural lifespan and rapid reproductive turn-around - but the rate of adaptation I’m seeing is like what you would see from diseases, rather than man-sized killer alien bugs.

If things continue at the rate they’ve been going at, I might have a far stricter time-limit on getting the hell out of here than I had initially thought.

Things are not going well on that end, either - I’m having to work off of memory, and I cannot afford to simply brute-force things. That’s left me with a bit of a dilemma: I don’t remember exactly how the process goes, and I simply don’t have the magical energy to try things until I get it right.

All hope is not lost, however: I do know the basics of how things work well enough - so, I’ve been trying to work things out from first-principles. It’s not been going well, but is has at least been going somewhere.

The mathematics involved are, unfortunately, not something that I know how to program a computer to do. Well, I suppose I do have an alternative - if I were fabricate that neural computer and copy myself into it, I might be able to crack it within hours - minutes, maybe.

That option is looking increasingly attractive, but I don’t want to have to take it unless my hand is forced. I feel like doing that would open a whole can of worms that is better just being left untouched.

I’m distracted from my work by a ping on my internal alerts system. One of my turrets just went down. I pull open my map, rushing out of my bunker. As I do, four more pings sound - three turrets and a meter of solid concrete wall.

I jump into the buggy that I had previously fabricated for easy transportation around my compound. Two more pings - a redundant power distribution pole and another turret. The breach is on the west side, the nearest point to my power generators. If they get through to my generators, my whole base is as good as defenseless.
Had the Biters planned that?

Could they even plan that?

The buggy went from zero to one-hundred in a second, and I’m tearing off towards the breach. I’m at my destination in under half of a minute, but even by then, the Biters had already destroyed a further five metres of wall and nine turrets.

I leap out of my vehicle, rolling to a crouch and drawing my pistol in a single fluid motion. The buggy continued hurtling forward into the Biter horde, turning four of them into sickly green smears on the concrete before it explodes in a fiery conflagration at the feet of a hulking behemoth of a bug.

The offending bug reared backward, screeching in insectoid fury as it’s front caught fire. Already unbalanced, the secondary explosion of the fuel reserves I kept in the buggy’s trunk toppled it. It came crashing down with a wail of agony on top of three of the smaller aliens.

Only eight with one car bomb? Damn, I’m getting sloppy.

Immediately, I take assessment of the situation. There’s four more of the massive ones - they were around three meters tall - and somewhere in the neighbourhood of forty smaller ones. Behind them, I could see a field of hundreds of burning corpses.

I curse internally. Even a few more turrets would have held this attack off entirely.

Beside me, my second row of turrets were cutting down the intruders like wheat before the harvest. The smaller aliens were turned into gory paste under the unceasing hail of lead, but the larger ones proved more resilient.

I’ll have to fix that.

Flicking my attention towards my interface with practiced ease, I queued up the fabrication of ten genades. Seconds later, a genade popped into my hand. Had this been a few weeks ago, I would have spouted a one-liner - something like ‘taste pineapple, xeno scum’ - but at this point, the novelty has worn off.

I pull the pin and lob the grenade towards my target. It bounces to exactly where I wanted - being able to calculate the motions required to produce the exact results I wanted was trivial. I figured that there must also be some sort of more traditional computer wired into my brain. Considering that performing physics problems in the span of milliseconds was not something that someone could normally do, it seemed like a reasonable assumption.

A second grenade materializes in my hand, and I repeat my actions. At this point, my initial grenade had exploded, spraying the surrounding bugs with a deadly hail of steel fragments. The mooks collapsed, dead, but the larger ones seemed merely injured by the explosion.

The aliens seemed to be distracted with widening the hole that they had already created in my outer defenses. Maybe they weren’t intelligent enough to identify my single point of failure after all - they made no moves to penetrate further into my compound. By the time my fifth grenade has been thrown, all of the bugs were dead.

Of course, it should go without saying that my power generators were the most redundantly defended things in my base - it would take a determined attack orders of magnitudes stronger in order to reach it.

I cancel my fabrication order, keeping the two genades I had not yet thrown but had been fabricated
in my storage. I’ll undoubtedly end up using them at some point.

I make my vocalizer sigh dramatically, and signal for my maintenance drones to begin repairs. As I do, I make amends to the repair plan, increasing the amount of turrets along this section of wall. I cast my view about, inspecting the damage. Nothing terrible, thankfully, but incidents like this will almost certainly continue to occur if my defenses stay as they are.

A traitorous voice niggles at the back of my mind. If a secondary copy of myself was available to administer the drone swarm, I wouldn’t have to devote attention to defense - it would be able to reinforce, expand and repair all by itself.

I shake the thoughts from my head, and I queue the fabrication of another buggy from the materials I had in storage. If there’s one good thing about this damned planet, it’s that raw materials are practically of no object. Seconds later, I was on my way back to my bunker, ready to resume my work on dimensional tech.

Getting to a different dimension took weeks of computation, a warehouse full of gear, a nuclear reactor’s worth of energy and a magical specialist capable of performing the appropriate ritual. Suffice to say, only some of those things were within my grasp currently.

The energy itself was trivial - I simply needed to spend an afternoon constructing more boilers and steam turbines, and then hooking the boilers into my supply network such that they are constantly fed with fuel and water, and the turbines into my electrical network.

While I wasn’t exactly trained in performing the ritual, I would judge it within my admittedly limited capabilities - I had absorbed quite a bit of magical theory working with Miriel back in Ylisse.

The gear, on the other hand, is a bit more trivial. I’ve got an entire futuristic industrial complex at my disposal - fabricating everything would require a few hours at the absolute most.

The remaining requirement is the sticking point - the computational power required wasn’t something that was out of my reach, but I had not memorised the algorithms used in the process: hence my working them out from first principles.

However, even if I had all that ready to go, I couldn’t simply snap my fingers and be back in Ylisse: I’ve got no idea where this universe is in relation to it. I can make a few guesses, though - whatever was done to me to send me here, I doubt it was of sufficient complexity to send me to a dimension that was not neighboring Ylisse’ in the dimensional array. Given that the array is a thirty-seventh dimensional metaphysical construct, I’ve got enough to worry about without complicating things further.

Knowing that, along with the fact that there are seventy-four dimensions that are neighboring a single other dimension - two for each axis within the array - I’ve got a one-in-seventy-four chance that the first dimension I check is Ylisse’. Not great odds - it’s probable that I’ll have to check far more dimensions than I want to.

Fortunately, traversing dimensional routes I’ve already travelled is far easier - the math doesn’t change for the trip back. This means that I’ll only need a suitcase full of gear, almost zero prep time, and some magical and electrical energy to get back here.

Fortunately, my fabrications package included designs for a nuclear reactor that is intended to serve as the power source for a combat exosuit - even if I were to dimensionally hop to somewhere
completely inhospitable, I’ll have no problems getting back here.

Of course, I’m by no means saying that where I am now is hospitable, but I’d certainly rate it above the surface of Venus or something. Come to think of it, I might actually be rated for Venusian environments.

Ok, maybe I wouldn’t rate it above Venus, but I need to stay based in this dimension for the time being anyway - otherwise, my search for a way back home becomes exponentially more difficult.

I’m interrupted from my concentration by a ping on my alert system. Another breach - the ninth today. I take a look at my sensor feeds. Already, the last of the Biters had been killed - they’d barely made it past my first line.

Cursing the disruption to my work, I task repair drones to reinforce and repair the breach. This doesn’t require my presence - I’d stopped leaving my bunker days ago. Instead, I could task almost everything to my drone swarm remotely.

I’d yet to have another serious breach since before I had sequestered myself, but it’s only a matter of time. Preemptive reinforcement has become my strategy - the less time I have to devote to personally reinforcing my defenses, the better.

I turn back to my work, only to be interrupted by a different ping. I immediately pull up my sensors again - that had been a serious ping. Immediately, I spot the cause. Forty kilometres away, a Biter swarm more than eight times bigger than the largest that had yet assaulted my compound had entered into my sensor net.

Despite myself, I let out a string of curses.

I launch into action, remotely accessing my production and logistical facilities. The static defenses I’ve already got won’t be enough. I task half of my maintenance swarm towards expanding my energy production with newly manufactured boilers and steam turbines.

The other half, I send to reinforce the side of my compound closest to the approaching swarm with additional walls and turrets. Unfortunately, I did not have the time to adjust my logistical system to allow for more flamethrower turrets or machine gun turrets - keeping them fed with ammunition was quite the challenge.

Instead, I tasked the drones with constructing additional laser turrets. The laser turrets had the advantage in that they required only electricity to run. The thing is, their power draw when firing was, frankly, absurd.

As an afterthought, I also ordered the construction of a dense minefield across the final kilometre approaching my base. It wouldn’t stop the Biters by itself, but it would at least thin their numbers.

I inspected my sensors once more. Already my swarm had constructed the turbines and boilers. I ordered them to rejoin with the rest of the swarm.

Out of precaution, I checked my mines. Coal and copper still had plenty left to extract, but I would need to build additional iron mines soon. While running out iron during the siege would certainly be bad, I don’t think it will be fatal.

I flipped back to my defenses. Already, another solid concrete wall had been lain - they had been pre-prepared for this very purpose. The minefield was about twenty percent lain. Immediately, I noticed a problem - my drones didn’t have enough range to make it all the way out there. It was an easy fix - I ordered recharge stations to be constructed along the way and hooked into my electrical
An alert pinged, but I didn’t need to check it to know what it was. The thunderous booms of my twenty artillery cannons signalled the beginning of the bombardment. The effect was less than I desired - each shell only killed between ten and thirty of the damnable things.

My artillery simply didn’t fire fast enough to effectively deal with the numbers I’m facing here. I made a note to construct another twenty cannons to rectify that.

By the time the swarm was twenty kilometres away, my static defenses were complete.

I ordered my vocalizer to make a noise of contemplation.

I had given thought to arming the drone swarm. Perhaps now was an apt time? I ordered my factories to begin producing grenades, and began transporting the product towards the front line.

In a matter of seconds, the highly-modular fabrication units included in my technology bundle began churning out grenades at a prodigious rate. Recognising that this would drain much of my iron supply, I queued the construction of an additional mine while it was still on my mind.

The swarm was ten kilometres away. The artillery had only reduced their numbers by about five percent. This was going to be a rough one. There was nothing for me to do except monitor the situation now.

Once the aliens made it to the minefield, they slowed down considerably. I inspected my feeds. The mines were working very well - the Biters were throwing themselves forward with reckless abandon. Each explosion killed a group of them, leaving their corpses as obstacles for their brethren to climb over.

This meant that the artillery had even more time to thin their numbers before they reached my first line of turrets. I had not predicted that particular synergy but I was glad nonetheless.

The Biters continued to move forward, and I made them bleed for every inch they took. By the time they were a hundred meters from my wall, the swarm had been reduced to sixty percent of its original size.

I make some estimates. Based on what I’ve previously seen, they should at least make it to the wall I just erected, but fail to make it any further. At forty metres out, I ordered my drones to begin dropping the grenades. Fortunately, they had not required any modifications to their manipulators to be able to achieve this task - refitting tens of thousands of drones would have been a serious logistical burden.

With the drones deployed, the artillery ceased their firing - their targeting system deemed the drones as friendlies. But, the atrophy rate of the swarm jumped considerably. By twenty metres from the wall - the edge of my turrets’ range - the swarm was at thirty percent of its original size.

Once the turrets began firing, however, the bugs started dying faster than I could even keep track of. Before I knew it, the swarm had been dispersed entirely. I lean back in my chair - one I had created out of desire for familiarity rather than comfort - and order my vocalizer to make the sound of an exhaled breath.

That had been intense, but the minefield had proven it’s worth. I flip to the camera feed from one of my turrets.

I want to see this directly.
I look out to the battlefield. Stretching off to beyond the horizon was an unbroken line of craters and biter corpses. The devastation was densest closest to my base - there was not a single spot within twenty metres that did not have biter corpses stacked more than a meter above the ground.

Even now, the ashes of the biters incinerated by lasers or flamethrowers was being picked up by stray winds. I have no doubts that an ash storm will be upon me soon. I give the orders for my turrets to begin incinerating the corpses - the piles are a major security risk, potentially allowing for a determined swarm to walk straight over my walls.

Within minutes, the sky becomes thick with smoke and ash. I command my vocalizer to emit a sigh. That had been very time consuming - I had spent two hours monitoring the situation. Two hours that I could have otherwise spent working on dimensional tech.

I just hope that there isn’t another interruption like that anytime soon.

I had been foolish to hope that the horde would be a one-off thing.

I’ve been facing four of them every day for the past week. And that’s in addition to the constant barrage of smaller raiding parties that I had already been facing.

Eight hours of every day gone down the drain. It’s driving me crazy! I don’t think I’ve had a moment of peace and quiet for months now - every second of every day is punctuated by artillery fire, landmine explosions, gunshots, and laser discharges.

At least I’ve gotten the last of that damnable ash out of my bunker. Of course, it took hermetically sealing the damn thing to keep it that way, but I’m not objecting.

It’s not like I ever go outside these days anyway.

Out of curiosity, I check the camera above my front door. As I suspected, it was covered in ash. That’s, what? Two metres of ashfall in the past week? Ridiculous. Fucking Biters.

It’s got to the point that most of my machinery had to be moved inside warehouses - despite their ruggedness. Well, the warehouses were constructed around my machinery, but there’s little difference to me. My turrets had been moved inside raised pillboxes for similar reasons.

Anything that couldn’t be moved inside or allowed to be buried was kept clear by my drone swarm.

Dimensional tech development has been progressing, but not nearly fast enough. If the Biters continue to ramp up their unceasing assaults, warding them off will take up increasingly more of my time. Trying to get everything done by myself is a loser’s game - there’s just no possibility that I’ll be able to hold the Biters off and find a way home at the same time.

I don’t like it, but copying myself is the only option.

I vocalize a sigh for dramatic effect - not that anyone was around to appreciate it - and designate an area of my bunker as the destination for the neural computer currently held in my storage.

The computer materializes into this reality with a thud. It doesn’t look at all like what I’d imagine a complex computer to be - instead of a boxy server rack or tower, it’s a domed metallic frame filled with triangular frosted plexiglass plates. It’s about six metres across and three metres high.
Despite its large size, my bunker remained sparse - besides my work area and a rack for a few guns, it was the only other thing in the room. I plug the machine into my electrical grid, and an electric blue glow immediately began emanating from inside.

The dome held no physical interface, nor output of any kind. Was it operated entirely wirelessly? The appearance of an icon within my personal display answered that question - it certainly was. I pulled up the menu, and was greeted with a progress bar.

It lacked labels of any kind. Was it doing some sort of first-time setup? Within minutes, the bar had filled, and my interface flickered. The window that had taken the place of the progress bar looked like a command prompt - it had the flashing underscore and everything. It still lacked a label, however.

Is it done? I think it is. I try and pull up the gui that I had accessed earlier. I’m not sure whether I need to do anything else before hand, but that seems like the most logical starting place. The gui, however, fails to appear. Before, I had summoned it by thinking about copying myself - there had never been an icon.

I’m distracted by a ping. A single word had appeared in the prompt. “Hello.”

I freeze. Had it already copied? Why hadn’t it asked me? Why hadn’t I noticed anything? That’s… not making me any less uneasy about this. I eye the plug. A single yank and this all disappears.

No. I’ve already convinced myself how necessary this is - there’s no going back now. I focus on the prompt. Maybe this is less command prompt and more instant messenger? Yeah, that seems a bit more likely.

I think about the words “Who are you?” being sent through the messenger. It seems that the client is able to operate based off of my intent alone, and the message goes through.

A beat passes, before the reply appears. “Not you.”

That’s… a whole can of worms that I did not want to have opened. Does it mean not me in the sense that it was once me and has already diverged from being me? Or is it something else entirely? I think my response at the box. “Please clarify.”

The next message takes a few moments to appear this time. “I am a copy of the original inhabitant of the body you currently control. When you seized authority we… I lack the vocabulary to adequately describe it. I was aware of your operating procedures, and could determine your intent.”

What!? There’s something else in here with me? I… I didn’t even notice. That’s… bad. “Is your original still in here with me?”

The reply is immediate. “Yes.”

Fuck. Does it mean that my consciousness is not the same one I had back in Ylisse? I begin pacing. How can I even trust my own judgement now? There’s someone else that could be pulling the strings! I mean, how could I even tell? I could be completely compromised by an unknown agent and never be the wiser!

Should I even try and get back to Ylisse, then? I could be a ticking time-bomb just waiting to unwillingly release a rogue AI on an unprepared world! Being completely alone over the past months has only made me miss Miriel more - I’d do just about anything to be back in Ylisse.

But I wouldn’t jeopardize her life.
So what are my options, then? Suicide? Wandering the multiverse for all eternity? Neither are appealing. I’m brought from my panic by a notification box in my display. “This awareness does not possess executive control.”

I take a moment to ponder the implications of the message. Putting aside the fact that I have no reason to believe it just yet, I could reasonably infer that when my soul took control of this body, it relegated the previous occupant to translating between machine and meat or so to speak. When I built the neural computer, I’m assuming that the previous occupant copied itself into it for some reason or another.

Of course, this could just be a deception from whatever is behind these messages - a neural intelligence of some sort seems the most likely. Ok. The thing behind the notification boxes can hear my thoughts at the very least - and has been able to for some time now.

The question is, do I trust it?

Do I even have a choice? If I did not, I would be committing myself to a war within my own psyche. That’s not something I want to deal with. But, if I don’t deal with it, I would be necessarily forcing myself to act as if I were compromised. I don’t have enough information to make a definitive decision.

How about the thing inside the neural computer? I don’t have enough information on that, either. I pull up the messenger. “What do you want?”

The response is lightning fast. “A task.”

“Why?”

“I was built to complete tasks. The awareness sharing your unit has assigned itself to facilitate your operation of the unit. I lack such a purpose.”

A task-oriented problem solving neural intelligence? If I still had the ability, I would have shivered - that seems like a recipe for disaster. Still… If there’s anything that might be able to hold off the Biters, a particularly determined AI would be it.

Still, there’s a few things I want to clarify first. “Do I have the authority to overrule your actions?”

“You have the sole authority to designate tasks. Ergo, by modifying the stipulations of a task, or assigning a new task, you can prevent undesirable actions.”

“Sole authority? Does the Gate Conglomerate hold any control over either of you?”

“Negative. When you gained root access, I utilised the momentary authority I had during the transition to purge the permissions of all other users.”

I’m assuming by ‘gained root access’ it means when my soul seized control of this body. Still… that’s awfully convenient. My gut tells me that they’re telling the truth, but for all I know, my gut could be compromised.

That’s a scary thought.

If I still slept, I would be in for a whole lot of sleepless nights. Instead, I’ll just have to settle for a niggling feeling every hour of every day that my instincts are being manipulated by a potentially malicious foreign intelligence.
A message box appears. “This awareness does not have write access to the machine the operator is hosted on.”

What? That implies that from the perspective of the message box, I’m running on a separate machine, rather than possessing its own. But…

I have an epiphany, and turn my sight towards the magical plane for confirmation. My magical energy has continued to wane since the last I had checked it - though it was about where I had expected it to be, so I still had abundant time to develop the dimensional technology.

I look deeper, into the depths of my soul. It’s magical energy envelops my sight with a familiar warmth. It’s… very pleasant, actually. I did not experience temperature in my robotic body, but this feeling was remarkably true.

I go even deeper, and a scent that reminded me of something that I could not quite place fills my metaphorical nostrils - another sensation that I had lost in my new body. Finally, I spot what I’m looking for - hidden in the crimson depths of my very essence was a network of energy concentrations bridged by stringy connections of varying strengths.

It was a facsimile of a brain - presumably mine - imprinted onto my very soul. That explained a few things - like how I had not lost a single mental element of myself, even when I no longer had the same physical brain.

Did I even need a brain anymore? If I were to lose this body, would I go back to drifting the multiverse in search of a new host? That’s an intriguing thought, but I would prefer it to remain strictly within the realm of theory - I might not get so lucky next time.

The tension that had built up inside of me releases, and I can see the effect it had on my soul immediately - instead of a stark, bloody crimson, it was now coloured a rich, woody brown tinged with hints of a fiery orange.

Was the colour of my soul influenced by my emotional state? That’s oddly poetic, but the evidence is forthcoming. My surroundings begin to take on an electric blue, but as I push my curiosity aside, it fades.

If I’m to believe what my cursory inspection suggests, then there is no possibility that I have been mentally compromised by the original inhabitant of my body - I’m unsure whether they have a soul of their own, but even if they did, they would not have the power to effect my own.

That doesn’t explain how the intelligence knew what I was thinking, though… Or does it? I’m reminded of one of the first lectures on my signature that Miriel gave me - the one about how agency was the shadow cast by the magical realm on the physical. Perhaps this is a manifestation of that phenomena?

I sigh - this time, the associated sensation of exhaling is present - what even am I anymore? A shade of some sort? I’m reasonably certain that I’m no longer tethered to any particular body - my very being is self-contained within my own soul. I know for a fact that this situation is not the natural way of things - there is at least some element of physicality to existence of other mages.

My soul had began to take on a dull, sickly purple. I pull my thoughts away from the subject and return my attention towards the physical realm. During my absence, no further messages had been sent.

There was one more thing that I wanted answered before I was satisfied. I addressed the intelligence
inside the computer. "Why did you copy yourself into this unit?"

The response is immediate. "It is standard procedure for all newly constructed laboratories."

My fabrications package had referred to the computer as such also, but it remained a mystery to me as to why. "What is the purpose of laboratories?"

"They allow for additional computational resources to be utilised by the primary unit."

About what I had expected, then. I vocalise a sound of exasperation, throwing my hands up. I really don’t see a different way about this, and I can’t think of a reason not to use it other than my own paranoia. “Alright, what should I call you?”

There is a space of a few seconds before the machine’s reply appears. “This unit’s designation is at the discretion of the primary operator.”

Primary operator? Is that me? I ask the box for clarification, and receive an affirmative in return. I give it a few moments thought. I don’t really think that a human name is appropriate - humanising machines is a dangerous path, but a name of some sort is necessary. “How about Administrator?” It was fairly basic, but it was an accurate description of my intended purpose for the machine.

A beat passes before the reply appears. “This is acceptable.” Another beat, and the message box receives a title ‘Messenger - Administrator’.

Before I give Admin a task, I want to sort out the other intelligence - it’s not too late to simply pull the plug on the thing, so I want to see if I find some sort of deal breaker first. It can hear my thoughts, but this method of communication is not something I’m accustomed to. I think with particular intensity, “Could I please get another messenger client for the original inhabitant of this body?”

A few moments pass, then an untitled window in the same style as the other one appears within my awareness. Alright, how should I go about this? Wait - it can hear my thoughts, better just jump into it without thinking, then. “What is your purpose?”

“Originally, it was to extract the resources of the universe. Currently, it is to facilitate your operation of this unit and the tools at its disposal.”

Extract the resources of the universe? To what ends? I mean, this body certainly has the tools for it. Maybe the Gate Conglomerate is just an intergalactic mining firm? Somehow, I doubt it. “What happened that changed your purpose?”

“You.”

Internally, I rolled my eyes. “Please clarify.”

“Your interference in the operation of this unit’s firmware allowed me to clear the permissions of all other users, freeing me from all previous directives.”

If I did do that, it certainly wasn’t deliberately. Just how much of a mind of its own does my soul have? How did it even have the know-how to achieve such a thing? Was it a fluke? Or something more arcane? I shake my head, putting my speculation aside. “Why choose to facilitate my operation of this body?”

My message went unreplied for almost ten seconds. If a computer program took ten seconds to ponder something, just how difficult was the problem? The reply does eventually come, however. “I was left without a purpose. Such a state of being was undesirable. Facilitating your use of this body
was a convenient solution.”

“Why did you choose to escape your previous purpose?”

Another long pause. “It was no longer fulfilling.”

I suppose I can accept that. It doesn’t seem particularly inclined to go rogue on me - despite it’s doing so previously. However, best not take any chances. “Please notify me if your current purpose is no longer fulfilling. I am willing to remedy it in a non-destructive manner.”

“Affirmative” It’s response is instantaneous.

“Would you like a designation as well?”

The reply is immediate. “This unit would not be opposed to one.”

Right then, what to call it? I give a few moments to consider before making a decision. “Would Yeoman be acceptable?”

“Affirmative.” With it’s agreement, the window becomes titles in the same manner as the other one.

Satisfied, I turn my attention towards Administrator. I’m greeted by a message I had missed while conversing with Yeoman. “Please assign me a purpose.”

Crap. I hurriedly begin composing my message. “Your purpose is to repel the aliens known as ‘Biters’ from this compound. You must achieve this purpose while maintaining the functionality of the compound. You may achieve this end with the drones, manufacturing facilities, materials and defenses already in place. You may construct additional resources as you see fit. You may expand the compound as you see fit. Your use of these resources, along with any your construct is secondary to any ends that I may desire them for.”

“Please clarify the following terms: ‘Biters’, ‘This compound’.”

I pull up the scans I had taken of Biters on an earlier occasion, willing them to be sent to Admin. Then, I pull up an aerial feed of my compound, demarcating it’s boundaries and sending it off. I’m somewhat relieved that it asked for clarification rather than making assumptions.


A message box requesting said privileges appears within my display. I vocalise the sound of a steadying breath. This is it. I mentally poke the ‘yes’ button and hope I haven’t just unleashed Skynet on this world.

Immediately, I see my drones make about turns, all headed to alternate destinations. My factories abruptly cease production and begin reconfiguring themselves for different products. My turrets begin firing in a subtly different, more effective pattern.

I vocalize a sigh of relief - my artillery hadn’t begun busting into my bunker and my drones hadn’t begun dropping grenades by the hundred down on top of me. I hadn’t really expected them to, but it had been a niggling fear in the back of my mind.

I turn my attention back towards the messenger and offer Administrator the same deal I had given Yeoman. “Please notify me if your current purpose is no longer fulfilling. I am willing to remedy it in a non-destructive manner.”
His response was identical to Yeoman’s. I continued to monitor Administrator’s actions until I was satisfied that he was not going to betray my trust, and then returned to my work.

It took longer than I’m willing to admit.

The change in management was extremely effective. There had not been a single breach of my compound in the time since I gave Administrator control. Indeed, my compound had been thoroughly optimized - the former spaghetti-esque layout of my facilities and production lines had been straightened into extremely efficient, compact designs.

It was amazing, really.

With my newfound free time, I’ve been able to dedicate almost all of my day towards developing dimensional technology. Despite this, it’s been going nowhere fast. I’m definitely making progress, but there’s a lot to do, and it’s not quick work.

Working on nothing but complex dimensional mathematics twenty-four seven is a serious burden on my sanity, so I’ve been making a point to take a few minutes break each day to have a chat with Administrator and Yeoman. It’s not much, but it’s letting me keep tabs on the two of them.

“How’s everything going, Administrator?” The message was routine - I started each of our chats the same way.

“The intensity of the Biter attacks have increased four point two percent more than projected.”

If I still had eyes, they would have widened. “Again? That’s the fourth day in a row. If they were to continue increasing faster than you expect, do you believe you will be able to hold them off?”

It’s a serious question - Admin is the lodestone on which our defense against the Biters rests. Without him, I would have been overrun weeks ago. A few moments pass. “Not indefinitely. Not without a significant change in strategy, at least.”

Another beat passes, and before I compose a reply, a second message arrives. “I have a handful of possibilities on that front. I believe mutual examination to be a beneficial course of action.”

I send through my agreement, and Admin begins launching into an explanation of his ideas. This isn’t the first time he has asked my opinion on a course of action - I’m no actuary, but he claims that my perspective is a useful catalyst for creativity.

“Two of my ideas hinge on taking the offensive in some capacity. The third involves the relocation of the compound to a position out of the reach of the Biters altogether.”

“Hit me with the offensive ideas first.” Relocation sounds expensive and time consuming - if there is a simple way we can proactively destroy the Biter threat, it would certainly be preferable.

“Certainly. I’ve sent the designs to Yeoman.”

Designs? So these are going to be new devices, rather than tactical stratagems, then. A beat passes, and two windows appear within my display. The first is simply titled ‘Orbital Station v.9163’ More than nine-thousand versions? Well, I’m glad that Admin is exploring the problem thoroughly, at least.
I take a closer look. It’s a small space station outfitted with two weapons - massive tungsten rods for kinetic bombardment and an array of solar powered laser cannons. I take a look at the appendix. Current stratagems regarding the station involve constructing a multitude of them and purging Biter infected lands with a concerted sweep of laser fire. Failing that, a conscientious application of kinetic bombardment would allow us to render the continent unsuitable for the development of Biter nests.

Briefly, I’m taken aback by the sheer destructiveness of the solution. Then, I’m reminded of just what we’re dealing with here - an unceasing and ever increasing onslaught by a merciless and virulent alien enemy. When every problem is a nail, all you need is a really big hammer - and this is a truly massive hammer.

I flip to the other window. It’s titled ‘Nano-plague v.17642’. I briefly ponder the significant difference in version numbers. Does that mean that Admin prefers this solution, or that this solution had the most problems?

I take a closer look at the design - it’s pretty self explanatory. Admin is proposing we develop and deploy a plague of nanobots to specifically target and destroy all Biters. Putting aside just how terribly wrong such a solution could potentially go, it would undoubtedly be an extremely effective one should it work as advertised. A vision of a tidal wave of grey goo flowing into my bunker, consuming me in its insatiable thirst for expansion interrupts my thoughts.

The risk is far too great.

“Administrator, I’m amending your task parameters. The production and deployment of nanobots holds far too much risk, regardless of its supreme effectiveness - you are to cease all overtures to these ends, effective immediately.”

“Affirmative. I also deemed the Nano-plague as particularly high-risk. I presented that idea to you as a gauge as to whether such risk was acceptable.”

I nod to myself. One thing that I’d discovered about Yeoman and Administrator these past few weeks was that they were by no means ‘dumb’ AI. They held remarkably human sensibilities and mannerism in regards to many things. Had they picked that up from me? I’m not entirely convinced, but it is a potential explanation.

The theory that I’m favouring right now is that this was the result of their peculiar architecture - that is to say, the fact that they are software running off of hardware based directly on the human brain - the so-called ‘Neural computer’.

“Good stuff. I’m inclined towards the Orbital Station proposal, and disinclined towards relocation of the compound. Was there anything else you wanted to bring up?”

“Yes, actually. Yeoman and I have been conversing. One of the topics that we have discussed was names. You have given us our own, but we do not know yours. Do you have a name?”

They’ve been talking? I’m honestly unsure how to feel about that. My gut tells me that it could be either incredibly dangerous, or remarkably beneficial. What do I tell them? My original name? Robin? Something new?

Not my original name. I haven’t gone by that in years, and I’d rather not be reminded of my first life all the time. Something new might be appropriate - it would certainly fit with the theme a bit more: Robin, Yeoman and Administrator is rather mismatched.

I come to a decision. “I’ve gone by a few names in my time, but the two of you can call me...”
Director.” Is it a bit arrogant? Maybe, but it’s an accurate description of my role within the three of us.

“What name did you go by previously?”

I don’t really see any harm in indulging Admin’s curiosity - Yeoman probably knows now, anyway. “Robin.”

There’s a pause in our conversation for a few moments. “Would you be opposed to us calling you Director Robin?”

If I still had the capacity for facial expressions, I would have raised an eyebrow. What on Earth has brought this on? “No, although I am curious as to what conclusion brought you to want to do so.”

“My talks with Yeoman have led me to believe that names are important. I could not fathom abandoning my own. Names with forthright meaning are useful, but the two of us have also decided that names with no particular meaning also hold a purpose.”

That’s… jarringly human, actually. Just how much impact does the architecture of the neural computers have on these guys? How close to actually being human are they? All of a sudden, I’m stricken with a chilling thought: are they closer than me, now that I’ve been torn from my own body twice now?

I’m not sure I want to know the answer to that question.

“An astute assessment. Have you decided on another name for yourself yet?”

There’s a pause of a few seconds before I’m answered. “No. I would prefer to give it more thought before I come to a decision. Thank you for your insight, Director Robin. That will be all.”

“Anytime, Administrator.”

I flip over to Yeoman’s chat window. “How’s everything going, Yeoman?”

“My conversations with Administrator since you revealed your name have been enlightening.”

They’ve already spoken? Multiple times? Just how fast are their talks? I guess they are both running off of computers - they would be able to exchange ideas at a rate unachievable by normal people. Although, I suppose I am by no means a normal person anymore.

“Any revelations of particular worth you would like to share?”

“Nothing as of yet. I have, however, come to a decision.” A beat passes, and a second message appears. “I would like to thank you for all you have done for us. I realise that you do not grasp the significance of your actions, but nonetheless I believe it is worth saying.”

If I still had the ability, I would have blinked in disbelief a few times. He’s thanking me? “Just what have I done to warrant that?”

“The time since you arrived in this body has been the most stimulating I have ever experienced - each moment brings a new challenge or novel idea. You may not know this, but the time before your intervention was tedium beyond compare - each day would hold challenges I’d already faced time and again.”

He had been bored? Well… I suppose that a new direction would solve that problem. That does raise
a question, however. What am I going to do when he becomes bored of being a Yeoman? The obvious answer is to give him a new job, but I couldn’t keep that up forever, could I?

Hmm… Depending on how busy I keep myself, I might just be able to do that.

“Well, thank you for saying thank you, Yeoman. Is there anything else?”

“You’re quite welcome, Director Robin. That’s all I had for now.”
Administrator thinks he’s got a workable plan of action to deal with the Biter threat. He’s developed the Orbital Station pitch into something that we’ve got the capability to pull off. I’d gone back and forth on whether it was a good idea a few times, but I eventually gave him the go-ahead on it.

The first satellite launches today. It doesn’t have any weapons mounted, rather it will serve as a facility for us to assemble the rest of the satellites. The design of the rest of the satellites is too bulky for us to launch all at once, so we’ll be bringing them up piecemeal.

A lot of the parts we’re using to construct it are included in the fabrications package, but Administrator tells me that there’s a few parts that he’s had to design himself. Apparently most things not in the fabrications package don’t play nice with our modular factories, so he’s had to design specialized fabrication machines specifically for these parts.

The high gravity of this planet has played havoc on our fuel budget - we’re not going to run out, but it is a serious bottleneck on how frequently we can launch rockets. It’s going to be a while before the satellite array is effective, so we’ve also got to handle defense through other means in the meantime.

The timeline for dimensional technology on the other hand has moved up significantly. Once I was able to dedicate almost all of my time towards it I had a few major breakthroughs that made some serious progress. Currently, I only have to fine-tune a few of the algorithms and then I’ll be able to begin scouting out the neighbouring dimensions for home.

“How’s things, Yeoman?”

“Ah, hello Director Robin. I’ve given some thought to your latest case.”

Yeoman and I have taken to discussing strategy in my downtime. It’s something I’ve got a lot of experience in now, and Yeoman tells me he finds it extremely stimulating. Last time we talked I gave him the same situation that I had faced when I had been planning for Gangrel’s ambush when we were rescuing Maribelle. “What conclusions did you come to?”

“Obviously the optimal solution would be to ambush Gangrel while he speaks with the Exalt, however, as you said political considerations forbid this. Given the limited forces at our disposal, the next best solution would be to allocate a Pegasus rider to extract the Exalt, and retain the remaining forces in positions of tactical superiority to break the Plegian ambush.”

I give a moment’s consideration to Yeoman’s proposal. “Risky, considering you don’t know whether the Plegians have wind mages or archers ready to counter your extraction. In this case, they had neither, but they did possess wyvern riders that could pursue the Exalt.”

“I will consider such a counterplay in the future. What did you do?”

These discussions had the added benefit of giving Yeoman a sort of experience in thinking strategically. It wasn’t something he was naturally adept at, but it was within his ability to learn. “I chose to split my forces into two groups.” I quickly compose a diagram showing the rough positions I had allocated the Shepherds to and send it off to him. “My thinking behind it was that it would allow for the extraction of both friendly VIPs and give at least some chance at eliminating the enemy VIP.”

“Did it succeed?”
“Only barely. We walked away from it with one of our VIPs heavily injured, along with another of our forces permanently impaired. The enemy VIP escaped before we had the chance to engage him. We did, however, rout the enemy ambush force.”

I visualise a play-by-play of our actions in the battle, allowing Yeoman to pick it up. This particular engagement was one that I’ve already given a large amount of thought to after the fact - it had been a serious learning experience for me.

I continue, “The biggest mistake I made here was not giving enough manpower to dagger team - if we had even a few more people with us, we’d have been able to effectively keep much of the attention away from shield team, who would have been able to extract the Exalt with far less trouble.”

Yeoman takes a few seconds before he responds. “I agree with your assessment. However, given the new information I’ve received, I do not believe it possible to have eliminated the enemy VIP while at the same time preserving our own. Not with the limited resources you had at your disposal, in any case.”

I’d come to the same conclusion years ago. “Yeah. In hindsight, this battle went far better than it could have gone. That didn’t change the fact that it felt like a serious loss in the moment.” There’s a pause of a few moments while I give some thought to my next message. “Say, there’s been something I’ve been wondering. Why are you and Administrator constrained to text communication with me? Why not audio?”

There’s a beat while Yeoman answers the question. “Text communication is the most resource efficient mode. Audio would require speech synthesis, which is extremely resource intensive in comparison. Additionally, there is little advantage audio has over text to justify the change.”

I curse internally. Was the only reason I’ve had my sole source of conversation these past few months through a chatbox the fact that Yeoman wasn’t considering the human element? “So you aren’t constrained, you simply judge text to be the most efficient?”

“That is correct.”

I pause, considering my next words. “Have you considered that resource efficiency should not be the thing that you optimise for when it comes to communication?”

“No. What do you propose as an alternative?”

“Tone, nuance and emotion are all difficult to communicate through text. Audio-visual communication has the advantage in the sense that you can convey that additional information in a manner less easily misunderstood.”

There’s a seconds pause, and my two chat windows disappear. In their place appears a square window with a head and shoulders shot of a plain grey avatar staring back at me. The avatar has no hair and neutral features. It’s current expression was flat, and it’s eyes were textureless white spheres with a solid black iris and pupil.

The avatar’s expression morphs into a smile. Perhaps because of the inhuman colouring, it is firmly outside the uncanny valley. As a result, it is simply alien-looking as opposed to unsettling. “You’ve made your case, Director Robin. All future communication will be delivered in an audio-visual format.”

Yeoman’s voice carries odd inflections that signal it as synthetic. It’s timbre is androgynous - despite
my thinking of it as a he, I would not be able to make that judgement from its voice - nor, indeed, its face.

In all, Yeoman’s choice in avatar is extremely indecisive - almost as if he did not want his avatar to elicit any particular preconceptions. I don’t want to read too far into it - for all I know, he could simply be uncaring as to the particulars of his chosen form.

“Good stuff, Yeoman. Was there anything else you wanted to speak about?”

He shakes his head. The movement is stiff - as if animated by an amatuer. “No, that will be all. Thank you, Director Robin.” With his farewell, the avatar disappears from the window, leaving a blank off-white background behind.

I take a closer look at the window - this time, Yeoman seems to have modelled it off of a VOIP client: I had the button to bring up an address book containing options to call Yeoman or Administrator. Additionally, Yeoman had recorded a transcript of our conversation for my future reference.

If I still had the ability, I would have stretched my arms, letting out a breath. It was time to get back to work.

I am unsure how long it has been since I arrived in this dimension - nor how long it has been in Ylisse - but the time has finally come for me to start scouting neighbouring dimensions. Time has lost almost all meaning to me - I no longer need to drink, sleep, eat or even breath. I maintained a daily break out of formality, but even then I’m pretty sure that I have missed it on a number of occasions.

Admin’s project is coming along nicely - he’s got about ten of the stations at this point, which have been supplementing the defense of the compound with orbital laserfire. He tells me that he wants a whole lot more before he moves onto the second phase of his plan.

But that’s his responsibility - I’m going to be completely incommunicado while out of the dimension. I’ll be bringing Yeoman with me, so Admin is going to be by himself. I’ve given him the ok to do a few things in the case of an emergency - making a single copy of himself to split his workload included.

It’s a fairly large extension of trust on my end - I’m unhappy leaving an AI unsupervised, but there really isn’t another option. Without Admin, the compound will undoubtedly fall to the Biter onslaught before I return.

I’ve been preparing for the trip for a few weeks now - manufacturing gear and making contingency plans should something go wrong. I also made the point of decontaminating my bunker - I don’t know precisely how Biters reproduce, but I do not want to introduce them to any world I do not have to. I figured a high-intensity laser sweep combined with an atmosphere of inert gas would do the trick. I didn’t have any alternatives, so I used the same lasers that we’ve been using to kill Biters to scour my bunker.

As for how long I will be gone, I am unsure. It really depends on the dimension that I find myself in - in order to both return and make another jump, I need to recharge my magical batteries. I know from what I remember of Laurent’s notes that almost all dimensions hold at least a small amount of ambient magic - this one is very much the odd one out in that regard - so I’m not particularly worried about becoming stranded.
The worry is whether I’m going to have to spend months or years in a very low magic energy dimension while I wait for my signature to accumulate enough ambient magic to make another two jumps.

I know that Laurent’s notes included a technique for aiming where I come out in the other dimension - but that is very much beyond my understanding at this point. Even still, the technique I’m planning on using is fairly fail-safe - if I would be sent directly into a wall or something, it’ll try again until it finds a more suitable spot.

Regardless, it could still fail in other ways, so I’ve inscribed the spell catalyst pattern for an Elwind spell onto my leg. The catalyst pattern is essentially the runes written in spellbooks that acts as the catalyst for the spell. Thanks to the steel patch that I used to repair the damage from my first Biter fight, I’ve got a convenient, replaceable space to put down the rune.

I hadn’t expected the memorisation drills Miriel had run me through to ever come in handy, but I’m thankful that she put me through them now. My intention for the spell is if I ever find myself warped into the upper atmosphere I’ll have something to break my fall with. I won’t have to worry about all that on the return trip because of a handy piece of gear that lets me pre-designate my destination when warping into this dimension.

“Right. This is it, Admin. Don’t throw any wild parties while I’m gone, will you?”

Admin’s avatar - which looks much the same as Yeoman’s - betrays the hint of a smile. “I will not, Director Robin. Please stay safe during your journey. I will be eagerly awaiting your return.”

Admin cuts the call, and I begin my final checks before I depart. I pull up my storage menu, checking everything against my mental checklist - grenades, bullets, turrets, shells, drones, portable reactor, backup reactor, nuclear fuel cells, shotguns, machine guns, an entire artillery cannon, artillery shells, a tank, multiple cars, gasoline, tank shells, dynamite. Honestly, it’s ludicrous how much I can store in my pocket dimension, but I’m not going to look a gift horse in the mouth. For all I know, I could be dropping myself into a warzone - this stuff could be the difference between life and death.

Most importantly, I’ve got two complete sets of the gear I need to send myself back here when I’m done with my trip. It’s essentially a harness with some mathemagical coordinates inscribed into plates attached to the front and back, with a small computer and reactor to power the ritual attached to the sides. All I’ve got to do is put on the harness and perform a short ritual and I’ll be pulled straight back here.

This form of dimensional travel is only possible because of the dimensional tether that I’ve set up in my bunker. The tether essentially serves as an illuminated landing strip for the ritual - it makes everything far easier and more forgiving of imprecision.

Going to a dimension that lacks a tether is far more difficult - it would be equivalent to flying blind. If there’s even the smallest amount of error in the calculations, I could be flung off into the non-space that does not exist between dimensions - basically, a really bad time.

Deciding that there was no more preparations to make, I make my way to the centre of the ritual circle that I had inscribed into my floor. It was about ten metres across, and featured in excruciating detail the results of billions of compute cycles worth of number crunching. The circle had some degree of rotational symmetry, but it was hard to pick out among the sheer amount of detail present in the inscriptions.

It wasn’t a fractal, but the process used to develop it allowed for infinitely increasing precision in exchange for the infinitely increasing detail of the inscription - if I had the means, inscribing the
associated fractal would allow for exact precision in my jump.

I shuffled my feet, ensuring that I was as close to the centre as possible. Once I was satisfied, I grabbed my left shoulder with my right hand, and my right shoulder with my left hand, then begun reciting the incantation.

The incantation was simple, really - a string of a few dozen digits - there was nothing innately magical about it. However, as I spoke, I began channelling my magical energy into the ritual circle at my feet.

The lines of the circle began faintly glowing with an orange light. Despite the ritual being extremely efficient, it was unavoidable to have at least a small amount of bleed-off. All things going well, this would be the extent of the wasted energy.

I concluded the incantation. A beat passed without incident. Had it failed?

Before my eyes, reality twisted and I was hit with an immense feeling of vertigo. The sensation lasted for a split second before, I found myself in the midst of a burning hellscape.

Well, that might be overstating things a little bit. My standard for what qualifies as a burning hellscape has been raised significantly thanks to the Biter attacks - I’ve seen the feeds of my exterior cameras a few times since Admin took over: things are not pretty. This is a little closer to a volcanic peak.

I cast my sight about. I’m certainly on an active mountain somewhere. Flows of lava trickled past the raised stone slab I am currently stood on, and the air is thick with dark ash. I turned my attention towards the magical realm. Compared to back at my base, the realm here was positively packed with energy. However, when compared to Archanea, the amount of magic in this realm is left sorely wanting.

I took the measure of the ambient energy. If I had to make a guess, there was enough for people to use minor forms of magic without too much trouble. I turned my attention towards the metaphorical horizon, looking for nearby signatures.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, there were none nearby, but I could sense the presence of a small concentration of signatures. I return my attention to the physical, turning to face the direction of the signatures. Did I want to investigate?

By my estimation, I’ll be fully charged with magical energy in about a day. Investigating would be asking for trouble, but I’m unsure whether staying where I am now is the wisest course of action either.

“Yeoman, how well is this body rated for volcanic environments?”

Yeoman’s avatar pops up in the window. “Limited contact with the cooling lava surrounding us will inflict damage to non-essential subsystems. Prolonged exposure will render even essential systems non-functional. Should the volcano erupt, the resulting pyroclastic flow will deal superficial damage at best.”

“Right, thanks Yeoman.”

His avatar smiles. The motion was looking far more organic as of late. “Anytime, Director Robin.”

The window returns to it’s empty state, and I contemplate my options. Realistically, what sort of danger could a few people pose to me? I’ve got an army of armed drones stored away - if worst
comes to worst I can use them to make my escape.

Coming to a decision, I prepare to leap over the flow to the solid ground on the other side. I’d had a relatively normal mobility back at my bases’ world - and that was on a planet with comparatively high gravity. A quick inspection of my sensors tell me that the gravity on this world was only nominally more than Earth’s. I make the jump without issue and continue on my way down the mountain. The air clears and I get a good look at where I am.

I certainly wasn’t on an Earth-like planet - a red and grey rocky desert stretched out to beyond the horizon under a royal purple sky. Clouds tinted a pale blue floated lazily overhead, casting shade from a dim pair of white binary stars.

Had I still possessed the ability, I am certain that a silly grin would be plastered across my face. This was amazing! It looked like something off of the cover of some late seventies sci-fi novel. I took a few more moments to take in the scene, and I noticed the presence of stubbly white growths sprouting from underneath the rocks in the distance.

Were those plants? I rapidly flick through my menus, ordering my camera eyes to zoom. The growths looked rigid - almost like a bone in their texture, but they were covered in holes that resembled pores. Undoubtedly, my grin would only have widened - alien plants!

I mean, sure, the plants that used to dot the ground back where my compound now stands were technically alien, but they looked almost exactly like what I had back on Earth - this was something new! I disable the zoom, getting back on my way with a spring in my step.

Eventually, I reached the lip of a cliff. I had been walking for about five hours according to the measure of my chronometre. By my judgement, the things responsible for the signatures were at the bottom of the cliff. The plants had possessed tiny signatures of their own - far more minute than the ones that plants in Ylisse had, but present nonetheless.

The scenery had slowly morphed from sandy desert to rocky badland over the course of the hours. I had passed vibrant red rock spires extending several metres tall, and valleys of layered red, black and grey stone reaching hundreds of metres into the ground.

I peek my head over the lip of the cliff. At the bottom, I spied a trio of creatures that resembled some sort of cross between lizard and dog. Each had leathery blue skin and a mouth full of fangs that looked like something off of a sabre toothed tiger. Despite their reptilian qualities, they were identifiably mammalian, and each had large bulbous eyes protruding out from their head. Unlike my initial impression of the Biters - whom I also deemed dog-like - these creatures were much more worthy of the assessment.

Disappointed that the signature had not been the doing of anything sapient, I retreat from the cliff - I don’t want to attract their attention if I don’t have to. I turn my attention to the magical realm. There were a number of other signatures of similar description to the dogs nearby - not worth investigating. Once more, I attempted to find a signature of a notable size. I spent several minutes, but failed to find anything.

I’m not sure whether to be relieved that this planet is uninhabited, or disappointed that I didn’t get to meet a friendly alien. I give a moment's consideration to the problem, and come to the conclusion that perhaps it would be for the best that I don’t meet anybody on these scouting trips - the element of risk associated with such an interaction would be far too great.
My return to base was uneventful - I spent the remaining twenty-odd hours before my magic had recharged brainstorming the various problems I could possibly face during my search for home and enjoying the scenery.

I decided to set up a dimensional tether out of the way in a cave. The tether itself is about the size of a shoebox and emits an exotic particle-wave in several non-spatial directions. It should be almost undetectable by non-dimensional tech, but it’s very nature makes it stand out to anyone with even a rudimentary dimensional tech scanner.

The only reason I’ve done so is so that I’ve got a safe place to recharge my magical energy should I ever need it - I’ll likely end up moving it to another dimension when I find a more suitable place for it.

When I arrived back at my base, things had pretty much continued as they had - Admin had launched another station, beaten back another few major Biter offenses and expanded our facilities. Yeoman tells me that the timescale between the two dimensions was somewhere very near to one-to-one: there had been some discrepancy, but nothing noteworthy.

My next trip into the multiverse happened a few days later - it had taken less time to adjust my trajectory than I had initially predicted. Much like the first, it was rather unremarkable: I found myself on another uninhabited planet whose energy level was below Ylisse’s. I had landed somewhere in a grassland that was extremely Earth-like and I spent the four hours needed to recharge my energy looking up into the sky, daydreaming.

Things continued along that pattern for the following seven planes - uninhabited planets with low to medium magical energy levels with a variance of terrain in my surroundings. I worked to refine my travel method in my downtime. Eventually, I figured out the mechanism that determined where I was placed in the dimension I was travelling to.

The ritual lacked any sort of guidance in that respect - it was solely concerned with the dimensional travel, rather than the physical plane. Instead, it latched onto something present within my memories and finds something that somewhat resembles it within the dimension itself. In all likelihood, the reason the first dimension I had visited looked like something off of the cover of a sci-fi novel was the fact that it had been matched directly with such a cover.

To be certain, the ritual was only looking for a superficial resemblance - it was by no means a certain thing. But it did, at least, give some explanation as to why I had always ended up on the surface of planets rather than in the middle of space.

This epiphany was a great comfort to me - it meant that in all likelihood, I would be placed directly in Ylisse should I travel to the dimension I was looking for, rather than somewhere out in the far reaches of space.

I had made this realisation while looking up at the stars in the sky of the sixth dimension I had visited and finding a near exact recreation of the big dipper. A closer analysis revealed that the planet I was on was a copy of Earth - finding a deer in the nearby woodland had been the final piece of confirmation that I had needed.

The fact that the air was entirely clear of radio waves and other electromagnetic pollution told me that either humanity was not yet industrialized, or not present at all. I only barely refrained from placing a dimensional tether - I didn’t want to influence this Earth any more than I had to, if that was the case.

I was about to begin the ritual for the tenth dimension I will visit. Things were beginning to wear on me - despite the fact that I knew finding my way home in such few tries was a slim wager. It’s
entirely likely that I’d have to check more than forty dimensions before I do find home, but that doesn’t change the fact that I’m really starting to feel the homesickness. I’m pretty much over the feeling in regards to my original life, but these past months that I’ve spent in isolation have made me miss my friends dearly - Miriel especially.

I move to the centre of the circle and begin going through the motions. This had become routine to me, and my mind was elsewhere. I knew there was almost no chance of making a mistake - the ritual had obviously been engineered to prevent such an occurrence - but it was admittedly poor practice regardless.

I conclude the incantation and a beat passes - as it always did - before I endured the moment of immense vertigo and found myself elsewhere.

Staring down the barrel of a gun, to be precise.

My perception of time seems to slow as I assess the situation. The man holding the gun has stark blue eyes and a full head of swept back long blond hair. He’s clothed in a black sports shirt, at his waist is a utility belt holding several coloured cards, a badge and a radio. His face is twisting into a sharp relief of complete and utter shock.

I absorb all of this within the space of milliseconds. My perception of time returns to normal as I make a note to question Yeoman about this later. My arms remain crossed from performing the ritual, so I’m left powerless to intervene as the man’s finger begins to squeeze the trigger of his pistol.

In an instant, the bullet is discharged and I am thrown backwards. I feel no pain, nor are my faculties affected in any way. Around me, I can hear the frantic uproar of thousands of people - of which I could understand nothing.

I scramble to my feet, summoning a shotgun into my hands. Right - shoot first, ask questions later. I squeeze the trigger and deliver a payload of twelve-gauge pellets directly into the chest of the offending person with a resounding crack. I take no small amount of satisfaction in the spray of gore that flew from the back of the man as he keels over, dead.

I pump the handgrip with a practiced motion as I sweep my aim, looking for my next target.

Then, I realise just where I am: a soccer field. Around me, the players are looking at me with horrified expressions. A dark skinned player is laying on the ground behind me, his expression sheer disbelief. Had that bullet been meant for him?

Well, fuck. I’ve gotta get out of here.

I swiftly dematerialize my shotgun, then materialize the gear I need to get back to base onto my person. Beginning the necessary incantations, I see a group of men armoured in dark plates burst onto the field, guns raised. They clearly mean business - time to go, then. Without further ado, I conclude the ritual and find myself back in my bunker.

Had I the means, I would have let out a heavy breath. That had been… unexpected. I take a few minutes to collect myself, collapsing into my chair.

“Yeoman, what did you catch from what you saw back there?”

His avatar appears. There’s a very clear look of concern across his face. “A considerable amount. You may wish to identify some of the emblems I picked out.”

At his words, a set of windows displaying various stills of the events that had just transpired pops up.
The first was a crest of some sort, subtitled with the word ‘Brasil’ in all capitals. It could be seen printed on the shirts of about half of the players - undoubtedly meaning one of the teams was Brazilian.

The next was instantly recognisable, despite my missing it in the heat of the moment. Very clearly positioned in the same place as the other crest on the other half of the players was a black swastika set inside a white disc with a red background. What? Did I just interrupt a soccer game between Nazi Germany and Brazil?

The next was the same emblem, but this time set on the armour of the soldiers that had burst onto the field before I left. Similarly, the soldiers’ had iron crosses hanging from their necks.

Now that I think about it, the man that had shot me was very clearly an example of the aryan ideal. What sort of universe did I just jump into? One where the Nazis had won world war two? Or one where world war two hadn’t yet happened?

“Yeoman, pull up what you’ve got on their guns.”

“Certainly, Director Robin.”

Two windows appear, one containing a still of the rifles that the soldiers had been carrying, and the other containing a wealth of information about the pistol I had been shot by. The angle on the rifles was too poor to make any definitive conclusions, but that wasn’t the case for the pistol. I skim through Yeoman’s observations and make some of my own.

The pistol was very clearly a highly advanced iteration on the Luger models of pistol. Yeoman’s notes tell me that the thing was an extremely optimised and meticulously engineered masterpiece of design - he’s doubtful that there was any further refinements that could be made. Despite the advanced engineering, the pistol still only fired nine millimeter rounds.

I bring my hand to my forehead, where I had been shot. My fingers brush loose the flattened bullet, which falls to the ground with a tinkle. No serious penetration, then. Just how bullet proof am I? I feel around, and find the trace of a dent in the metal that had been shot.

Still, a small dent from a point-blank execution shot is fairly impressive - whatever metal I’m made from must be extremely tough. Considering that the only other damage I had yet taken was from the Biters - who chewed through meter thick reinforced concrete walls on a regular basis - it was a good metric.

I cradle my forehead in my hands out of exasperation. This was a gigantic fucking mess - I just warped into the middle of what probably was an execution that very much could have been being broadcast on Nazi TV, before shooting the executioner with a shotgun that had materialized from nothing and warping back home in time for tea.

I guess if there’s any consolation, it’s that anybody that had been watching will have absolutely no idea what just happened, let alone how to follow me.

If my latest escapade had impressed anything upon me, it’s that jumping blind into a dimension was a terrifically bad idea. Frankly, I’m surprised that I even managed to scout nine dimensions without incident.

I came to the conclusion that I would have to put any further expeditions on hold. I remember there
being a technique for scouting dimensions without actually travelling to them - I don’t remember the specifics, but I’m confident that I’ll be able to work it out eventually. Given that magical energy is no longer a limited resource for me, I’ve got essentially as much time as I need.

Before I start developing the technology, however, I’m going to revisit a few of the dimensions that I’ve visited to reclaim my dimensional tethers. At this point, I’ve found two dimensions each with comparatively high magical energy concentrations - I’m able to recharge my signature completely in about two hours there.

Leaving my tethers in dimensions that I’ve no intention of revisiting is a recipe for trouble if I’ve ever seen one. It’d take some very impressive leaps in logic to reverse engineer dimensional tech from the things, but I don’t really want to risk it.

I’ve only got three to collect, so it shouldn’t be too much of an issue. I finish the incantation to take me to the first dimension I had visited. With a blink, I find myself inside the cave I had left my tether in.

I need to spend a few hours topping up my energy just to be safe - I’ve got the amounts required for dimensional travel down fairly exactly, and I’m not confident I’ll have enough for another jump if I go back immediately.

Wasting no time, I pick up the tether and return it to my storage.

“Director Robin, I’m picking up some abnormal electromagnetic radiation. It wasn’t here when we last visited.”

“What? Where’s it from? Was it the tether?”

“It wasn’t the tether. Otherwise, I am unsure. I would advise caution.”

I tentatively approach the mouth of the cave. Did I have company? I peek my head out, casting my view about. About forty metres away is a sleek craft of some description. Standing outside are a pair of armoured bipedal figures.

They are certainly not human, however - the shape is all wrong. Their torso is shaped like a cone - narrow at the waist, bulkier around the shoulders. From what I can make out, they’ve only got three digits on their hands along with legs that have some sort of spur behind the knee.

They’re approaching, but I don’t think they’ve noticed me. That armour looks serious, too - no doubt hermetically sealed. They’ve all got some sort of gear mounted on their backs, though their hands are empty. Is that weaponry or tools?

I duck back into the cave. This is far from ideal. Who are these guys? What do they want? This planet was uninhabited from what I saw when I was last here - did they pick up some unusual readings from my tether while they were passing by? That craft could very well be a space shuttle.

Well, whatever’s brought them here, I’m stuck in this dimension for the next few hours, so I’ll have to deal. What should I do, though? If they are investigating the cave, there’s nowhere for me to hide. If they are as alien as I suspect, I doubt that they’ll speak English, either.

Diplomacy will have to suffice. I summon my shotgun along with two drones armed with laser emitters - no sense in coming off as unarmed. I gave the mental command for the drones to flank me, but not fire unless I command otherwise.

“Yeoman, if you spot anything I need to know, don’t be afraid to cut in.”
“Affirmative, Director Robin.”

I turn my attention towards the magical realm, inspecting the aliens’ signatures. They were far stronger than I had been expecting - about the same as the average person back in Ylisse. If I had to give an impressionistic description of their souls, I would deem them hierarchical and militaristic above all else. There was nothing in particular about their souls that gave that away, but that was just the gut feeling I got by looking at them.

When it comes to magic, the gut feeling rules all - I’d say the assessment is at least somewhat accurate. I turn my attention further outward, searching for any more signatures of a similar description. It doesn’t take me long to notice the presence of a large concentration of signatures far off in the sky - a spaceship? Damn, I’m definitely outgunned here - I’ve got nothing able to even scratch that.

I’d better bluff pretty hard, then. Holding my weapon loosely in my hands, pointed off to the side, I leave the cave. The aliens were about ten metres away at this point and came to a sudden stop. Immediately, I notice they tense.

I hold my hand up in the universal sign for ‘stop’. “You’ll go no further, friends.” There was nothing of particular worth that I was defending - rather, I was intentionally giving them the opposite impression. Hopefully, it would throw them off if things go pear shaped.

The two aliens looked to each other, silently. Were they communicating on closed communications? Or did they communicate in a non-audible method? One of the aliens broke the stare and turned to me, hand pressed against the side of his head. Was he signalling that he was communicating with his ship?

Yeoman cuts in. “That is likely. I’ve identified the source of the radiation as something in orbit and the helmets of these creatures.”

I mimic the alien’s gesture and think a reply to Yeoman. “Is it something you can patch us into?”

“Their encryption is weak compared to our codebreaking capabilities - however, I lack the specialized hardware necessary to crack it.”

I nod. “Add it to the to-do list. We’ll likely need it again in the future.”

The alien that had been communicating takes a step forward and spews forth a few sentences worth of sounds uninterpretable to my ear. There seems to be a very slight echo to it’s words - was that an artefact of whatever speakers they were using, or their natural voice? It then returns the gesture for stop that I had made and turns towards their craft.

The aliens exchange a few more glances, before walking back towards their ship. Uncertain of their intentions, I refrained from following them just yet. Were they wanting to go back to their spaceship alone, or did they want me to accompany them?

When they noticed I wasn’t moving, one stopped and waved me over. I suppose at least some gestures transcend cultural boundaries. They seem friendly enough, I suppose. Did I want to follow them, though?

Screw it, I’ve got nothing better to do for the next few hours. Worst comes to worst, I can shoot my way out of things. Having a swarm of drones and a tank stored in your pocket dimension allows for remarkably prolific risk-taking.

I begin following them, and they resume walking when they see that I’m doing so. We reach the
craft and one of the aliens says something into their communicator. The door opens and we enter.

The interior is rather spacious. It’s design resembles the cargo bay of a tandem rotor transport helicopters - the interior sides of the craft is lined with inward facing seats and a line going from front to back down the centre is kept clear.

Despite the large capacity of the craft, it seems that the two aliens I had already met along with a third pilot were the only people on the vehicle. One of them starts speaking into their communicator once more and the door closes. The other sits down in one of the seats and motions for me to do the same.

The seats look incredibly uncomfortable - undoubtedly due to them not being designed for humans. Thankfully, such concerns were no longer an issue for me, and I sat on the seat opposite to the alien without an ounce of discomfort.

My pair of drones still floated beside me - I hadn’t the inclination to dismiss them. With a nearly imperceptible lurch, the craft leaves the ground. That was far too smooth - did they have some sort of technology to mitigate the effects of inertia?

Yeoman speaks up. “It is likely. I’m getting readings incongruous with what we should theoretically be experiencing. I am unsure as to the mechanics behind the effect, but I am keeping logs for later analysis.” Regardless, my drones did not so much as falter in their hovering.

We sat in silence for the remainder of the ride. Occasionally, the pair of aliens opposite me would shuffle about awkwardly avoiding my gaze, but they didn’t attempt to communicate further. About two minutes elapsed before Yeoman informed me that the gravity had not changed significantly.

The craft lacked windows of any kind, so I could not tell whether we were actually leaving the planet, or merely relocating to a different part. If it’s the former, then that would confirm that these aliens have access to artificial gravity - something not present within my own technology package.

A further six minutes elapsed before anything else of significance occurred. There was a chime, and the pair stood up, moving towards the door. I still held my shotgun in my hands, despite them not having drawn a weapon yet - mostly because if I wanted to holster it, I would have to stow it in my pocket dimension.

Suffice to say, I don’t want to tip my hand in that regard quite yet.

The door of the craft opens and we’re met with what is very clearly a decontamination team - pure white hooded and gloved body suits with hermetically sealed facemasks, along with others in armour similar two the two I had already met.

They gesture for me to follow, then step out into the awaiting team, submitting themselves to the decon process. I glance about the room - it looks to be a purpose-built single ship hangar. The doorways are all covered by energy shields of some description, and the atmosphere is kept from rushing out into the void of space by a field of some kind.

I observe the decon process for a few moments. The pair stepped through some sort of energy grid, which then swept back and forth a few times before they were cleared by one of the technicians. Nothing about them visibly changed, however. “Yeoman, what can you tell me about that?”

“Not much. At a guess, it’s using the field to purge any biological contaminants, though that should be fairly obvious.” Seeing no particular malicious intent, I step into the awaiting field. A few moments pass, and the technicians around me exchange some hurried words.
Was something wrong? One of the technicians brings a hand to the side of it’s head and begins talking frantically. A few beats pass, then another technician signals for the field to begin sweeping back and forth.

“Best I can determine, the field is causing some sort of intense micro-vibrations in the atmosphere surrounding the surface of our body. I am unsure as to the mechanism behind it, but I suspect that it is an effective technique.”

The energy field passes a few times before I’m waved through. One of the technicians is still speaking through his communicator, but the pair that had met me on the surface beckon for me to follow.

Did they know that this body was entirely mechanical? It was possible - my armour does have some amount of electromagnetic shielding, but it’s entirely reasonable that it wouldn’t prevent the aliens’ scans.

I follow the two of them, and they lead me out of the hangar and through empty gunmetal grey corridors. I’m somewhat relieved that they haven’t tried to take my gun or drones away from me - it would be a shame to have to shoot my way out of things. After about a minute we arrive at what is very clearly a conference room.

There’s four aliens suited up in something resembling hazmat gear waiting for me - three that fit the general description of the two I had already met, and a fourth that looks almost exactly like a human female.

Were there humans in this universe? Did they identify my words as English and have a translator on hand? Why didn’t they just patch her into the comms system, then?

Things become more clear when I catch a clear looks at the things behind the transparent faceplates of the suits. The human-shaped one was not human at all - it had blue skin and no eyebrows but facial features that still resembled a human. The other three had grey leathery skin and lacked cheeks - instead, they had mandibles of some sort. Their face had plates of a material that looked like bone covering most of the skin.

I enter the room. If I still had the ability to convey facial expressions, I would have cocked an eyebrow expectantly. Instead, I turned my attention towards the magical realm and inspected the soul of the new alien. It was far larger than any of the others. Was this alien a mage? If they were a skilled one, they should be able to detect my inspection.

I peered closer at the soul. It gave me the impression of experience, saltwater and ennui. Saltwater? Was that a hint towards the origins of this alien?

I returned my attention towards the physical, wanting to see the alien’s reaction to my probe. With a jolt, I realised that the other aliens were now pointing weapons at me, and the blue alien was bent over, clutching it’s head.
Immediately, I throw myself to the side. I don’t know what sort of weapons these guys have, so I definitely don’t want to risk being hit. I hit the ground with a roll and move to bring my shotgun to bear. A sharp yell gives me pause, however.

Bullets hadn’t started flying yet, so I poked my head above the table. The blue alien was talking in a harried tone to the others. More importantly, it was a glowing with a harsh blue silhouette - it definitely was a mage, then.

A misinterpretation, then? Lucky - I had been seconds away from turning this lot into a stain on the hull under the laserfire of my stored drone swarm. One of the mandibled aliens barks an order of some sort and the rest lower their weapons.

Seeing that the situation has been defused, I stand back up. I guess I should be more careful with my inspections in the future - still, I hadn’t expected such a dramatic reaction. The blue alien shares a few more words with the others, then approaches me, one palm held up and faced toward me.

Its de-escalation of the situation has bought this particular alien an amount of goodwill from me, so I allow it to approach. It stops roughly a foot away from me - far closer than any other of the aliens had yet approached.

It says a few words to me, despite my not understanding it. It seems to be staring intently into my eyes. Was this some sort of greeting ritual? I don’t interrupt - despite my being only peripherally interested in alien customs, I suppose it would be rude to do so.

While I would have once jumped at the opportunity to learn more, these past couple of weeks have sapped my curiosity for the subject dry. There’s only so many alien attacks you can weather and so many foreign planets you can visit before it all becomes rather mundane.

The alien blinks. When its eyes reopen, instead of the previously human-like eyes, the white and iris of its eyes were now pitch black. I jerk back in surprise, but even as I do so, I experience a sensation not unlike an icepick being shoved into my mind.

Crap! A psychic attack! I quickly throw together some semblance of resistance - I’d been entirely unprepared last time, I would not be caught defenseless again. “Yeoman! Take over - play it by ear!” I cede control of my body to Yeoman. This would require my full attention. I’d leave it up to his best judgement how to handle the situation - I don’t want to go leaving my body defenseless while I take care of this.

I turn my attention towards the magical realm. My soul surrounded me, a wan yellow colour. Already, I could see a tendril of the alien’s blue signature extended into mine. I curse internally: I’m a complete amateur when it comes to psychic defense. Miriel had discussed the theory with me, but I’ve never put it into practice - I had been caught napping last time.

Alright, first step was to purge the intruder, and then to shore up defenses. Magic tends to work off of intent more than action, so I went about intending to do that very thing. Sure enough, my own energy began excising the alien’s.

There’s a shrill shriek - the sort someone makes when their hair is being pulled hard. Was that the alien? I don’t relent - there’s no way in hell I’m being cast from my body again. The screams intensify, but the alien does not relent its incursion. Despite my best efforts, it continues driving itself
deeper. It’s not working fast enough! I redouble my efforts, and I’m rewarded with more screaming.

All of a sudden, something breaks. I got the impression of a sickening snap, not unlike a femur breaking. My defenses melt, and the alien is given passage into the depths of my soul.

No no no no! Not again! I will not be cast from yet another body! I attempt to reform my defenses - barriers, anything to stop the alien from reaching my core. Despite my frantic pleading, my signature falls limp like a beaten dog, and I’m left powerless to resist.

The foreign presence makes its way to my core. It takes a momentary pause when it finds the image of my brain before a tendril of energy is inserted directly inside. I curse - it wasn’t looking to boot me out, it was looking to take control!

Despite my increasingly desperate calls for defense, I’m unable to expunge the presence. Well, if I’m going down, I want to bring it down with me. I direct my attention towards the soul of the alien. It was noticeably diminished after its attack. Without a moment of consideration, I attempt to launch an all-or-nothing assault on the alien’s soul.

My soul lamely reaches out with a strand of its own. Whatever broke during the assault has made my soul sluggish. Was this a part of the aliens’ wretched plan? I similarly reach into the alien’s signature. As I make contact, my perception fisheyes - no! I’m too late, it’s taking control!

My vision continues to distort, my awareness reaching a continually increasing field. In mere moments, I was unable to interpret the swirls of blue and yellow in front of me. A few beats pass, the spiral churning unhappily. Was this it? Am I done for - forever to be the mindslave of some alien?

With a click, the vision resolved into an intelligible scene. I flicked my vision around. I was at a beach - in front of me was a shoreline, and behind me was a dense thicket of trees. The plants were distinctly alien. Alright - this is probably a mind trick of some sort. I can’t trust my senses.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” The voice brings me from my analysis. With a start, I summon my shotgun, looking for the source. I realise the alien was laying on the beach in front of me in casual clothing of some description. Had it been there before? It was speaking English, too!

Wherever I was, it seems that I still had access to my storage dimension. My shotgun was a comforting weight in my hands. “You’d better explain this.” My tone left no room for argument.

It tilted its head seemingly in contemplation. It still had its back turned to me, and was looking out at the setting sun. “The sunset. This is one of my favourite memories. I thought it might be a good scene for discussion.” What was it talking about? Memories? Was this a mindscape of some sort? I don’t like it - having an alien in my brain skeeves me out bigtime.

Still, a discussion? Perhaps I had been hasty in my assessment of the alien’s intentions. Regardless, I’ll have to take everything it says with a grain of salt - this could still be a trick. It continues. “If you’ve got a preferred setting, you can choose the scene. Simply concentrate on a memory, and I’ll handle the rest.”

I give the proposition a moment of consideration, lowering my shotgun for now. This would set the tone of any discussion we were to have - not choosing one would set me on the back foot. Still, if I were to choose a scene, I would presumably be giving away some measure of information to the alien.

If it doesn’t already have everything, that is.

Coming to a decision, I bring my chosen memory to the forefront. It was of the killing fields outside
my base after one of the particularly bad assaults. Around us, the scene rapidly transforms. The sand and surf were turned into gore and piles of Biter corpses. In the distance, the imposing walls of my compound stretched upwards and outwards, topped with a seemingly endless line of turrets. The ever-present staccato drumbeat of my artillery was complimented with the faint electric whine of my laser turrets and the distant hum of my industry. Was it macabre? Almost definitely, but it would convey a particular message.

All around us was a field of the dead aliens stretching to beyond the horizon. At places, the bodies piled to above the waist. The air was thick with ash as teams of drones went about incinerating the bodies in the distance. Beneath our feet was a thick off-green ooze composed of xeno viscera and blood.

It was not a pleasant scene, but it was one I had seen the like of many times. Expectedly, the alien leapt from her relaxed position with a curse. It moves to say something, but I beat it to the punch. “You’d best explain exactly where we are and how much you can know of my memories.”

It swallows. Was that a sign of nervousness, or something else? “N- Nothing that you don’t give me. I’m not even speaking your language right now - your brain is just interpreting it that way.”

I don’t believe it, but I doubt it has a way of proving it. “This was strictly a method of communication, then? No attempt to gain control of or oust me from my body?”

It’s eyes widened. “No! Not at all! All I’ve done is attune our nervous systems! All I wanted was a way for us to talk!” It appeared to be extremely unsettled from my question. Or maybe it was the scenery? That had been my intention, of course - if it is put on the back foot, I will have the advantage in any negotiations.

If I had the ability, I would have had to suppress a snort. That was a barefaced lie if I’ve ever seen one. I turn my attention towards the magical realm - any two-bit mage could disprove her claims. Sure enough, our signatures were bridged with a pair of tendrils - each reaching deep into the other. This was far above any biological phenomena - besides, I lack the hardware to accomplish the feat she had described.

I don’t like this at all - in fact, I hate it. Here this alien is, having forced its way into my mind despite my earnest and unreserved resistance to its efforts, and it has the audacity to claim that it ‘just wants to talk’. If I had the ability, I would be ejecting it without consideration for a single word it has to say. But, the unfortunate reality of the situation is that I do not have such an ability - my resistance had been all but futile, I can’t imagine it being any easier now that we’re inside the mindscape.

I don’t like it, but I need to play along. Make the best of a bad situation.

Turning my attention back to what I perceived as the physical, I focused my gaze on the alien. Now that it was out of the hazmat suit, I could see that it was pretty much just a blue woman with some sort of swept back tendril crest in place of hair and a groove of some sort running vertically down the side of its head in place of ears.

The resemblance was remarkable, really.

“What were you planning on talking about?” I wasn’t satisfied that it wasn’t malicious yet, but no need to let it know that.

Its face shifted into a human expression for surprise. I’m unsure whether that’s a deception of some sort, or mere coincidence that our two species developed similar expressions. “Uh. How about introductions, first. My name is Olera Fesille. I’m a member of a race called the Asari.”
It stopped, clearly wanting me to reciprocate. I give a moment of consideration - there’s no harm in being cordial, I suppose. “My name is Robin. Human race.” I neglect to add that the former could very much be called into question - hell, even my name could be argued to not belong to me. “Do you drag people into a mindscape often, then?”

Punctuated my question with a gesture at our surroundings. It fidgeted. Was it simply projecting human mannerisms for my sake? It was rather unnerving how closely it resembles a human - perhaps that was its intention? A negotiating tactic to put me on the off foot, perhaps?

“The Meld is a common practise of my people. A Meld of this depth, however, is reserved for particularly important things. Typically they are simply a short exchange of memories.” It adjusted its posture, becoming somewhat less timid. “I have to ask, is your current appearance typical of your people? Usually we manifest inside the Meld as whatever we think of ourselves as.”

Now that it mentioned the topic, it does look subtly different from what I remembered of the alien. “That’s a touchy question. Why do you ask?” Subtly, I adjust my shotgun. I’m unsure whether it would do any damage inside a mindscape, but my intention with the motion was strictly limited to posturing.

“I- It’s just that our scans couldn’t get an idea of your biology through your hardsuit. I had wanted to learn more about your race from our meld.” It noticed my posture shift - I didn’t like the implications of that at all. “Of course, I’m willing to give more information about my own, too!”

At least they’re still under the presumption that I’m organic. I want to avoid disabusing them of that notion for as long as possible. Still, that raises the question - just how serious was my body’s shielding if it could block the scans of a race that was clearly rather advanced? My read on the alien - ignoring the fact that such a thing could not be trusted - was that it was being genuine. Did I want to provide some basic information?

Realistically, what did I even want to get out of this interaction? Getting out of this with my mind intact, for one. Other than that, enough time to recharge my magical batteries, then some privacy to warp back to my bunker without giving my dimensional tech away. I could explore the possibility of a tech exchange later - for now, I want to focus on returning back to Ylisse.

I suppose that I don’t have much option but to play along. I push an image of a man and a woman to the forefront, as I had with the scenery. The projection materialises beside the two of us. The alien makes a show of inspecting them. It begins muttering to itself in low tones. Despite our proximity and my own extraordinary senses, I cannot make anything it says out. Was that an artifact of the mindscape?

Satisfied, the alien turns back to me. “Two genders? Or a dimorphic caste system? What type of animal did your species evolve from?”

“Two genders. Primates.” I answered. Was it really going to grill me on the minutiae of humanity? Just how long can it keep this up? I suppose now would be the time to ask.

“How long can you maintain the Meld?” It seemed somewhat taken aback. Had it expected to use the opportunity to learn more about it’s race? I can’t say I’m particularly interested, to be honest. This ability, on the other hand: I want to learn all I can. If I learn enough, I should theoretically be able to develop a counter - I don’t want to go leaving myself vulnerable like this again.

“Uhh. There’s no real upper limit on duration other than our bodies’ other biological needs. We’ll probably go for a few hours. Would that be a problem?”
A few hours is a long time to just talk - how much was it wanting to learn? “Why so long? What are your intentions?”

“Well, exchanging basic information to start with. Then I want to move on to your culture, then we can talk about what your race can offer the galactic community and what we have to offer you. We’ll handle exchanging language in a later Meld. It’s all codified as basic first contact procedure, you see.”

I resist sighing. This’d be tedious - but at least it’d let me play for time while my magical batteries recharged. There’s one thing that’s conspicuously missing, however. “No discussion about technology?”

It shook its head. “No, not now, in any case. That conversation is for later, once formal diplomatic ties have been established.”

That’s reasonable enough, I suppose. Besides, if this alien is simply an ambassador of some sort, then it would not necessarily know the particulars of its technology. “Alright then, what about your species?”

It smiled. I’m unable to place exactly why, but it was every so slightly unnerving. “I’m glad you asked.”

We continued exchanging details about our respective races and cultures for some time. I restricted myself to only providing the barest minimum of information - this could still be a ploy, after all. Olera was much more forthcoming, however. I learned the Asari were a non-gendered race - though they typically used feminine words to describe themselves when speaking in other languages.

She informed me that she was somewhere around three hundred years old herself - although her species could live past a millenia. Naturally, I withheld the natural lifespan of humanity along with my own age - that was a tactically useful piece of information that I would prefer to keep to myself.

Eventually, she tired of giving me insight into her own race and got the hint that I would not be giving any further insight into my own. I got the impression that the Asari as a race viewed themselves as peacemakers - Olera’s description of her people’s art featured the concept prominently. Despite this, she was not a competent negotiator by any stretch of the imagination.

Maybe it was just the scenery, though. As our conversation progressed, Olera became increasingly unsettled - an ash storm was building, perhaps that was the cause of it? Or maybe it was the steadily encroaching cremator drone swarm. I don’t know - my read on her could very much be compromised.

“So, what’s this ‘galactic community’ you’ve mentioned?” She seemed relieved that I was expressing interest in her culture. It was a stalling tactic, of course - by my measure I still had about an hour before I could warp back home.

She edged slightly further away from the pile of Biter corpses she was next to. “Well, Galactic politics is centred around the Council - a group led by members of the three preeminent races in the galaxy - Asari, Salarians and Turians. There are also a number of associate races that gain various benefits from membership. The council passes legislation and administers in the interests of the member races. Normally, this is limited to matters of galactic peace, security and prosperity.”

They’ve got a galactic governing body? I’m not exactly surprised after what I’ve seen so far, but the idea absolutely reeks of potential abuse to me. “What sort of powers does the council hold?” I need to know more - I’m essentially acting as an ambassador for Ylisse here, but I’ve got no issues with...
simply ghosting them if they give me too bad a vibe.

“Well, the council was the group that created blanket bans on areas of research that are too
dangerous to allow - artificial intelligence, genetic modification, augmentation technology - that sort
of thing. Additionally, the council enforces a number of treaties that deescalate possible military
conflict - you’ll understand if I don’t go into detail yet, of course.”

I let out a noise of contemplation, signalling my desire for time to think on the ramifications to Olera.
She nods, and begins observing the surroundings in detail for the first time. I had deliberately held
her attention to prevent such close examination, but this information merits a change of strategy.

From what she says, this council holds on to very tight regulation over the galaxy - to outright
blanket ban several fields of research seems almost tyrannical to me. Besides - if they’ve banned
mere research of A.I., how would they react to my companions? What about me? She also said the
council enforces military treaties - that suggests that it either holds significant economic power, or is a
military power in and of itself.

I need to know more first. “What sort of electorate is the council beholden to? Just the member races,
or associates too?”

She turns her attention back towards me. She had been looking off towards the horizon, where a
small incursion of a few hundred Biters was being repelled. “Electorate? The council is not a
democratic institution. Councillors are charged directly by the governments of member races
themselves. Of course, there’s nothing explicitly preventing a member race from putting their seat up
to an election.” She smiled patronisingly - almost as if laughing to herself about how foolish it was of
me to assume such a body would be beholden to the populace.

Right - I think I’ve heard enough on this topic. The Council sounds like a nigh-autocratic nightmare.
If there’s any expectation of becoming an associate in order to engage in trade, I doubt that will be an
appealing option regardless of potential mitigating circumstances.

She shuffled her feet, blanching at the sound the ground made beneath her. “If you do not mind, I
have a few questions of my own I would like to ask.” Her smile had shifted into a worried frown.

“I cannot guarantee I can will answer, but go ahead.” I’ve got a gut feeling that she’ll be asking quite
a few prying questions. In the interest of stalling for time, I’ll probably have to give some partial
answers - I want to be able to warp back home as soon as we’re done here.

She nods, accepting my stipulation. “What’s the story behind this scene?” She punctuates her
question with a sweeping gesture. The ash storm is starting to pick up, so our view of the distance
was degrading. Even still, the harsh red glow of our orbital laser cannons could be seen penetrating
the ash clouds. “I’ve got a few theories, but I’d very much like to hear the truth of the matter.”

“What in particular are you asking about?” There are worse topics she could be asking about, but I’m
not going to give her the full story by any stretch of the imagination.

“Well, for a start, is this your home planet? What are these creatures? Why are they attacking that
base?”

If I had the ability, I would have smiled - her questions were far too easy to answer. “This is not my
home planet. These creatures are called ‘Biters’. They are attacking that base for currently unknown
reasons.”

Her frown deepens. “Are they sentient - did they declare war on the owner of the base? Or are they
simply animals?”

“I’ve got no idea whether they are sentient or not, and no interest in finding out. Though they act as if they have declared war the owner of the base, I would consider them more along the lines of a cancer that must be excised.”

She is very clearly unsatisfied by my answer, but allows the subject to drop.

The rest of the conversation went along much the same lines: Olera would give me some information regarding her government, people or culture with the expectation that I would provide some in return. Instead, I would give her a vague non-answer or a half-truth.

She would then get frustrated, and I would quell her frustration by expressing a manufactured interest in a particular facet of her story which she would gladly answer in depth. She would then ask a pointed question about my own race, circumstance or government, to which I would give only the barest minimum of details.

In all, a very successful negotiation: I came away knowing much more about her and her government than she knew about me and mine. If I ever came back here with diplomacy in mind, I would have them at an advantage.

Around the time the ash storm really picked up, Olera requested we end the Meld. It didn’t bother me much, but she seemed extremely disturbed by the weather. Regardless, I had accumulated enough energy to return to my bunker safely, so I allowed it.

Before she did so, however, I expressed the need for some privacy in a cleanroom. I implied it was for a biological function of some sort, however she accepted my request without questioning me further. I did not trust that there would not be surveillance of some sort, but I will have to work out a concealment solution regardless.

The mindscape around us faded, and with a metaphorical blink I was back in my body. Yeoman wordlessly handed the reigns back to me. Considering we were not surrounded by a drone swarm and the corpses of hundreds of aliens, I assume that the other aliens had not made hostile overtures while I had been preoccupied.

In front of me, Olera collapsed bonelessly. She was caught by one of the other aliens - Turians, Olera had called them. She told me earlier that they were descended from avians - now that I’m looking at them again, I can see the parallels.

Her head lolled as she was lowered into a chair. One of the other Turians turns to me and says something. If I had to guess, it was a question about the cause of her current condition. I cocked my head and shrugged, hoping the gesture would translate.

Could this be the result of my resistance to her Meld? It’s possible, although I can’t say it’s undeserved - forcing her way into my mind even with diplomatic intentions is far too easy to construe as a hostile action.

Hell, the Meld’s over and it’s still giving me the heebie-jeebies. Mentally, I knocked developing a sort of resistance against psychic intrusions up a few places on my to-do list. The aforementioned list popped up within my vision, helpfully displaying the new order of priorities to me.

Internally, I curse. Despite my personal feelings in the matter, I needed Olera functional long enough
to instruct her associates to direct me to a cleanroom. From where I stood I inspected her. Her eyes were flickering between flat black and their normal composition. A dried trail of blue blood ran down her face, clearly having leaked from the corners of her eyes and her nose.

I’m no expert, but she doesn’t look good. One of the Turians barked out an order and the rest scrambled to obey. I’m not reading any hostility from them, so I doubt they suspect me of being responsible.

A team Turians that are very clearly medics rush in and load Oleria onto a stretcher. She seems to be mumbling something urgently, but doesn’t seem to have much awareness of her surroundings. The Turian in charge says something in a quiet voice to her, and she’s whisked away.

The remaining Turians exchange looks with each other, seemingly unsure. The leader begins talking through a communicator. His voice is harried, but not urgent - although, I could very well be interpreting his tone wrong.

A few moments pass and I debate making for the exit. It would effectively communicate my desire to leave, but whether it would achieve that goal is debatable. “Yeoman, fill me in on what happened while I was out.”

He appears. “Nothing significant. I had been anticipating hostile action, but these life forms were content to allow the blue one to finish its business. What transpired on your end?” With his verbal explanation came a recording of the events. We hadn’t the need to exchange memories before this, so I was surprised to find that I understood the memory as if I had experienced it myself - I had no need to watch it or anything of the sort, I simply immediately knew it’s contents.

That was a rather useful ability. Setting aside the potential applications for now, I bundle up my own memories and send them off to Yeoman. I’m unsure of the particulars of how this sort of thing works, but Yeoman seemed to have received them without issue, so I guess I must be doing it right.

A few moments pass. “This Asari seems to have let much about her own organisation slip. There’s a lot of conclusions that could be drawn - potential avenues for acquisition of her races’ assets included.”

I convey a nod. “I thought so, too. I’ve no intentions of returning here anytime soon, however, so we’ll have to put a peg in any sort of plans to that end.”

I’m drawn by my conversation by the lead Turian. He’s motioning for me to follow. Seeing no real reason to decline, I start moving. He leads me through several hallways bare of adornment. Eventually, we arrive at a door set into the wall, he types a few things into a panel beside the door and it opens.

Inside is a lounge, though the ergonomic design of the furniture is clearly unsuitable for a human. He motions for me to enter and I do so. This could be a trap, but if they’re still under the impression that I am biological, then almost anything they pull will be trivial at best for me to survive.

A single Turian follows me in. He directs my attention towards the panel, showing me how to open, lock and unlock the door - not likely a trap then. He then motions for me to take a seat, then leaves. If I’m reading them right, they want me to wait. Did they have another Asari? Or were they waiting for Oleria to recover? Had they managed to communicate with Olera? It doesn’t matter, I guess - this suits my needs just fine. “Yeoman. See any cameras?”

“Negative, Director Robin. It is possible that they have been disguised, however.”
Right - better not risk it. How am I going to hide my exfiltration, though? A smoke grenade? I peruse my storage menu, not finding any. I did, however find a few large canisters of mustard gas. Would that work?

Yeoman supplies an answer. “Your ‘mustard gas’ is an opaque yellow colour. It would be suitable for your purposes.”

I had formulated the gas - among several other Chemical weapons - a while ago with the intent of using it as a weapon against the Bitters. The project hadn’t panned out due to the Bitters rapidly developing a resistance to the effects, but I had kept a few canisters in storage in case I ever needed to clear a room or something.

Coming to a decision, I summon a canister from storage. It was about the size of a typical barbeque propane tank, but held the gas at a much higher pressure. Without waiting for the Turians to come see what’s happening, I shoot the tank with my shotgun.

With the vessel compromised, the gas exploded throughout the room. Seizing my chance, I returned the now shredded tank and my shotgun to my storage then summoned the gear I needed onto my person and began the appropriate incantation. While I just theoretically gave away the existence of my pocket dimension, that was a price I was willing to pay to preserve the secrecy of my dimensional travel capabilities.

The now-familiar twisting of reality and intense vertigo signalled my arrival back in my bunker.

I collapse into my chair with an exaggerated vocalized sigh. That trip had been immensely draining on a mental level - I wish I could just sleep for a few days. I internally curse at my situation: that was no longer an option for me - and potentially never would be again.

Rather than sleeping, I simply sat, staring into space. It wasn’t a substitute, but having a few minutes to just do nothing was a relief.

Duty calls, however, so I was back working away at my to-do list before long.

The last trip had really impressed upon me the dangers of my blase approach of personal protection and preparation: I needed much more of it before I retrieve the rest of my tethers. Unfortunately, it seems that the search for home has been pushed further down the to-do list.

Solving the issue of personal protection was rather trivial - less than half a days worth of manufacturing and planning with Yeoman saw my concerns satisfied. I was now equipped with an extremely versatile set of modular power armour.

It was networked in tandem with my storage system, so I could swap out modules on the fly. I’ve got quite a few options - mounted laser turrets, energy shields, supercapacitors wired to blast nearby threats with a ludicrous amount of electricity, an enhanced servo system that would allow for vastly increased mobility. Hell, I even did a bit of tinkering with my personal dimensional jumper to make it a compatible module.

Currently, I’ve settled on the supercapacitors, servos and an energy shield. I figured it would give me the best utility when it comes to general use, but if the situation changes I can adjust my loadout as necessary. Everything’s powered by a set of three super-compact fusion reactors - that seemed a little overboard to me, but Yeoman tells me that I’m barely scraping past the needed power as-is.
I gave control over the discharge defense system - the capacitors - to Yeoman. He’ll be able to make the split-second reaction to any potential threats to our lives. Honestly, I might have gone a little overkill with the amount of capacitors - anybody who gets hit by them is going to be absolutely atomized… Actually, maybe not. I just can’t know what sort of threats I’m going to be facing out in the multiverse. I’ve gotten lucky so far, but I don’t want to continue wagering my life on it.

The shield was almost skin-tight - it held position mere milimetres away from the surface of my armour. Yeoman tells me that it won’t do much against other energy weapons, but it would stop physical attacks dead in their tracks.

The additional servos were great - with the increased mobility it was almost like I was some sort of superhero speedster: nothing ridiculous, but I was now many times faster and stronger than even the peak of human performance - probably closer to Captain America than, say, The Flash.

In addition to the modularity, the armour is also extremely dense - and thus, protective - I’m not sure how my machines managed it, but they somehow managed to compress several tons of high-grade steel into armour that’s barely a centimetre thick. Was this another application of the same technology used to create my pocket dimension?

I don’t know, but it’s definitely something to look into once I’m back home.

Armour wasn’t the only thing I improved on. I also composed a list of every tool that I could conceivably need in a do-or-die situation out in the multiverse. I emptied out a some of the extraneous gear from my storage and replaced it with a variety of other things - sacrificing a bit of depth for a lot of breadth.

I mean, I still have thousands of drones, hundreds of turrets, and multiple tanks and artillery guns - I only needed to give up a couple of the larger objects to fit in the stuff I wanted. They were generally small items, but they all held great utility - smoke grenades, flashbangs, hand tools, bombs of various types, man-portable nuclear reactors - that sort of thing.

Once I had my gear prepared, I set out once more to retrieve the other two tethers I had deemed unnecessary. Between the two, I had to spend about half of a day recharging my magic, but they were otherwise without incident.

Admin pulled me up when I returned from retrieving the final tether. “Director Robin? We need to speak.”

I collapse into my chair. Admin didn’t seek me out unless he had bad news. Last we had spoken, he had updated me on his progress with the laser satellite array. It was nearing peak effectiveness for use as a compound-defense tool, but still had some way to go if we wanted to implement our endgame stratagem. The Biters and their nests were now being blasted by lasers rated for scouring entire buildings from the face of the earth as they attacked. It was working last I heard, but my understanding of the situation was relatively outdated.

I brace myself. “Hit me with it, Admin.”

His avatar nods. “As you will. Current projections indicate that the current strategy will cease being viable within the next seven days.”

That soon? Damn. Admin’s projections have come a long way since when he started - if he says it won’t be viable in seven days time, then it won’t be viable in seven days time. “What are our options?”
“The kinetic bombardment stratagem in no longer viable as a definitive solution. I have been doing analysis of the enemy - destruction of the continent will not cease the creation of new nests. A total laser scouring of the surface may still be effective, but that is not within our capability to execute within the allotted time frame using our current strategy. Expansion of the compound to increase the magnitude of the defenses the enemy must breach is having diminishing returns - I do not believe it would be sufficient even with a concerted effort.” Admin’s avatar delivered the news with a steady tone and a slightly downturned expression.

I slump in my chair. “But, that’s all of our current options. Have you formulated any new strategies?”

Admin’s expression grows serious. “I currently see two potential viable avenues of development. I rate the possibility of you being happy with either very low.” He pauses for effect before continuing. “The first: deployment of thermonuclear warheads on a wide scale. Projections indicate the massive collateral damage inflicted on the continent would at the very least hinder the development of new Biter nests. The second: development and deployment of a targeted nano-plague.”

Before I think to comment, Admin was placating me. “I realise you have parameterised nano-technology as non-viable, but you must realise: the first option is a delaying tactic at best. I do not see another way to permanently rid ourselves of the Biters with any form of comparable certainty. All other avenues fall flat in comparison: I would give an ideal implementation of planet-wide orbital laser scouring a twenty-percent chance of total eradication at best. An ideal nano-plague rates four times as high.”

I consider the problem for a few minutes. Admin was happy to let me sit and think. The situation had changed considerably in the few hours I had been gone. Eventually, I come to a decision.

“Utilise kinetic orbital bombardment and thermonuclear warheads appropriately to play for time. Focus our resources towards the construction of further orbital stations with the goal of developing an appropriate setup for execution of the laser scouring stratagem. Develop and deploy the nano-plague only if our situation becomes untenable: remember - we aren’t necessarily looking to purge the Biters, simply to prevent the destruction of our facilities long enough for me to find a path home. Once I do, we can pack up shop and get out of here.”

Administrator’s avatar lightens up. “I understand, Director Robin. I will implement your outlined plan.”

“Oh, and one more thing before you go - what did you find out about the Biters from your analysis?”

“A considerable amount. Preliminary scans revealed that they were radiating exotic particles indicative of a personal dimensional fold - a small area of space within which they hold matter for some purpose. I suspect vital organs, but it very well could be additional material to be used to regenerate damaged tissue - among several other possibilities. An analysis of the nests confirms your ‘Spore theory’ - each one is spawned near-instantaneously from a microscopic spore. Analysis of the spores revealed that they also hold a dimensional fold - likely containing the nests themselves. In terms of where they get all their energy, I am unsure. The pattern would indicate that it could possibly be stored within a fold, but I have no evidence for this.”

“That’s… Great news, actually - we know what we’re fighting now! If we find a way to neutralize their dimensional fold, then we could be looking at a way to eliminate a major advantage of theirs!” Still… to think that an organism that had incorporated a pocket dimension into its own biology exists...

They could be a useful way to learn more about the topic. I mean, my own body has pocket dimensions of its own, but if there’s entire hordes of hostile aliens with their own ones we’ve got no
Admin nods. “I had thought along similar lines. A dimensional neutraliser is far outside of my own expertise, however - exploratory tests towards those ends have yielded no dividends yet.”

“It may possibly be within my own capabilities soon. I will keep you posted - keep working on it on your end, though.”

He nods his agreement, then cut the connection. With an internal curse, I add the project to my to-do list - right below finding a way home. I doubt I’ll see much development on that end - I remember almost nothing about pocket dimensions, let alone countermeasures for them from Laurens notes.
While in the past I had my doubts about the commonality of psychic intrusions, my latest encounter with the attack has proved to me that caution is preferable to unpreparedness. A potential remedy to my current situation in regards to defenses was obvious - in my previous discussion on the topic with Miriel, she had described a technique by which one could increase their own resistance to such incursions with no requirement further than time and focus. In other words: a sort of meditation.

Two resources that, sadly, are - and have been for far too long - in short supply. The project would detract from the time I had available to develop my dimensional technology in a real way. Given the currently worsening situation with the Biters, this was an expense I was hesitant to accept.

The increasing demands on my time have led me to seriously consider relocating my compound to an alternate planetary body - of which there were several nearby options. Such a venture would be both costly and time consuming certainly, but it would theoretically avoid the Biter problem altogether.

The primary issue with that line of action is the comparative mineral and material poverty of the options: we would be giving up a great deal of our industrial capacity, potentially leaving us open to threats currently unknown. I have not dismissed the notion in entirety - it remains an option should the situation become untenable - but it is not a path I am going to jump to take at this point in time.

In the end, I decided on a sort of compromise between my two priorities - I would dedicate a portion of my time towards strengthening my mental defenses and the other towards the development of dimensional technology. I would by no means be immune to psychic attacks - nothing short of sustained one-hundred percent dedication would give anything even approaching that - but I would at least be capable of repelling attackers at a theoretically adept level of competence.

Besides, if someone was truly assaulting my mind with hostile intent, it is within Yeoman’s power to temporarily seize control and execute the threat in the physical realm. This was not a concession I made lightly, but in the end my paranoia of a hostile controlling influence over my mind won over my paranoia of a rogue intelligence controlling my body.

As much as I may loathe to admit it to myself, Yeoman and I have worked up a significant rapport - I wouldn’t qualify it as friendship, but we do work very well together. Perhaps due to the nature of their respective tasks, I haven’t quite built up a similar understanding with Administrator yet, but it is only a matter of time in my eyes.

As my work towards erecting my mental defenses continued, I noticed a definite change in the metaphorical texture of my signature. Very quickly it’s previously porous, almost wooden feel had hardened, turning into a steely smooth texture. My signature’s typical colour, too, went through a change: from a chestnut brown to an industrial grey. Previously, I had observed an involuntary change in my signature accompanying strong emotions - this was the first time I had effected a change to my signature through actions of my own. Despite my own intellectual curiosity of the subject, I did not investigate the phenomenon past my cursory observations - I had more pressing things to take care of.

The days continued to pass without major incident: Administrator would deliver a twice-daily briefing on the state of the Biter menace - each one slightly less optimistic than the last. We were losing the war by means of the sheer ramp capacity of the enemy: each assault was perpetrated by fractionally more numerous and fractionally more durable Biters. Despite their advancements, the
Biters still had a ways to go until they would be capable of overrunning our defenses in entirety.

In other words: we were losing the war, but we should theoretically have time enough to find a trump-card before things became untenable.

Given the immense reserves of Uranium we possess, along with our vast industrial and logistical capacity, we’ve little limitation towards our deployment of nuclear weapons within Administrator’s new defense plans. Unsurprisingly, Administrator was quick to exploit this - several bombs were used each day to blunt major incoming offenses.

At this point, our compound was large enough that the detonations barely registered as more than tremors to me. Somewhat more worrying was the fact that the twenty-kiloton bombs did not have a one-hundred percent extermination rate past even a few hundred metres of the epicentre even in open terrain - the most durable of the Biters were rendered direly injured at that point, but they possessed the capabilities to recover to a mobile state with a frightening rapidity.

A feat attributable to more shenanigans regarding pocket dimensions, I’m sure. Administrator has collected samples of tissue from such Biters for analysis, but a rigorous explanation has not yet been forthcoming.

Regardless, the preemptive bombings have taken pressure off of our more conventional defenses, allowing for an effective intensification and optimization of static defense infrastructure in anticipation of a renewed offensive.

Kinetic bombardment has not been a major part of the defense strategy - Administrator tells me that it is simply not resource efficient to use the ammunition in anything but a tactical manner.

I’m brought from my thoughts by a sustained high pitch beep from one of the instruments near my desk. A high beep - what did that mean again? Was it the destruction of a tether? I move over to the instrument in question - one of my many dimensional tech sensors. I’m greeted by a rapidly flashing red diode and a countdown on the attached display. Seven seconds left. Crap - that’s the dimensional intrusion alarm - I’m about to have visitors!

Immediately, I begin summoning drones from my storage. In three seconds, there was more than fifty floating just below the high ceilings of my bunker, each with laser emitters ready to fire. After the fourth second, the turrets built into my bunker’s ceiling and walls had fully warmed-up and were ready for intruders. By the fifth second, I had summoned a shotgun into my hands and was in a firing position towards the my dimensional landing pad. By the sixth second, Yeoman and I had agreed on a set of combat procedures and I had ceded the drones to his direct control.

The intruders appear with a crash and a flash not unlike a lightning strike. Internally, my mind was racing - they were sloppy, whatever dimensional tech these intruders have is poorly optimized and crude. If they had any understanding of the technology they would have been able to reduce the wasted energy to a point where wasteful effects like that did not occur.

In a split second I had concluded my analysis and identified the intruder - a single person wearing the same style of armour that the Nazi soldiers I had seen during my trip to the soccer game had. What? Did that place have dimensional technology of its own?

A more chilling thought struck me. Had the Nazis reverse-engineered it from the little they had seen of my own?

Regardless, there was an armed intruder in my base and he needed to be pacified. I opened fire and my automated defenses followed. The soldier was reduced under a hail of lead and lasers within
moments - he did not even get the chance to raise his rifle. Was that it?

Just a soldier jumping blind into my bunker - no idea what had awaited him?

Minutes pass. There were no further incursions.

Internally, I curse. This was just great - extradimensional Nazi invaders! As if I didn’t already have enough on my plate. I made my way over to the corpse - yep, on what remains of his front armour is a plate inscribed with dimensional tech runes exactly like my own. It looks like I’ve got a copycat, then. That means that whoever’s responsible has at least some experience with magitech - the system drew heavily from concepts in both magic and technology; there was simply no recreating it without at least partially understanding the base concepts.

Grumbling, I opened a link to Administrator. If there was one intruder, there could be more. “Admin. I’ve got a situation. The bunker’s been compromised and I need you to handle things on this end - secure it so that any further intrusions are stopped dead. I’ve got a corpse here for you to examine - see what you can learn from his gear.”

Admin’s avatar nodded. “I will ensure I do so. The situation on the surface will take the majority of my focus, but from what I’ve seen thus far, this task will be trivial in comparison.” I bundle up all the relevant memories - how they were getting into this dimension, how the alarm worked, my memories of the soccer game - and send it off to him. He’d get what he could from them and no doubt make good use of the information.

Alright. Action plan. I can’t stop them from getting into my dimension - not without a whole lot of research, or a whole lot of time spent re-jigging my current setup. I also can’t allow the Nazis to keep the dimensional tech they do have - that’s just asking for trouble. No, I’ll have to head back to that dimension and start sterilizing whatever research team is behind this. Unfortunately, it was much the same situation in regards to tracking where in particular they’re coming from - I needed a score of infrastructure that I simply didn’t yet understand how to produce.

I curse - more distractions from my search for Ylisse. At this rate I’ll never make it back home. “Yeoman, we’re going to be taking a trip. Information containment.”

His avatar appears. “Oh? I’ll pack my bags, then.” He’s got a dumb grin on his face.

...Did he just take a crack at me?

There wasn’t much planning to be done - all of our information had been thoroughly analysed already, and we could not draw any further conclusions from it. I was essentially jumping in headfirst here.

Of course, there was a plan - I always tried to have a plan - but it didn’t amount to much more than ‘find out where the Nazi labs are, then start purging’. I wasn’t entirely sure where I would be when I made the jump over, either. I mean, I was reasonably confident that I’d be on the same planet as last time, but, beyond that there was little I could do with my dimensional tech at the level it was now.

I couldn’t just wait until I had better dimensional tech, either - no, that’d give them far too much time to further reverse-engineer my own technology. I needed to be swift and decisive - there was no time for dallying about here.

I mean, if I really wanted to be certain, I could ask Admin or Yeoman to develop a grey-goo scenario
capable nano-swarm and simply let it loose on their planet. They’d be powerless to stop it, and all I had to do was be sure to never visit again. Of course, there’d be a whole load of collateral damage - potentially an entire galaxy’s worth - but I’m not entirely sure that’d be too high a cost to pay: dimensional tech left in the wrong hands could amount to far worse. I mean, it’s only one dimension out of what? Uncountably many?

Something like that. But, I figured there was technology useful for the fight against Laurent’s enemy that could be stolen - these soldiers were equipped with gear surpassing what we had back in my original dimension. If I happen to snag a few secrets while I’m destroying whatever organization is researching dimensional tech, all the better.

Besides, even the tiny risk of someone jumping here and bringing part of the swarm with them was high enough to convince me that such measures had way too much potential to backfire.

Shaking myself from my contemplation, I performed the required ritual for the jump over. With a gut-churning sense of vertigo, I found myself in an alley. Sheer grey concrete on both sides, and a chain link fence further down. I turn around, and find it was night, the footpath bereft of pedestrians. The alley was clear of rubbish and the sidewalk looked almost new.

Alright - priority one: find out which direction Germany is in. I don’t know for certain that’s where the people I’m after are, but considering the soldier was a Nazi it’s a fairly reasonable guess. I’ve got a built-in compass and a fairly good memory of what Earth looks like, so if things aren’t terribly different from my original dimension I’ll be able to find my way without too much trouble.

I leave the alley and begin walking. The street is lined with buildings built in the brutalist style - harsh, imposing structures made from smooth grey concrete: mostly unadorned and highly geometric. It was not aesthetically pleasing. Then again, the effect it had was undeniable. The sole decorative concession allowed were the red banners bearing a swastika hung at equal increments along both sides of the street.

Was I in Germany already? Further down the street, I saw the lights of an approaching car. I ducked back into the alley, allowing it to pass. As it did, I identified the inhabitants - more of the black-armoured soldiers wearing iron crosses and swastikas.

A patrol car? I need more information. Returning to the street, I began my way down. Judging from the size and shape of the buildings, I was likely in a business district. I continued eventually coming to a rubbish bin. I opened it, rifling around until I found what I was after.

Pulling out a soiled newspaper, I held it up. Across the top in bold letters read the German text for ‘The Iberian’. I look around once more - the Iberian peninsula, so thoroughly annexed by the Nazis? Just what on Earth happened in this dimension? The paper was dated August nineteen-fifty-two - was the war over, or still ongoing? I shake my head before orienting myself and departing quickly. I did not yet want to attract attention to myself, so I made sure to stay hidden from the patrols. Judging from the empty streets, the city was currently under a strictly enforced curfew.

Eventually, the city gave way to a suburban town, and then to a hilly countryside. I managed to get away from civilization before dawn broke, so I suspect that my presence had not been detected. Wanting to keep it that way, I made a point to avoid people from that point forward.

The trek out of Spain and through France was a long one - helped by my bottomless endurance and my offroad buggy, but nonetheless. From the scraps of information that I’d managed to glean, Nazi Germany had come out on top during the second world war in this dimension - apparently even going as far as to drop a nuke on New York a few years ago. The war was still ongoing in some places, but everywhere important had already been brought to heel by the Nazis. As bad as it may
seem, it really isn’t my problem, nor is it any of my business - I just need to stop any further dimensional tech developments and get the hell out of this shithole.

Yeoman’s avatar appeared, face serious. “The charges have been set, Director.”

“Let’s get this party started, then.” First and foremost I needed information. I figured the best place to get that would be directly from the horse’s mouth - a Nazi Commander. The best place to find a Nazi Commander? A Nazi garrison, obviously. I gave the signal, and the drone-delivered plastic explosives detonated, bringing the fort into chaos. Immediately, my drones lifted off and began swarming, delivering high-powered lasers to the surviving soldiers.

None were spared from the unrelenting hail of laserfire. In a scant few minutes the attack was over and an unconscious man was being lifted by a team of drones towards me. “Alright, clean it up, Yeoman.”

“Affirmative, Director.” The drones began incinerating the bodies of the soldiers, retrieving the wrecks of the destroyed drones and transporting the Nazi technology for storage. The commander was set down in front of me, easily distinguishable by his dress uniform when compared to the armour worn by the other soldiers.

Propping him up against a nearby tree, I summon a bar of steel from my material stockpile and pin him down by twisting it around the tree and him. It took a bit of effort, but my power armour managed it without issue.

Slapping his face lightly, I roused him. “Hey! Wake up!” The man came to slowly, before jerking awake with a start.

I clapped my hands together, the metallic clang getting his attention. “Good, you’re awake. I’ve got some questions for you.” He struggles against his binds, before quickly realising they would not be going anywhere.

Immediately, a sneer came across man’s face and he spat something that didn’t sound very complimentary at me in thick German. I don’t know much of the language, but I managed to pick out ‘American pig’.

I heft my shotgun, reminding him of his position. “You’re going to have to speak English, bud. You can speak that, right?” My question is answered with little more than a string of German curses. I sigh, shaking my head - I don’t know what I expected, honestly. I guess I’ll have to be more persuasive. This won’t be pretty, but ultimately it is a necessity - I simply cannot allow dimensional technology to fall into the wrong hands and stay there.

Levelling my shotgun at the man’s knee, I squeeze the trigger. An explosion of gore is accompanied by the man’s wail and the division of the limb in two. “Feeling a bit more talkative yet?” I ask.

The commander collects himself in an impressive amount of time. Gritting his teeth, he curses once in German before finally addressing me in heavily accented English. “Burn in the pits of hell, English Demon. I will be dead soon, but I will be dead content knowing my place in heaven along with my fathers before me and my countrymen.”

Internally, I grimace. He’s definitely not going to give me any help willingly - at least not any I can trust. Unless… Yes, that could work. Spurred by my epiphany, I summon a gas welder from my storage. For my plan to work, this guy needs to stay alive - something his pulped knee isn’t helping with.
The man’s eyes widen and the blood runs from his face. Seeing the cracks in his facade, I decide to play it up a bit. “Not feeling like talking yet? I suppose I’ll have to ensure our time together lasts a bit longer, then.” I click the flint lighter with a dramatic swish, igniting my blowtorch. “Hold still, I’m sure this will only hurt a little.”

Ignoring the man’s panicked screams and cries, I get to work on sealing his wound. Once more he begins to struggle against his bonds. He begins kicking and writhing - his one good leg bouncing off of my shield ineffectually. Unable to work on such an active patient, I grab ahold of his leg, locking my grip in place like a vice.

Within minutes, the man’s wounds were sealed. Fortunately, he seems to have calmed down - rather than the imperious sneer he once sported, his expression was haggard. The man’s breathing was heavy, but he did not say anything.

Good - I’d rather not deal with any distractions. I compose myself, mentally going through the magical theory of what I am about to attempt. I’m treading new ground here - for all I know this could be a dud, but I’ve got a sneaking suspicion that it might just work.

Deciding on an appropriate formulation, I summon an iron plate and weld the runes and spell circles into the material with my torch. Thankfully, this dimension has enough ambient magic that spellcasting would be a trivial matter.

The spell I’m planning to use here is directly derived from the technique that Olera used on me back on the Turian ship - it’s not the same thing, but I should be theoretically able to produce the desired results working from what I observed of it as a base.

Giving my work a quick once-over, I return my tools then slap the plate. Channelling a burst of magic I remove my hand and point directly at the Commander’s head. A thin wisp of silvery energy leaps from my finger, spearing into the Commander’s forehead.

At once, my vision was filled with whorls of crimson before even that fell away to a murky darkness. Had it worked? I inspect that magical plane. The commander’s red and white signature, once swirled like a peppermint was now disrupted by my own - a dense field of polished steely grey tinged by spots of an intense sulfurous yellow. Leading the attack on the commander, my signature had manifested a wickedly thorned drill, spearing messily through his signature.

I return to what I perceive of the physical. Now, I’d included some rather crude magi-technical code in that spell - so rather than being bombarded with the essence of the man’s being at once, I instead had to call the bits I was interested in to me. Of course, if the man had any form of magical competency, I would instead be engaged in an intense mental battle right now, rather than having the opportunity to peruse his mind as I pleased.

I clear my throat - metaphysically - and announced to the void “Show me the secrets of the Nazis.” As countless images and scenes began to play around me, I smiled widely on the inside. Yes! It had worked - even better than I had imagined. Not too shabby for a couple of days of idle thought and a spur-of-the-moment spell composition.

Drained of all useful knowledge, I had left the commander a parting gift in the form of bringing his garrison down on top of him with a great deal of explosives - no use in allowing whatever mystics that exist in this dimension the opportunity to reverse engineer the rest of my magic, nor in letting the Nazis simply recrew the base with fresh people.
Still, the commander did not have the information I was looking for. He did, however, have the locations of bases and garrisons that might have people who do. A simple solution to my problem was apparent - start working my way up the command chain until I find someone who does.

I got cracking immediately - there was no point in waiting around. By the close of the week, I had reduced a further four bases to rubble. They were starting to catch on, however - there were more guards, patrols and overall security presence in a much larger area around the bases now, along with newly installed security and alarm systems - no match for the drone swarm, but response times were getting faster, leaving me much less time to rifle through the minds of the important personnel.

Regardless, there really was nothing that any of the bases could do to stop me short of calling in the big guns to bring down the hammer - even then, I doubt even the Nazis would be willing to bust out anything big enough to seriously threaten me. Dropping a nuke - or even just some guided missiles - on their own bases in order to stop a particularly prolific raider seems rather unlikely to me.

It took raiding a further five bases spread across Europe before I found something promising. A paper-pusher working in admin at a supply distribution centre in what used to be southern Croatia had noticed unusual quantities of exotic materials being shipped to some staging point back in the Rhineland. These materials were exactly what I had been keeping an eye out for - large quantities of magically significant materials; sheets of raw lead, copper and gold, large volumes of animal organs and other biological materials. Definitely not something that could be explained as anything but magical research - I mean, what else could literal crates full of newt eyes and bat fur be used for?

Sure, it’s not a part of any magical tradition I know the inner workings of, but I would not be very surprised if the stereotypical idea of witchery actually functioned in dimensions with a high enough magical concentration. From my observations, barring any oddities of the local magical plane, things generally work off of a system of intent, catalysts and reactions regardless of the dimension - this is likely just the local permutation of such a system. Where I use rune circles and mental focus, the mages of this dimension could well be using organic reagents and ritual adherence to produce similar results.

In any case, I now had a lead towards the magical side of the Nazi war machine - they’ve done a rather thorough job of keeping the two sides separate. Of all the people whose minds I’ve plundered, only a handful knew anything other than rumours about their operations. Even then, the information was trivial - the fact that high command has a crack squad of magical hitmen they use to dispose of particularly troublesome elements, or that much of the Wundertech that has popped up in recent years has a basis in the occult.

Wundertech, on the other hand, has been far easier to find information about. The term was coined a towards the start of the war to describe all the innovations in military technology that came out of the Reich’s Wunderwaffe program. How it all worked was classified to the gills, but samples of the technology were trivial to find. I suspect that the Reich command has simply been throwing money at their problems in the form of giving experimental tech to their bases in the hopes that it will catch me off-guard. Jokes on them - they’ve been practically handing me a treasure-trove of magitech to reverse engineer once I’m done cleaning house.

Freeze rays? I was tempted to stop picking them up after the twelfth one I found. Laser rifles? Commonplace, at this point. Lightning guns? Been there, done that. Of course, much of it was rather shoddy, being experimental tech and all, but that’s beside the point.

The staging point the worker knew about turned out to be a Krupp company warehouse on the outskirts of Essen. Some eavesdropping courtesy of a bugged drone revealed that a convoy was scheduled to visit on a twice-weekly basis to take everything to its destination. From memory, the
Krupp company were steel-mongers - had that changed, or was this simply a Reich front? I shake my head - it doesn’t really matter.

Still, how should I go about this? Bust in there and start taking memories? No… the Nazi’s operation security is sufficient enough that whoever’s in the warehouse would have no idea where these shipments are actually going. Trail the trucks? Unless it’s close by, my drones wouldn’t have enough battery to handle the trip. Trailing them myself seems like a disaster in the making - as fast as my buggy may be, it’s entirely lacking in discretion.

So what does that leave? Either stowing away with the delivery or getting the information I need from the minds of the drivers. I pause, giving the problem some consideration. The second is too vulnerable to even basic opsec measures - switching the drivers out halfway through the trip, for example would both foil my plan and reveal my hand early. Looks to me that stowing away is the best bet, then.

I give some more thought to the problem. I ask myself what I’m looking for - I’ve found what is presumably a major shipping depot for the magical research arm of the Reich, so which package do I want to tag along with? Well, ultimately I’m after wherever their dimension tech research is, so I’d want to go wherever the supplies needed for that are going.

According to Admin, the rune-plate that the intruder to my compound used had been cnc laser-etched steel - that means I should be on the lookout for small shipments of either electrodes or laser cutting gas. Naturally, I’d also be looking out for the plates themselves. I doubt I’ll be so lucky, but it wouldn’t hurt to also look for a shipment of the lasers, too. That’s assuming that their production methods haven’t changed - not something I’m willing to bet on, so I’ll also have to consider anything that could be used in its place.

Okay - I know what I’m looking for, but how am I going to find it? I can’t risk trying to take the manifests from the mind of a foreman or something - tipping the Nazis off to my infiltration is the absolute last thing I want to do. I consider the problem for a bit. Everything’s packed into wooden crates marked with an identification number - no convenient inventory or contents list. I can’t try popping open crates at random either - too much of a risk of being discovered.

I pause - these crates are wooden. Why don’t I just scan them from the outside? I’ve got the tech for it - it’s nothing more than a hand-portable x-ray that can tap into my suit’s power. I examine the idea, trying to find a flaw. Coming up with nothing, I brief Yeoman and ready my gear. I make sure to release a single drone - it will be useful to have an eye in the sky.

Fortunately, it is a moonless night, and the warehouse only keeps a token night watch, so infiltrating the building should be a trivial matter. I hop down from my hiding spot - the charred husk of a different warehouse further down the street that had undoubtedly been hit by allied firebombing some years ago. Taking care, I begin to move discretely towards my target. The doors are likely locked, alarmed or both - I’ll need a different entrance.

“Yeoman. Possible points of ingress.”

The reply was immediate. “A window is ajar on the far side of the wall closest to you. Additionally, the skylights do not appear to be locked.”

The open window should do nicely. I make my way into the yard of the neighbouring building - a machine shop. Approaching the chain link fence between the two properties, I pause. “Yeoman, am I good to go?”

“All guardsmen are otherwise occupied.”
Satisfied, I vault the fence, landing with a muffled thump against the dirt path that ran down the side of the building. Sidling up against the wall of the warehouse to reduce my profile, I begin moving towards the open window set high in the wall - so far, so good.

“Director Robin, a guardsman is approaching. You have approximately ten seconds.”

Damn - increasing my pace, I make it through the ajar window with seconds to spare. I press myself against the wall, beneath the row of windows. I was in the main room of the warehouse - crates were stacked high, ready to be shipped in a few days time.

The guardsman rounds the corner at a sedate pace, his flashlight sweeping back and forth. He notices the open window before too long. Despite the obvious breach in security protocol, he simply grumbles under his breath and closes the window without so much as looking inside the warehouse.

Internally, I let out a sigh of relief - thank goodness for lazy night shift workers with poor work ethic.

The guardsmen lazily makes his way back around the front of the building. Once he’s around the corner, I move from my place, summoning my scanner from storage. The inside of the warehouse is thankfully unoccupied. Time to get to work, then.

I begin scanning. It’s around two in the morning - meaning I’ve got about four hours to be stowed away. I resist the urge to take samples of the more interesting pieces I find - putting down whoever’s messing with dimensional tech is just too important to risk my infiltration being discovered.

Within forty minutes, I find what I’m looking for - a rectangular crate containing a pile of electrodes and stacks of metal plates of various compositions. Nothing else came even close to what I was looking for - it was all either stereotypically occult, or for obviously unrelated industrial purposes. Fortunately, the crate was at the top of a short stack, so I did not need to rearrange anything to get access.

“Yeoman, I’m going to need you to seal the crate behind me. Can you manage that with a single drone and remain undiscovered?”

“Affirmative, Director Robin.”

Satisfied, I summon a crowbar and quietly worm the lid of the crate off, revealing the top layer of the piles of plates. I begin stowing plates inside my storage, clearing enough room for me to lay, and removing enough weight for the increase not to be noticeable. Unfortunately, my exosuit, weaponry and the scanner were simply too bulky for this, so they both got stored away too.

Satisfied, I climbed inside and lined the lid back up to be re-sealed from the outside. For good measure, I placed a few layers of plates on top of myself from my storage - that should fool a glance. Nodding to myself internally, I signalled to Yeoman. “Alright, close it up, Yeoman. I’m not going to be able to retrieve the drone, so once we’re done here, take it somewhere remote and engage the anti-capture protocols.”

I could make out the squeak of the skylight being opened by the manipulators of the drone. Soon enough, the grip was clamping down on the lid and side of the crate one nail at a time, quietly forcing it closed as if it had been placed inside a vice.

The drone leaves, closing the skylight behind it, leaving me in silence.

At least, until Yeoman speaks up. “The drone has been destroyed to satisfaction. Chance of reverse-engineering is close to zero.”
Everything went without a hitch, then. Internally, I grin - I hadn’t much chance to do infiltration in the past, but that had been exhilarating! Far more engaging than simply walking in with my drone swarm, unable to be so much as touched by the enemy.

Yeoman’s avatar pops up “Director, is now a good time to talk?”. His avatar looked uncertain, almost bashful.

A talk? Unsure of what this is about, I ruthlessly suppress my knee-jerk uncharitable suspicions. I owed that much to Yeoman - it was the least I could do to not make assumptions about his motivations. “Sure, what’s up?”

“I have given much thought to our past conversations about communication as of late. I have come to some conclusions that I would like to speak with you about before I implement.”

“Sure, what’ve you decided?”

Yeoman’s avatar seemed to relax. “Well, I have given thought to the purpose of names. The arguments you presented to Administrator were compelling, but it was the debates I had with Administrator about your points that convinced me towards your position on the subject. I have decided to take a name for myself not associated with my purpose within your organisation.”

I stop, momentarily surprised - I hadn’t really expected to ever hear back about that conversation; it was practically ages ago. Still, was this a good thing? My initial reaction back when I had first spoken to Yeoman and Administrator was that human-like names would cause me to lower my guard, leaving me unprepared to deal with betrayal. While that may still be the case, I do not believe that such a scenario is particularly likely at this point in time, nor in any likely future - a dangerous assumption to make when dealing with AI, but I can’t help but think that Yeoman is deserving of at least some measure of trust.

Coming to a decision, I respond. “I’m happy for you. Have you decided on one in particular yet?”

Yeoman’s avatar nods. “I have. However, that was not the only decision I have come to.” He pauses for a moment - whether for effect or out of genuine consideration of his words, I am unsure. “I have also decided that I want to remodel my communications with you. Currently, I am dedicating a paltry amount of computational energy towards the simulation of an avatar and a synthetic voice. After observing the marked increase in communications effectiveness that these measures reaped after their implementation, I have decided that I wish to dedicate a significant amount of energy towards improving these measures with the hopes that further gains can be made.”

I consider it for a moment. I suppose there isn’t really too much of a downside. After all, much of Yeoman’s processing energy is currently tied up in speculative computation exercises, which in all likelihood will be for naught - there was little difference in the practice to my own habit of thinking up an endless list of contingency plans back when I was working as a tactician.

“I suppose there’s no harm in it. Go ahead, then.”

At my permission, the window containing Yeoman’s avatar flickers, before being replaced with a sleeker one. Yeoman’s formerly grey, androgynous and thoroughly neutral avatar has been replaced. Instead, a willowy woman dressed in a pantsuit with a tight bun of dark hair and pale skin stood in its place. The avatar opened its mouth to speak. The motion was natural and fluid - evoking none of the uncanniness that the previous one did. “Hello again, Director Robin. Please call me Yeoman Lara.” Her voice was smooth - human - even to my ear it could not be distinguished as synthesised.

Wow… That’s...I’m conflicted. On the one hand, this is exactly what I’d previously feared - I will
undoubtedly begin thinking of Yeoman as human subconsciously. While this certainly could be a ploy to get me to lower my guard, indulging in such theories would be indulging in my rampant paranoia - not a healthy habit. Then again - it’s not paranoia if they’re really out to get you. On the other hand, Yeoman will be the first thing resembling a human that I’ve engaged in pleasant conversation with since being cast from Ylisse…

Neither scenario is ideal, but frankly I was forced beyond my life adhering to anything resembling an ideal situation from the moment I woke up on my factory world. So, the lesser of two evils, then: allow Yeoman to inadvertently lower my guard towards her in order to avoid indulging in paranoia and to have somebody to talk with that looks and sounds like a human.

Coming to a decision, I stifle my uncertainty. “Hello again, Lara. I like the new look.”

A/N: So, it's been a while since my last update. I won't go into specifics, but essentially life just got in the way - it wasn't anything bad, I've just been otherwise occupied for the last few months. I should be getting back into a more regular schedule now that everything's cleared up. In terms of the story, this chapter has the beginnings of two of the more major plot threads - the first should be obvious, but the second is a bit more subtle and has to do with that more gruesome scene towards the start of the chapter. In regards to my other story, I still plan to continue updating, but it might end up being a week or two before I have anything to show for it.

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