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Reborn to Master the Blade:

From **Hero-King**
to Extraordinary
Squire ♀

Author: Hayaken
Illustrator: Nagu



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“I...I can’t
believe it...
Me, with a
special-class
Rune...”

Leone,
still awestruck,
gaped at the
special-class Rune
on the back of
her right hand.

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Rafinha

(Rani)

Inglis's childhood friend, with ambitions of becoming a knight. Lately, she's been struggling with the gap between her ideals of justice and reality.

Leone

A future knight whose brother is the traitorous holy knight Leon. She is accompanying Inglis and Rafinha to Highland.

Inglis

(Chris)

The former hero-king, reborn in the far future as a girl. An Artifact has changed her physical form into that of a little girl!

Liselotte

The proud daughter of a duke, and a future knight. She discovers a new aptitude during the visit to Highland.



*“Liselotte?!
Can’t you tell
it’s us?”*

*“Liselotte!
What are
you doing?!
Come on,
listen!
Liselotte!”*

*As the two called
out, something ate
at Inglis—a sinking
feeling that something
was amiss. This person
didn’t seem like
Liselotte at all. Neither
this woman’s intensity,
nor her presence, nor
her aura were that of
a knights’ academy
student.*

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Chapter I: Inglis, Age 16—Far-Off Highland (1)

A bright blue filled Inglis's vision from both above and below. Looking down, she saw more of it not from the sky, but from the sea.

She and her friends had taken off from Chiral, and after soaring over Karelia, they were now above the open ocean. They were on their way to a meeting with the machinator, one of Highland's Triumvirate. However, he was also apparently the father of Ambassador Theodore as well as Rin—that is, his little sister Cyrene. There, they would arrange treatment for Eris's weapon form, which was damaged in Inglis's part-proposal, part-sparring match with Dux Jildegrieva. She was also to put out discreet feelers to the technicians working on Eris as to whether Rin could be cured.

And personally, she hoped a Highland defensive system or a deadly weapon of theirs would go haywire and attack her. Her match with Dux Jildegrieva had lit a fire under her. It made her want to scrap with whatever the machinator's technological prowess had accomplished as well.

"Wow! This is so nice! The sky and the sea are both such a beautiful blue! We've never been in a place like this before, huh, Chris?" Rafinha stretched languidly on the deck of the flying battleship carrying them to Highland.

"Yep, this is a first." Inglis smiled. This was a once-in-two-lifetimes experience. Definitely something worth seeing.

"Agreed. It's stunning." Liselotte nodded.

"Well, yes, but..." Leone peeked over at Inglis as if she wanted to say something.

"Don't bother. Paying attention to her antics is how she gets you," Eris warned.

Eris, Leone, Liselotte, and Rafinha were all aboard the *Star Princess*, which they had brought along. Inglis, meanwhile, her legs bent, was carrying it around the battleship with both hands as she chatted with Rafinha. Needless to say, the

reborn hero-king was training at every possible moment. As routine as it had become recently, it was still probably a bit strange for the others to see someone who looked like she was six years old performing such feats.

“It’s already been a few days; I hope we get there soon,” Rafinha pondered. Then she turned to a Highlander knight standing nearby. “Hey, Wilma! We’re almost there, right? How much longer? How many hours, how many minutes, how many days?”

The knight was a beautiful young woman with lustrous golden hair. On her forehead was a stigmata, the mark of a Highlander. Her hair hung just a bit off her shoulders, short for a woman, which gave her a bit of an air of military discipline. She looked a little younger than Eris, and a little older than Inglis’s friends, but looks were a poor gauge of either a Highlander or a hial menace’s age, so it was impossible to tell who was the senior. Except for her face, her entire body was covered with heavy black armor, ready for action at any time.

She was the captain of the Highland battleship which had been sent for Eris. Ambassador Theodore had his own duties to attend to in Karelia and was thus unable to accompany them. She had been the Highlander who had answered his summons. She seemed reasonable—hopefully.

However, she remained silent, ignoring Rafinha.

“Wilma! Wilma! Can you hear me?!”

“Stop bothering me.” Wilma shot a glare at Rafinha.

“Awww, but when we get to Highland, you’re supposed to show us around, right? So I thought since we’re going to spend that much time together, we should be friendly!”

Rafinha seemed to have fully embraced the idea of cross-cultural communication. And while Wilma was brusque and standoffish, she wasn’t sneering or mocking, which did seem to make her friendly for a Highlander. Rafinha took that as a sign to keep trying to befriend her.

The knight remained silent.

“C’mon, don’t ignore me, that’s mean! Wilma, you’re being mean! Wilmaaa!”

“Quiet down! Which one of us is the mean one anyway?! You’re making that little kid carry you around! That’s terrible! Are the people of the surface really such brutes?!” Wilma shot back.

Rafinha was indeed standing on the *Star Princess*, which the young-looking Inglis was hefting around. Wilma had no clue Inglis was just obsessed with training.

“No, Chris is the only one on the surface like this! She said she wanted it to be heavier! I’m just helping her out!”

“To be honest, this does come off in bad taste.” Eris sighed.

Inglis turned to Wilma. “How about you ride along with Rani and the others, then? I think that would show that it’s no big deal, and I’d appreciate the more intense training, so…” Wilma’s armor looked heavy—that would make for a good challenge.

“I-I would never do such a thing!” Wilma flatly refused.

“Then answer me!” Rafinha asked. “C’mon, how long until we get to Highland?”

Wilma paused before acquiescing. “We’re just under the arranged contact point. All that’s left is to…” She trailed off as the flying battleship entered a thick bank of clouds which suddenly blocked her vision. “Once we make it upward through this cloud bank…we’ll be right there.”

“Wow! We’re almost there! I wonder what it’ll be like,” Rafinha said, giddy.

“I’m really looking forward to it, Rani. I wonder if some superweapon will attack me! We’re going to the machinator’s base, so there’s probably gonna be something even more impressive than Dux Jil to see!”

“We’re not going there to fight! I’m more curious about Highland’s meals, and snacks, and maybe what kind of clothes are in fashion!”

“You’re not coming here on vacation!” Wilma scolded.

The clouds broke at that very moment, revealing a clear sky. The flying battleship had passed through the cloud bank and come out above.

“Anyway, that’s Illuminas, the home island of our machinator. You should

consider yourselves honored among surface dwellers to cast your eyes on it!" Wilma pointed dead ahead as she spoke proudly.

But all that the rest of them could see was more of the same bright blue sky.

"Huh? Uh, Wilma, there isn't anything there."

"As expected." Wilma smiled knowingly.

"Hm?"

"Camouflage. Our islands can be hidden, made to blend in with the sky. It's something our advanced technology, unrivaled even by the Altar, can do."

"Really? That's so cool!" Rafinha said.

"It looks like there's nothing at all there. Quite impressive..." Liselotte agreed.

"Yes. I guess everything here is different from the surface." Leone was impressed as well. They were all starting to understand the power of Highland technology.

"Eris...do you sense the flow of mana?" Inglis asked.

"Huh? No, but I don't think it works like that?"

"I'm not sure, but things seem too quiet... Wilma, is Highland really there?"

"Stop with the nonsense. That's our point of contact. Are you trying to imply we're deceiving you? What would we stand to gain from doing that?"

"No, I didn't mean it that way, just maybe something unexpected happened..."

As Inglis spoke, another Highland soldier ran to report to Wilma. Unlike hers, their face was completely covered by a helmet and could not be seen at all.

"Captain! We've lost contact with Illuminas!"

"What?! But it's right there, just camouflaged!"

"There's no sign of the camouflage magic, ma'am!"

"What the—?! So it really isn't there?! What's going—"

Splashhhhhhh!

The earsplitting sound of a gigantic rush of water rose up to them from far below, as if even the water itself had come this high.

Rafinha gasped. “Wh-What?! Something must have fallen to make that noise!”

“It came from over there! To starboard!” Liselotte said.

“I just saw a huge waterspout come up from between the clouds!” Leone said.

Eris’s brow furrowed. “I’d guess something happened up in Highland.”

“Chaos in one of Highland’s centers of power? Maybe one of their deadly weapons went wild, maybe they’re under attack by a gigantic magicite beast, or maybe it’s a raid by the Steelblood Front or the Papal League...” Inglis surmised. “Whatever it is, it’s not normal.”

Eris paused. “Neither is your expression. Seriously, why are you like this...?” Eris let out a deep, deep sigh. Inglis’s young eyes were shining like gems.

Rafinha also sighed as she looked down from the *Star Princess*. “Chris, you look like a little girl seeing her birthday cake right now...”

“She may look like a child, but somehow she’s the same as ever,” Eris bemoaned.

“Nah, this is definitely how she acted when she was six. Believe me, I was there.” Rafinha waved a hand.

“Incorrigible, then...” Leone chuckled wryly.

Wilma ordered her surrounding knights and soldiers, “Set a heading for the sound’s source! We need to get to the bottom of this! Something may have happened on Illuminas!”

“Wilma, we’re going ahead to scout!” Inglis, still hoisting the *Star Princess* above her head, darted forward.

“Ah! What are you doing?!” Wilma asked.

“Helping out! We need to get Eris looked at too!” With a smile, Inglis leaped from the deck of the flying battleship, bringing Rafinha and the others along, of

course.

“Eeek?!” The *Star Princess* hadn’t started its engine yet and as a result plunged rapidly. No wonder everyone aboard was screaming.

“Er, Rani. Could you take the controls?”

“Yeah, I know, I know, but tell me before you jump! You scared me for no reason!” Rafinha grasped the *Star Princess*’s controls and started its engine. The plunging Flygear regained its lift and came to a stop.

“Sorry, sorry. I couldn’t wait.” Inglis flipped herself up and onboard. With a complement of five, it was rather cramped.

“There are too many people here, it’s crowded!” Rafinha complained.

“Agreed...” Leone followed.

“I can make room!” Liselotte activated her Artifact’s Gift. Pale wings stretched from her back and she soared, a hand on the Flygear’s rails as she flew alongside. Leading ahead of Wilma’s battleship, they dove while turning to starboard, and soon a large island entered their vision.

“Is that—?!” Inglis began.

Remote though it may have been, the buildings and structures on the island were obviously unlike any of the surface. Rectangular, boxlike forms were predominant, and all were decorated in the manner of the carvings on Artifacts. If those were what controlled the flow of mana within Artifacts and allowed them to produce magical phenomena, then perhaps the buildings themselves were as Artifacts.

“That’s not just an island! It’s Highland!” Eris announced.

“So *that’s* Highland!” Rafinha marveled.

“Then that splash we heard must have been it landing in the water?!” Leone asked.

“I’m amazed it’s staying afloat!” Liselotte remarked.

“Yes, that’s probably due to their technological capabilities... But something strange is definitely going on...” Eris said.

She was right. The plan had been to rendezvous in the skies, but it seemed to have made an emergency water landing.

“Look over there, Eris!” Inglis’s finger pointed at a school of fish moving through the waters. Each was more than twice the size of a person, and there were dozens of them—moving as one mass toward the desert island that part of Highland had become. The movement was clearly unnatural, with some purpose behind it.

“They’re—! They’re headed for Highland?!” Rafinha exclaimed.

One of the fish jumped, breaking the surface of the water and showing itself. Its hide was hardened, studded with gemlike clumps. Its eyes were crazed, and the horn on its forehead was jagged like a saw.

“Magicite beasts! They’re attacking Highland!” Leone said.

“Ooh! Great timing!” It was a fairly large school, the kind that might provide a good challenge. Inglis didn’t know if it was what had forced Highland to land, but truly oceangoing magicite beasts were new and exciting to her anyway.

“Lady Eris! Something is coming from Highland as well!” Just as Leone said, they could see something flying from Highland.

“That’s...Mr. Dragon?!”

Rafinha’s “Mr. Dragon”—that is, the ancient dragon Fufailbane, who had been turned into a mechanical being and had been taken away by Archlord Evel—this was not. However, this was no living dragon either. Someone had changed this one into a machine also, with parts like those of a Flygear or Flygear Port all over its body.

“Ooh! Mechanical ancient dragons?!” Inglis had missed her chance for a fight with the mechanized version of Fufailbane. Getting that fight here and now would have been more than even she could have wished for. However, looking at the beast, it was notably smaller than Fufailbane—a few at one time like this would probably be quite satisfying though.

“No. Those are mechanical dragons! One of Highland’s defenses! They’re made from living dragons.”

“So, something like a younger mechanical ancient dragon?” Did that mean Highland was turning regular dragons into machines? That made sense, considering there existed a method to do the same to ancient dragons.

“I suppose. Though I’ve never seen a mechanical *ancient* dragon,” Eris said.

“Looks like the mechanical dragons are off to intercept the magicite beasts,” Rafinha said.

“Yeah, it does look that way,” Leone agreed.

“What a waste! Er, I mean, let’s help them out to limit their losses!” Inglis said.

“You just want to fight them yourself, Chris!” Rafinha protested.

“Of course! I haven’t had a real fight since Dux Jil!” That was why she had been training so intently, but nothing beat the real thing. She was sure he was giving it his all too. That’s why she needed to take every opportunity to improve herself, so he didn’t have a leg up on her in the rematch. Her goal was to defeat him, not with the power of a hial menace, but with her own strength. She needed to set high standards for herself and unlock the power of hi-aether on her own.

“I’m not going to stop you, but don’t get too worked up and destroy the mechanical dragons too, okay? That could be a problem,” Eris said to Inglis.

“With their current course, we’ll be between the two sides as they come together!” Leone said.

“I hope we aren’t caught in the mechanical dragons’ attacks...” Liselotte worried.

“It’s okay, Leone, Liselotte. I’ll get to them before that!” Inglis replied.

“Oh! Booster mode, Chris?!” Rafinha asked.

The *Star Princess* had a booster mode that allowed it to reach far greater speeds than its normal pace, but it didn’t last very long. Rafinha was asking whether to activate it.

“Not yet, Rani. Once we use that, we’ll have to wait a while... Better to keep it at the ready!” It was better to save things that could turn around a fight for

emergencies. Plus, Inglis wanted to test her own might. *I'll go on my own!* She climbed up the prow of the Flygear and focused.

“Dragon Lore!”

Crossing her arms in front of her body, she rested an index finger on each shoulder.

She traced down across her chest, her waist, her legs, sheathing herself in dragon lore along the path of her fingers. At the same time, she converted aether to mana and covered herself with it. Applying the same magic with which she created blades, she formed the ice into armor.

The flow of mana she used to create this armor was based on her observations of the workings of Dragon Claw, King Carlias's dirk Artifact. Dragon Claw was a level beyond other upper-class Artifacts, something which might be called “super-upper-class,” and was the twin of Rafael's Dragon Fang.

The action of the magic overlapped completely with that of the dragon lore, transforming it. She called this fusion of mana and dragon lore “dragon magic.” And it created not simple magical ice, but an azure suit of armor resembling that created by Dragon Claw.

“Gwohhhh!”

The armor, imbued deeply with dragon lore, made the roar of a dragon as it sprang into existence.

“Blue dragon armor?!” Leone gasped.

“Inglis, what *is* that?!” Liselotte asked.

“It's an application of dragon lore. I guess you'd call it dragon ice armor? I had Mr. Rochefort show me how the Dragon Claw His Majesty issued him worked until I figured out how to do it.”

Of course, not only was the armor sturdy on its own, the power flowing through it improved her own abilities as well. However, the flight function that the actual Dragon Claw had was too complex, and she hadn't been able to reproduce it. Summed up, it was a slightly weaker Aether Shell. “Weaker” didn't mean much in comparison to aether, though, and this way she could use it in

conjunction with other aether abilities. And combining this with Aether Shell was sure to take her even further.

“Wasn’t Dragon Claw supposed to be a national treasure?” Leone asked, her tone one of shock.

King Carlias had only just entrusted Rochefort with it before Inglis and the others had left for Highland. He had returned from the palace with it just when Inglis was training after school with Arles.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Liselotte asked.

“Good or bad, what’s done is done. I’m impressed she only had to see that little of it.” Eris shrugged, and smiled at Inglis.

“Well, worrying about every single thing Chris does is just a ticket to heartburn. Go for it!”

“Yeah, Rani! Here I go!”



Inglis nimbly leaped forward from the prow of the Flygear. If she had really wanted to get some momentum, she would have done it with Aether Shell already active as well and put her full strength into it, but that would have sunk the *Star Princess*. So for now, a light hop was best. However, that meant she'd lose speed and the *Star Princess* would catch up with her.

Therefore...!

She spun around midair and brandished her palm at the horizon. "Aether Strike!"

Blammmmm!

The recoil from the blast of aetheric light sent her rocketing forward. Pulling away from the *Star Princess*, she dived toward the school of magicite beasts.

"Grahhhh!" A particularly lively one reacted swiftly, leaping from the water to treat her as a self-delivering meal.

"Thank you!" Just before its fang-studded jaw snapped shut, she spun to avoid it. "I was just thinking I needed somewhere to stand!" Perched aboard its snout, she leaped again, toward a point ahead of the school. The unfathomably deep ocean awaited her. She would sink—or, *no, she wouldn't*.

Clink!

The sound announced the formation of an ice floe beneath her feet. The dragon ice armor was—of course—*ice*, and Fufailbane, the source of her dragon lore, was an ice dragon with unparalleled power to freeze. Put the two together, and that power extended to the armor as well. A little bit of focusing on her feet, and the chill emanating from her gear could form a foothold for her. She could run in a straight line on water without ice, but not if she was to stop suddenly or turn quickly. Forming these footholds, on the other hand, let her fight with the same swiftness as she did on dry land. This had limited uses, but it was good enough here.

“Excellent! This makes it easy to fight! Here I go!”

Ahead, two magicite beasts were sweeping in from either side to leap to the attack. Building a corridor of ice as she went, she rushed toward the one on the right. “Haaaah!” Jumping high, she closed in on the beast as it did the same to her.

She had moved in quickly—too fast for it to intercept her. Leaping toward a target was plenty aggressive, but that had a drawback: what if the target changed course when you could no longer do the same? A bird or the like could control its trajectory with its wings, but a fish would be left high and dry. She showed no mercy as she swung a roundhouse kick into its side.

Bammmmm!

The magicite beast was sent flying sideways, crashing into its counterpart. Their momentum canceling each other out, they got tangled together and began to fall. Inglis chased after them, running ahead to where they’d land.

“Rani! Leone!”

As she called out her friends’ names, she kicked the beasts high. Far higher than their jumps, high enough to end up in the path of the oncoming *Star Princess*. Then another sharp horn, another gaping maw, appeared beneath her feet. It wanted to swallow her whole, but her short hop handled that too. Evading the chomp by a hair’s breadth, she grabbed the beast by the horn and pulled it from the water.

“And this one’s yours, Liselotte!”

She sent her catch soaring with a punch. It writhed on its way up to join the previous two. Magicite beasts couldn’t be hurt by normal physical attacks. A punch could send one flying but wouldn’t actually wound it. Letting Rafinha and the others finish them off was the most effective tactic.

“Eeek! Something’s flying this way, and it smells fishy!” Rafinha yelled.

“If we let them fall, they’ll dive again!” Leone said. “We need to get them on the first try!”

“I’ll take the one a bit farther off!” Liselotte said.

“I’ll handle the Flygear! You concentrate on dealing with them!” Eris gripped the controls of the *Star Princess* while Rafinha and the others prepared to deal with the magicite beasts.

Shiny Flow’s arrows of light flew forth, phantasms emanated from an extended dark greatsword, and a blizzard spewed forth from her halberd’s decoration of a dragon’s jaw. The chaotic but overwhelming assault destroyed the magicite beasts.

“Good work! Here come more, then!” Inglis sent one after another upward toward Rafinha and the others.

“Hey, Chris! You’re going too fast! Deal with some yourself!” Rafinha’s complaint came only after seven or eight in a row.

“Mm. I guess...” Inglis agreed. She looked down. She’d built up quite the platform for herself with her footwork. “All right, I’ll deal with some down here!”

She released the dragon ice armor magic. Forming her hands into fists, she brought them together at her waist as if she was drawing a sword. In that stance, she used magic to create a blade of ice while overlapping it with her dragon lore with a drawing motion. By intentionally mixing dragon lore and magic, a change occurred.

“Gwohhhh!”

A blue sword sprang forth with a draconic roar. This was another version of dragon magic—dragon icebrand. She wasn’t yet able to use both it and the dragon ice armor at the same time, but for now, she had enough of a platform to maneuver without relying on the armor. She had created this weapon once before, during her battle with Dux Jildegrieva, and she wanted to try it out again.

The gems studding the magicite beast leaping for her were blue. That meant this monster would be resistant to her ice sword, but attacking it with that

added challenge sounded interesting.

“Haaah!” Leaping up from her ice platform, Inglis swung the sword into the oncoming magicite beast. Its azure blade easily sliced into the beast, neatly bisecting it. As its remains sank, they disappeared.

“Hm, nice edge!” If it had just been the magical blade of ice, it would have barely left a scratch, but thanks to the dragon lore, her sword practically ignored the blue gems’ resistant properties. Aether it was not, but it sure was stronger than magic alone. A clever invention, if she did say so herself. The black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front could conjure a sword from aether; she’d like to cross blades with that someday and see how it went with this sword of hers.

As she thought about that, she carved through oncoming magicite beasts one after another.

“Chris! That’s the last one! Go for it!”

Rafinha was right. Time had flown while she’d been having fun.

“Aww, last one? It’s sad to say goodbye, but I guess the time has come!” Inglis was grateful that they had helped her out in her practice with dragon magic. Since this was her last chance, she wanted to carefully monitor the quality of her cuts until the beast was neatly filleted. Focusing on that, she raised her blade.

Fwoosh!

Only for a swarm of beams of light to come flying from behind her.

“Ah!” She sensed them in time and evaded them with the grace of a dancer. However, the magicite beast she faced was not so nimble. The beams skewered it, and it twitched as it dissolved.

“Ah! What a waste!” She’d wanted to take out all the beasts herself. But that was a new attack, which meant there was a new challenger. Inglis turned her attention to the rear.

The beams of light had come from the mechanical dragons which had sortied from Highland. That attack had been one coordinated volley. She counted six of them. They awaited her in a neat file.

She fell quiet, watching them in turn.

For a moment, all was silent. Had the attack that had finished off the magicite beasts been aimed only at them, or at her as well? It was hard to tell from one volley alone. So she needed to see how they proceeded. What would it be? Maybe...

“Chris! C’mon! Get up here!” Rafinha yelled.

“It’s probably not a wise idea to get too close to them. Let’s get out of here!” Eris brought the *Star Princess* down toward Inglis.

“Gwohhh!”

At the same time, the mechanical dragons howled all at once. Flashes of light appeared in their gaping maws and began to swell. The same light that Inglis had just seen was now aimed at her.

“Excellent!” So she was a target. That was good. That meant the fight wasn’t over yet.

“What do you mean by that?!” Rafinha and Eris both shouted.

“Don’t worry, Rani,” Inglis said. “It’s fine as long as I don’t break any of them, right, Eris?!”

“Well, yes, but—!”

Even if Inglis couldn’t attack, there was plenty she wanted to try out in relation to their attacks. It was important to wring the most experience she could out of any situation and any fight. Letting the dragon icebrand disappear, she switched again to the dragon ice armor.

“Eris, let’s get back to Wilma! Maybe she can call off the dragons!” Rafinha suggested to Eris.

“Yes, let’s!”

“Be a good girl and don’t break them, Chris!”

“Fine...” Inglis nodded, and prepared for the mechanical dragons’ attack.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” a voice suddenly cut in. At the same time, another Flygear approached from behind the *Star Princess*. “Override intercept command! Shift to standby alert! Fall silent, ye dragons!”

It was Wilma’s voice. Glowing sigils rose from her in her Flygear. Inglis assumed the magical light could control the mechanical dragons somehow. In any case, they did stop their attacks immediately at Wilma’s call. Turning about-face, they departed toward the fallen piece of Highland.

“Awwww! Wait, don’t go! At least give me one attack!” Inglis wanted to try her dragon ice armor against it and see just how durable it was.

“The mechanical dragons are leaving!” Eris said.

“Thank goodness!” Rafinha said.

“It looks like we’ve steered clear of any friendly fire incidents,” Leone said.

“Yes, we’ve managed to avoid anything untoward happening,” Liselotte agreed. Everyone seemed relieved, except for Inglis.

Wilma paused, taking in the situation before she said, “The mechanical dragons are programmed to attack incoming hostiles. We’re okay now. I thank you for your help, and I apologize that it was needed. That said, I didn’t get a good look, but this girl’s movements seemed...” Wilma trailed off.

“But it’s true!” Inglis protested. “I think it would have been better if you left at least one to attack me. What if I’m hostile too? I think you’re placing a bit too much trust in people of the surface! Plus, you’re Highlanders! When did you start caring whether surface people got caught in an attack on magicite beasts?”

“That’s a rather strange way to look at things,” Wilma remarked awkwardly.

Rafinha drew close to Inglis and tugged on her ear. “C’mon, Chris! Don’t be selfish! The problem’s solved, and that’s what we’re after! And Ambassador Theodore and Cyrene would never do anything like that!”

“Oww, Rani, that hurts! Fufailbane got away, so I at least wanted to see an

attack from one of these guys! Plus, I think it would be a useful experiment for them. And I wasn't going to fight back!"

"Sheesh! Big or tiny, on the surface or in Highland, this part of you never changes! Anyway, no! Behave yourself!"

"Now, now. There's no reason to scold a child for showing enthusiasm," Wilma said.

"You're spoiling her, Wilma! And I'm telling you, she looks like an innocent little girl, but she really is the same age as the rest of us!"

"Sounds like a mess... Anyway, behave yourself when we get to Highland. Though it might be a mess there too..." Wilma cast her eyes toward the piece of Highland cast adrift on the seas. "I'm glad it came down over water, though. It would've been disastrous had it crashed onto land..."

"Yeah, that's true," Inglis agreed.

"Does this sort of thing happen often?" Eris asked Wilma.

"No. A few hiccups from time to time, but this is the first time I've seen anything like this... We're going to need to isolate the cause."

"I guess we're showing up at a bad time, then." Eris sighed.

"Something that doesn't normally happen might imply the presence of someone who isn't normally there. Like infiltrators from the Steelblood Front, or maybe the Papal League! Deadly weapons, magicite beasts, hostile forces galore! It'll be a real party!" Inglis cheered.

"Whew... Just why are you along, anyway?" Eris asked.

"Are you sure you should be bringing her to Highland?" Wilma asked.

"I-It's okay! I'll keep an eye on her! It'll be fine! I think," Rafinha insisted, trying to persuade herself despite her own doubts.

Chapter II: Inglis, Age 16—Far-Off Highland (2)

Everyone returned to Wilma's ship and landed in Highland while aboard. The flying battleship docks were located underground, and their scale and technology were simply incomparable to the knights' academy's facilities on Lake Bolt. In addition to the ship on which they had arrived, there were many others moored there, and the sight of them in a line was simply spectacular. There must have been dozens.

Karelia had only two such ships: that of the Paladins, of which the use was lent by Ambassador Theodore, and the flagship of the Rangers, which had been captured from Venefic. Each seemed to have a lighter complement than Karelia's, but still there was an overwhelming difference in force projection, even compared to a major surface power like Karelia.

Additionally, Inglis noticed a number of unfamiliar machines flying through the air, carrying materials and other objects. Autonomous mechanical hands were both overhauling existing ships and building new ones. Nothing at all like this existed on the surface.

"Wow, this is amazing! What's that? A cart moving things around on its own?" Rafinha asked.

"And that metal hand," Leone commented. "Is it moving by itself to build a battleship?"

"It's so advanced I haven't the foggiest what's going on," Liselotte said. "I suppose everything here is completely different from the surface."

Each stared around in awe.

"Impressive..." Inglis quietly murmured. She could sense complex flows of mana from the machinery and parts in the dock. Some magical effect seemed to control the workings, but she couldn't understand it at all. Still, though, these were devices automatically controlled by a source of mana. In other words, they were incredibly advanced and precise Artifacts.

“It’s overwhelming.” Even Eris gaped in amazement, as if she’d never gotten a very good look at this before.

“There’s nothing wrong with being surprised. The arsenal of Illuminas is the most advanced in Highland. Nothing else compares. Now, if you’d come this way.” Wilma led Inglis and her friends down the gangway to the pier.

“So this is the home of the machinator...” Inglis mused as she followed.

“The arms produced here are for the dux and the quaestor as well. The Triumvirate’s alliance is firm.”

“I don’t see many people around, though. Is this mostly automated?”

“This is an emergency. Since the island has fallen into the sea, everyone must be out trying to handle the mess. If the city was damaged, we’ll have to provide aid as well.”

“I see...”

“Then shouldn’t the rest of the crew be coming with us?” Rafinha asked.

“Indeed, where are they?” Wilma turned and prompted with a knowing look. Her subordinates, who had been on the deck, were already gone.

“Huh?”

“They’ve already returned,” she replied.

“Returned? To where?”

“To the homunculi pools. They were created for the sole purpose of manning that battleship. They can do nothing else.”

“What?!” Rafinha gasped. “S-So those people *weren’t* people?!”

“That’s right.”

“They...didn’t seem inhuman. I thought they were all just shy,” Leone said.

“Truly astounding technology,” Liselotte said.

“It really is,” Rafinha agreed. “All of it...”

The three were stunned again.

“So, they are extremely advanced golems that can understand human speech,

then?” Inglis asked.

“I feel like that’s the best way to think of them,” Wilma answered.

“I see...” As far as Inglis remembered from her past life, a golem’s form depended very much on the material it was made from. If a golem was indistinguishable from a human at a glance... That meant, well... That meant it was best not to think about this any further.

“I don’t know the technical details. I’m just a knight.”

Wilma’s rank was probably similar to that which Rahl and Fars had held. She was entrusted with a battleship and with Theodore’s orders, so was likely ranked fairly high among knights. Though since she served the Triumvirate, and they the Papal League, there might be slight differences.

“All right... Stop here.” Wilma stopped at one of the passages leading from the arsenal’s cavernous expanse.

“A wall of light... Is that a barrier?” Inglis could feel intense mana. It didn’t have any human control, but it felt similar to when a spell was being cast.

“Yes. Don’t touch it. It will repel those without authorization.” Wilma stood in front of the wall as she said, “Privilege level: administrative. Authorize temporary passage, four unscreened individuals.” A ray of light lanced toward her stigmata, and the wall disappeared. “Let’s go. Stay close to me. If you wander off, the barrier will activate.”

“This technology is amazing.” An Artifact’s Gift required a wielder to activate it. Yet this was able to achieve complicated tasks like determining whether its user had a stigmata or temporarily disabling the barrier with no human intervention.

This sort of complex control should be impossible without human intent, yet it had been automated. “If this wall is like an Artifact, then where does the mana to power its magic come from? How does it decide to recognize your stigmata, or allow exceptions?” Inglis’s mind raced at the possibilities. She could spend an entire day just examining the wall.

“Come on, Chris, what are you doing? Wilma said not to wander off.” Rafinha scooped her up.

“Ah, um. Sorry, Rani.”

Leone also had a question for Wilma. “Excuse me... Why did you just say ‘four’? Aren’t there five of us?”

“Indeed,” Liselotte agreed. “I was wondering that as well.”

“There should be no problem with letting a hial menace through, right? After all, we, Highland, created them.”

“Oh, I see,” Leone replied.

“That does seem to make sense,” Liselotte said.

“A welcome home, then. I appreciate it.” In contrast to her words, Eris’s expression was indifferent and showed no pleasure.

“The end of the passage is pretty far off. If only we had a Flygear.” Rafinha was right: the light at the end of the tunnel was still far off.

“Yes. Agreed.” Wilma approached a crest of some sort carved into the wall. “Requesting a vehicle for six. Destination: central laboratories.” Again, a light shone on her stigmata. The wall opened silently, and a Flygear emerged from within. It was shaped like a saucer, with a railing all around, somewhat reminiscent of a miniaturized Flygear Port.

“Wow! That’s amazing!” Rafinha exclaimed in glee.

“That is very convenient...” Leone agreed.

“But how does such a thing operate?” Liselotte asked.

“Automated logistics. Not just here, there are countless terminals like this all over Illuminas. Get in,” Wilma replied.

“All right, I’ll pilot it—where are the controls?” Rafinha asked.

“Its operation is automatic too. All we have to do is tell it where we’re going.”

“Woooow! Incredible!” Rafinha was overjoyed.

Leone, meanwhile, was becoming more and more overwhelmed. “I suppose I should have expected such things from where Artifacts and hial menaces are created...”

Liselotte nodded. "Quite agreed..."

"All right, let's go." At Wilma's command, the Flygear took off. Clearing the long passageway, they entered the open air. As they exited from the side of a mountain, the full splendor of Highland revealed itself.

A metropolis spread out before them, one incomparably larger than even Karelia's capital of Chiral. As they'd seen from afar, the houses were of matching boxlike form, arrayed in an even grid, and their milk-white walls were decorated with green sigils. Even the trees were neatly placed and trimmed, giving an overwhelming sense of neatness and order.

"All the houses are the same size!" Rafinha remarked.

"They're all precisely measured..." Leone agreed.

"There *is* a sense of organization that makes it look extremely strictly planned..." Liselotte said.

"Wilma, are those small matching buildings where Highlanders live?" Inglis asked.

"Yes, that's right."

"Then the larger buildings are for other purposes?"

"There are no signs or anything! I can't tell what's what!" Rafinha stared down in awe.

"I bet you're looking for a restaurant, Rafinha," Leone remarked.

"Ah, you could tell? I want to have a tasty meal, and then visit a Highland tailor, and somewhere where I can get souvenirs. Where are those, Wilma?"

"We don't have anything like that. Anything you need gets delivered."

"Whaaat?!" Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte gasped in shock.

"They just get it for free?!" Rafinha asked.

"That's so different from the surface," Leone said.

"Then, Highlanders don't have to work or anything?!" Liselotte asked Wilma.

"We've moved beyond the need for labor. With some exceptions, of course.

Research scientists, or people like me. This is the machinator's home island, so many of its people want to be researchers."

"I see... If their needs are automatically supplied, then people don't need to work," Inglis pondered. Perhaps this was the end point of human society as a whole. The world had advanced since the lifetime of King Inglis. At least *here*.

"There are no fields or farms, though," Rafinha remarked. "Where do you get your food—oh, right, from the surface in exchange for Artifacts..."

"It seems like a nice place, maybe, for the people who live here? But meanwhile we have to fight desperately to defend our land from magicite beasts, and that..." Leone began.

"But without those Artifacts, we'd have no hope in doing so, so..." Liselotte replied.

"There's no point in worrying about it. We do what we have to do. That's all that matters," Eris reminded them.

"The surface and Highland may not be equal, but we do rely on each other. That's why we're allowing your entry, and repairing your hial menace, without asking for anything in return," Wilma said.

"I suppose we can be thankful for that."

"Honestly, I think the idea of being freed from the labor needed to survive is great. That means you're allowed to focus on mastering the blade, and train and fight as much as you want, right? I'm jealous!" Inglis said. A world where duty and obligations didn't apply and she could devote herself to what she wanted to do sounded wonderful to her.

Eris, Leone, and Liselotte all eyed Inglis uneasily.

"Hm?"

"Chris, you don't seem like you have to be here to do that," Rafinha remarked while poking Inglis's cheek. Eris, Leone, and Liselotte nodded in agreement.

Inglis smiled back, unperturbed. "So, isn't the surface fun too?"

"I still can't help but compare the two," Rafinha said.

“Yeah, that’s right. But I’m happy just being with Rani, having a powerful foe I can fight anytime, and having all I can eat.”

“Isn’t that a little bit greedy? I’m fine without the ‘powerful foe’ part! Anyway, though, let’s enjoy what we can! Let’s do some sightseeing!”

“Wait, Rafinha. We’re not just here on vacation...” Leone said.

“The emergency landing in the ocean must have caused many problems here,” Liselotte said.

“There don’t seem to be many people around town,” Eris said, looking down. As vast as the city was, it was deathly silent, near deserted.

“The evacuation is mostly complete. The bulk of the population should be underground,” Wilma said.

“I see...” Inglis said.

“Once the all clear is given, the people should come back out. But where we’re going is *there*.” Wilma pointed to the center of the city. There loomed a building dozens of times larger than its neighbors, several times larger than even Karelia’s palace. “That is the central laboratory. The very heart of Illuminas. That is where hial menaces are born.” As Wilma narrated, the Flygear approached the massive building.



Setting foot inside the central laboratory section, they found bedlam incomparable to what they had expected from the exterior.

“What caused the failure?! What happened?!”

“The Floating Circle just suddenly malfunctioned!”

“What?! What’s going on?!”

“We don’t know! More importantly, we need to stay afloat!”

“Yes, we’ve activated emergency redirection of the mana for rainfall detection and urban barriers for stronger buoyancy!”

“Understood... But if the Prism Flow begins to fall...”

“We don’t really have a choice in the matter right now!”

“Yes, and we can always request aid from a satellite island!”

Highlanders, ones whom Inglis assumed were researchers, carried on an intense conversation while monitoring the instruments scattered around. The central laboratory encompassed many floors, and as Inglis’s group remained on their Flygear, which followed a path marked by a beam of light, the scene on all the floors was the same. The air was thick with tension.

“We’ve come at a terrible time, haven’t we?” Rafinha asked.

“Yeah,” Inglis said. “It’s probably a really big deal for a piece of Highland to fall and get stuck. If the Prism Flow falls heavily, or a Prismer shows up, they won’t be able to escape.”

“Don’t tempt fate... What would we even do if that happened?!”

“Fight, I guess? I haven’t gone at it with a Prismer in a while.” Inglis clenched a fist and smiled, the cute expression at odds with her desires.

“I don’t wanna! The thought of fighting something like that again scares me!”

“We’ve arrived. Get off here,” Wilma announced.

Stepping down from the Flygear, they found themselves before a grand door.

“This is...?” Inglis asked.

“Chief Academician Wilkin’s lab. He’s said to be the finest researcher in Illuminas. Do try to mind your manners...though I’m not sure he will.”

Wilma stood in front of them, and again, a beam of light brushed over her stigmata before the door slowly opened. On the other side of the threshold was an open space with scattered research equipment, bookshelves, and miniaturized versions of the mechanical hands they’d seen at the arsenal assembling devices unfamiliar to Inglis.

“Eww, what’s that?” Rafinha’s attention was drawn to a lump of flesh floating in a transparent tube. As one of the mechanical hands pierced it with a needle and injected fluid of an unnatural color, it began to pulsate.

“Eeek?!”

“Well, that doesn’t look very pleasant...” Leone remarked.

Suddenly, the flesh transformed into something that resembled a puppy.

“Aww, how cute!”

“Indeed, it is quite adorable,” Liselotte agreed.

But the moment it drew their attention, it transformed back into a mass of flesh, and from there into a large fly.

“Ewwwww!”

“That’s not cute at all!”

“What in the world...?”

While Rafinha and the others were frightened, Inglis gazed at the tube, fascinated. “A creature capable of taking any form? I wonder how that works. It’s amazing...”

“Chris, don’t get close to that thing! It’s nasty!”

“Quiet down. You’re making a scene,” Wilma scolded them as she herded them further on. “Chief Academician Wilkin. I have completed your order to transport the hialal menace.”

There was a large desk at the back of the room, and Wilma reported to the person seated there. From behind, Inglis thought he must have been a young boy. The white glove on his right hand seemed like the kind of thing a researcher would wear, but he oddly wasn’t wearing its pair.

“You’re always so formal, Wilma. I appreciate that you take things seriously, but just ‘dad’ is fine.”

“Well, this *is* a formality.”

Strangely, Wilkin looked obviously younger than Wilma. And as he turned around—a familiar face was revealed.



“Lord Evel?!” Inglis gasped.

“Say what?! Why is he here?!” Rafinha said.

His face was that of Highland’s Archlord Evel—though his calm and relaxed expression certainly bore no resemblance.

“Um? Evel?” Chief Academician Wilkin, Evel’s apparent twin, was taken aback. On second glance, the color of his hair was slightly different.

“Err... Yes. The archlord from Highland...” Inglis began.

“An archlord? Oh, he must be with the Altar. Yeah, some of them are probably using a hi-mana coat, we sent over a few.” His casual tone while responding to Inglis broke the tension.

“So you’re...not Evel?” Rafinha asked.

“That’s right, yep! You heard Wilma calling me Chief Academician Wilkin, didn’t you?”

“So that isn’t your original body,” Inglis said, trying to understand. “It’s an artificially created one you call a, uh, hi-mana coat? And more than one of these exist?”

“Yep, that’s it! Well, I’m the one who came up with it, so I guess you could say I’m the original, and the rest using it are all copies.”

“I see...”

He redirected his attention to Eris. “And you’re the hial menace we’re supposed to fix? Got busted up by the dux?”

“Yes, if you have the time. Things seem hectic around here right now...” Eris said quietly.

“Yep. Depends on how broken you are. If you’re too beat up, it might be quicker to scrap you and ship a replacement.”

Eris was silent.

“But then what would happen to Eris?!” Rafinha cried.

“You mean in terms of personality, or soul, or whatever? The hial menace

part's already broken," Wilkin remarked in unperturbed confusion.

"Y-Yes! Exactly! What then?"

"Mmm? We could put her personality in a new vessel and let you take that home. See? I've got just what I need right there to do that. I'll even throw it in for free. Not giving you a hi-mana coat, though." Wilkin pointed at the lump of flesh they had just seen transform.

"Absolutely not! I don't want Eris to end up as some bug!"

"Eh, I can make the body pretty much anything you'd like. One like now would be fine. No guarantees, though." Wilkin laughed. "Anyway, though, any body's fine as long as it fulfills basic biological necessities, don't you think? In the end, a body is just a vessel; it's the personality or 'soul' that feels happiness."

Rafinha struggled to comfortably reply. "Um... I don't really get what you mean by that..."

"It's fun getting to do what you want forever!"

"But I feel like that wouldn't be Eris anymore..."

"So you're hung up on her keeping her 'natural' body? I mean, she's a hial menace—it's not like we haven't already tinkered with her attributes. She's not even remotely natural. Basically, the only thing we kept was the skin. There's no reason to be worried about a new body for her." Wilkin rattled off to Rafinha without concern.

Rafinha's breath caught in her throat. "But...it's weird! It's just...really weird!"

"I consider it an enhancement! We Highlanders consider it an honor to be moved to a hi-mana coat or some other new vessel. It's an incomparable opportunity to deepen one's knowledge and thinking. And of course, the machinator himself is a shining example. The body isn't what makes a person—it's their knowledge! Their soul!"

Although Eris paused at first, her response was firm. "I'd prefer to be returned to as close to my original state as possible. I still have duties to fulfill as a hial menace—ones I would not like to burden others with."

"I see, I see. That's a beautiful example of dedication too. Anyway, let's get

you checked out and see what we can do, hmm? Heeey!” At the chief academician’s call, a fist-sized sphere of navy blue approached. Sigils shone across its entire surface. “Theeere we go. Search, search. Ascertain damage and malfunction throughout her entire body.” A pale green light fixed on Eris. “Oh? Looks like there’s one part that’s completely wrecked. Guess it’ll be faster to fix her up after all.”

“Sir, given the circumstances, are you sure this is a good idea?” Wilma asked.

“I told you, Wilma—just ‘dad’ is fine.”

“Again, I have formal duties.”

“Your mission was complete as soon as you delivered her, wasn’t it?” Chief Academician Wilkin looked forlorn. “Anyway, hial menace production is independent of the machinator’s systems, so it’ll be fine. Now let’s get back to that search and figure out how we’re going to do the repairs.” Various lights flitted over Eris. “And? What about the other girls? Did you come here to be hial menaces? Then why don’t we check your aptitude?”

Rafinha shook her head. “No, we’re only here as an escort...”

But Inglis had other ideas. “Yes, please, sir!”

“Chris!”

“It’s not like we’re going to be here often, so we may as well make some memories!” As a divine knight, she didn’t expect the process would be smooth at all. However, studying the technology up close might reveal new techniques she could use in battle. That was what drove her obvious fascination.

“Sure, sure! All right, need another one!” Another sphere approached, and stopped before Inglis. “Just touch it with your hand.”

“Understood!” Inglis rested her hand on the sphere as instructed.

Beep-beep-beep-beep!

It let out a sound that seemed to be some kind of warning.

“Hm?”

“Huh, a measurement error?” Wilkin’s head swiveled. Apparently, the aether sheathing a divine knight interfered in some way. “Hmmmm, how about you give it a try then?”

“Huh? Me?!” Rafinha tentatively rested her hand on the sphere as it arrived before her.

Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep!

“I guess it’s broken. Maybe it’s affected by the machinator’s silence? I thought these things were supposed to operate independently. Anyway, let’s try a different one,” Wilkin mumbled. The second sphere disappeared, replaced with a third. He looked to Leone. “Here, you’re next.”

“M-Me?! Err, okay...” When Leone touched the sphere, no alarm went off.

“Analysis complete. Aptitude level: C.”

Rafinha’s eyes widened. “Wow, did that thing just talk?! Amazing!”

“Hmm, that’s good. At least some of ’em are working. Anyway! It looks like you’ve got potential. Interested? Level C means you have a chance.”

“I-I do?!” Leone pointed at herself in shock.

“Yeah. The treatment will take four or five years, and it has about a twenty-five percent success rate? You might never see your friends here again.”

“That long?! And what if it fails?!”

“Mmm. You wouldn’t be able to keep your original form, but we can’t stop partway and transfer your spirit to a different body either... Basically, you’d be dead.”

“I-I’ll pass!” Leone furiously shook her head.

“Please don’t recommend things that are that dangerous!” Rafinha complained.

“What’s the matter? Those aren’t the worst odds, and I don’t think the time frame is that unrealistic. Or perhaps it’s because your position in society is

different from that of those who arrive as offerings, giving your lives a different value in your mind.”

“Just what is that supposed to—?!”

As Rafinha began to yell, the sphere spoke again. *“Additional notification. Rune and mana output desync rate at seventy-one percent. Recalibration recommended.”*

“Hmm? Huh. Well, since we’re already here, I’ll get that fixed up for you two. This will be just a moment, and there’s no chance of failure, so if you could just keep your hand still. Order. Destroy that girl’s Rune. Execute reissue.”

At Chief Academician Wilkin’s order, the sphere practically blinded everyone. At the same time, the Rune on the back of her hand also glowed equally bright before beginning to fade.

Leone gasped. “My Rune?!”

“It’s disappearing!” Liselotte said.

“Calm down, it’s just going away for a moment and then a new one will be inscribed.”

“So this is similar in function to the baptismal tabernacle on the surface?” Inglis asked.

“Yep! That’s just one of its functions.” Wilkin smiled.

A new Rune began to rise on the back of Leone’s hand. But not an upper-class one like she had had. Its sublime prismatic sparkle was that of—

“Unbelievable...” Leone stared in wonder.

“You have a special-class Rune?!” Liselotte gasped.

“A-Amazing! That’s incredible, Leone!” Rafinha beamed.

There was no mistaking it: that was a special-class Rune. One’s given Rune at the time of baptism was not necessarily permanent, and Inglis knew there were cases where someone’s had improved to something stronger. She had been told that had been the case for Lahti’s brother, Prince Windsel of Alcard. It wasn’t impossible, but it wasn’t common by any means. This was the first time Inglis had seen it happen in person.

“I... I can’t believe it... Me, with a special-class Rune...” Leone, still awestruck, gaped at the special-class Rune on the back of her right hand.

“Congratulations, Leone. I’m so happy for you.”

“Inglis... Thank you!”

Out of Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte, Leone was the one who put the most into her training, so Inglis didn’t find the increase in her Rune totally unusual. She always trained hard, and since entering the knights’ academy, she’d survived many battles. That experience had steadily increased her strength.

“Let’s have a mock battle with all sorts of Artifacts later! I bet it’ll be good practice...” Inglis smiled excitedly. Her regular sparring partner Leone’s getting a special-class Rune was cause for joy indeed. Their sessions together would be improved both in intensity and in nature.

“D-Do take it easy on me, though. I may have a special-class Rune now, but I don’t feel like I’ve suddenly gotten stronger just because of that.”

“Yeah, that’s about right,” Wilkin said. “It didn’t do something to make you stronger or anything. Just detected a conflict with your existing Rune and inscribed a more appropriate one.”

“Th-Thank you, Academician Wilkin!” Leone bowed deeply to him.

“It’s nothing. Just wanted to do something for you, since you came all the way up here.”

“I want to thank you too!” Rafinha began. “I had my suspicions because I don’t have any good memories associated with that face, but it seems like you really are a nice person.”

“Ha ha ha, it’s like I was telling you. Even if two people are using the same hi-mana coat, what matters is their personality, their soul. Anyway, I’m glad I failed to disappoint. Always have to keep reputation in mind.” He flashed a grin.

“That’s wonderful, Leone! Congratulations!” Rafinha said.

“There was no one in our class with a special-class Rune before, but now you can stand proudly at our head!” Liselotte remarked.

“I think Inglis is still stronger, though...” Leone protested.

“I’m in the squire program, so I think you’re a better representative,” Inglis said. A holy knight with a special-class Rune was more palatable, whereas Inglis herself could be ‘Runeless but strong’ or ‘inexplicably strong’ in the perceptions of others. Circumstances surrounding the rebirth of the rimebound Prismers had forced her to make a name for herself, but this was probably something she could spin into pinning the credit on Leone if another Prismers appeared. If she proved herself in an easy-to-understand way, the new proposals rolling in would be too much to bear. The crown had put a stop to that for now, but even with things having calmed down there was no guarantee that it wouldn’t happen again.

To avoid that, she needed a new heroine from some new disaster to overwrite her own fame. With that, what she’d done would be in the past, and all eyes would be on someone else. If a new Prismers were to appear and ravage the countryside, and she and Rafinha weren’t the ones to defeat it, people’s memories of them would fade.

“Well, I’m just happy that something really cool happened to you, Leone!” Rafinha cheered. “Don’t push yourself too hard because of it, though!”

“Indeed,” Liselotte agreed. “You’re a powerful motivator. I’ll have to work hard to keep up with you.”

“Thanks, everyone... I’ll do my best not to let you down.” Leone nodded with a serious expression.

“How about you, Liselotte?” Rafinha asked. “Maybe you can get a special-class Rune too!”

“I’m not confident, but I’d like to give it a try!” Liselotte’s eyes shone.

“Of course. You go next, then,” Wilkin said.

“Yes...!” After the sphere approached her, Liselotte placed her hand on it.

Ring-ring-ring-ring!

That was a different sound than the earlier alarm.

“Huh?! What in the—?!”

“Is it broken again?”

“Critical notification! Critical notification! S+ aptitude sample detected! Immediate capture and initiation of hial menace procedure recommended! Initiating automatic capture in ten, nine, eight, seven...” The sphere blinked violently and began to circle closer to Liselotte.

“A-Ah! What’s going on?! ‘Immediate initiation of the hial menace procedure’?!” Rafinha asked.

“Oh, wow! I’ve never even seen someone with S+ aptitude! ♪” Chief Academician Wilkin raised his voice in glee.

“It said something about ‘automatic capture’?!”

Just as Rafinha said, it was probably about to forcibly capture Liselotte.

“Stop this—or else,” Eris warned sternly.

“Okay, okay. No forced capture, no automatic processing! After all, you’re our guests!” At Wilkin’s order, the sphere stopped blinking and fell silent.

The obvious implication was that those who were not guests would be forcibly captured and transformed into a hial menace. Those sorts of people were likely either kidnapped or offered in place of food or supplies. Inglis concluded the common practice was to gather many and scan them all at once.

As friendly as Ambassador Theodore was, he could not have eyes on everything that happened in Highland. Nor was Karelia the only surface country in contact with Illuminas. And Chief Academician Wilkin’s words suggested that this was done as a matter of course.

“Yes, that was quite startling...” Liselotte exhaled loudly.

“Anyway, what’ll it be? As you heard, you’re extreeeemely suited for it. With an S+ aptitude, the whole thing would take at worst half a day—no, it’d be over in the blink of an eye, and your success rate would be assured! Like a hundred and twenty-five percent! I’ll give you my personal guarantee, so why not give being a hial menace a try?” Wilkin’s eyes gleamed as he approached Liselotte.



“Er, no, I...I don’t have anything I can give you in exchange for becoming a hial menace...”

“No, no, it’s free! Not as some sort of exchange for a hial menace, I’ve just never seen someone with your aptitude! I just want to see what happens! All you’ll owe me is some occasional data-gathering!” he insisted. “Please? You’ll be able to stay cute like that forever! You’ll get stronger and better in fights! C’mon!”

“I understand that, but I’m not ready to make a quick decision. I apologize.” Liselotte glanced over at Eris as if asking for help.

“Unlike Highlanders, people of the surface are not used to changing their natural bodies. No matter how certain you are that the procedure will be successful, it will have a significant impact on her relationships with her family and friends, as well as her future way of life. Therefore, while I will not stop her if she chooses to go through with it, I do ask that you give her time to consider,” Eris said, wedging herself between Liselotte and Wilkin.

He didn’t try to hide his disappointment. “I see. Well, I can’t argue with that. But if you’re ever interested, just ask!”

“Lady Eris...thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Eris said as she gave a motherly smile. She was outspoken and curt, but a caring person nonetheless.

Inglis, meanwhile, reflected silently. Her initial reaction to the possibility of Liselotte becoming a hial menace was to daydream about improving her own training even further. She had felt a bit happy when she’d heard that the procedure would be safe and quick.

“What’s up, Chris?” Rafinha peered at Inglis.

“Oh, n-nothing! Nothing at all!”

“Really? You were thinking you wanted Liselotte to become a hial menace, weren’t you? Probably something about it making training more fun. You can’t hide your true self from me!”

“No, no, no—I mean, maybe I thought that a *little*, but I wasn’t really being a

creep about it like Chief Academician Wilkin, so I don't think I was *that* bad!"

"Well, yeah, but...! You know, first I thought he was a jerk like Evel, and then I thought he was a nice guy...but I guess he really is a jerk."

"Shhhh! He can hear you, Rani!"

"It's because you were thinking weird things to begin with!"

"Oh no, just look at what I did. Cultural exchange is hard, isn't it?" Wilkin scratched the back of his head, not looking very troubled at all.

"Anyway, knowing my aptitude is helpful. If I decide that the procedure is necessary, I'll be sure to visit again. Thank you for your consideration." Liselotte politely bowed to Wilkin.

"Yeah, yeah. I'll be waiting." With that, he turned to Eris. The sphere which had been examining her drew close to him. "Then, let's get back to the point. The hial menace... Eris, right? You're a very old hial menace. One of the earliest models, I'd say. So the search took a bit of time... You're from a period when the aptitude tests hadn't even been fully established. No wonder I didn't recognize you. It must have been before I was even born."

"I see... When I underwent the procedure, there was certainly nothing mentioned about my aptitude level."

"Makes sense. After all, I'm the one that came up with it!"

"Fascinating," Inglis cut in. "Around how long ago was that?"

"Four or five hundred years ago... Probably around the time of the Highland-Surface War."

The Highland-Surface War—Inglis had never heard *that* term before. It must have been referring to something which had occurred between her lives. And Eris must have originally been from around that time.

"What?! Does that mean Eris is at least four hundred years old?!" Rafinha gasped in shock.

"She certainly doesn't *look* four hundred," Leone said.

"Perhaps there is an advantage to becoming a hial menace," Liselotte

pondered.

“This is the first time I’ve heard that so much time has passed since then. I suppose that explains why everything is so different now.” Eris looked away wistfully.

Inglis could understand that feeling. The world in which the goddess Alistia had caused her to be miraculously reborn was entirely different, with not a trace of King Inglis’s era left. Inglis’s own sense of loneliness was probably something Eris carried with her as well.

However, Inglis had retained a divine knight’s ability to control aether. Everything else may have changed, but that wasn’t all bad. She’d gained a loving family, something she’d never had before, and above all she had Rafinha—the apple of her eye, a girl to dote on like a granddaughter. She had been placed in circumstances suitable for pursuing her wish of mastering the blade. Life as Inglis Eucus was something she greatly enjoyed. That was undeniable.

But, as for Eris... Inglis didn’t know exactly what she had gone through, but after undergoing the long procedure to become a hial menace, she had returned to what felt like a completely different land, expected to become its people’s guardian...

What did the world look like to her? What did she think?

“So, anyway, yeah, this is the interesting part! Looking again at Eris, what do you think her aptitude level is?” Wilkin asked.

“An S+ like Liselotte, maybe? That’s a given—Eris’s never let us down!” Rafinha insisted.

“No, no, that’s not it. Other way around, in fact!” Wilkin said.

“Other way around?” Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte all asked in confusion.

“Yes! Her aptitude’s an F! Like one-in-a-million odds of success! Pretty much guaranteed death! We’d never do it nowadays, it’d just be a waste—we’d find some other use for her instead. I guess maybe they just didn’t know back then, but trying to force someone with that aptitude into being a hial menace is just unheard of these days. It’s like they were trying to get her killed,” Wilkin rattled off enthusiastically. Inglis was in no position to object, but it did strike her as

rather rude.

“Eris...” Rafinha began, her tone concerned.

“Does that mean you can’t repair me because of my original aptitude?” Eris asked bluntly, with no hesitation. As she did, she placed a hand on Rafinha’s shoulder. “It’s okay. It was the only choice I had at the time. I’m here with you now because it succeeded. The odds don’t matter anymore. So don’t worry about it.”

“O-Okay...” Rafinha seemed relieved.

“Well, about that...” Wilkin said. “I mean, yeah, it worked, and that counts for something. However, Eris, since your aptitude is so low, your insides are a patch job at best. It’s like they decided they were gonna get the job done one way or another. That’s why I’m not sure you can avoid coming out worse, in terms of hardness, when clashing with a truly amazing weapon.”

Eris let out a small gasp. “I see. I was the one who was a burden in that fight...” Eris had stood firm until now. Her expression twisted in regret. She must have been remembering when she was damaged in the part-proposal, part-duel with Dux Jildegrieva.

“Anyway, though, the thing about the work on you is that you’re easy to mend.”

“How long until the process is finished?”

“A month, give or take.”

That was a bit of a wait, Inglis thought, but she found that acceptable. It opened the question of whether to wait here and return to Karelia after the process, or to head home immediately and come back to Highland after it was complete.

But as she pondered this, Wilkin’s eyes suddenly lit up. “But hear me out! What if we made it a year or two and tried adding some new features?!”

“New features?!”

“Yes! Eris, you’re the hial menace that never should have been, a total patch job, a real monument to the do-or-die spirit of the old days. But why

don't we try to take advantage of that? Make lemonade out of those lemons? It's like a blessing in disguise."

"I'm not sure whether you're praising me or belittling me." Eris sighed.

"Oh, it's all praise. You might even end up a step beyond any other hial menace. My instincts as a researcher are screaming out to me: 'Now, what do we do with Eris?'"

One to two years was a pretty long time frame, but was still not completely unrealistic to Inglis. However, at that rate, they'd definitely have to return to the knights' academy while they waited. In any case, though, the decision should be up to Eris.

Eris turned to Inglis. "What do you think?"

Inglis paused for a moment. "Would that make you even stronger in human form?"

"*That's* your concern?"

"Because to get stronger, more than anything, I need harder training! How about it, Academician?"

"I'm not sure. It's possible she'll get stronger, but I can't guarantee it. It's just a new feature for her weapon form."

"In that case, her own opinion is the most important."

Eris thought that over. "I suppose if my weapon form becomes stronger, that essentially means you become stronger. After all, there's no one who could use that but you."

"I definitely don't disagree that I'm the right person for the job, but..."

The pitfall, one could say, of a hial menace was that their wielder's life force was unavoidably sapped away. To a holy knight with a special-class Rune, the hial menace was a last line of defense, allowing them to strike down a powerful Prismer at the cost of their own life. For Inglis, however, there were none of these side effects—hial menaces were simply the ultimate weapon.

However, hial menaces had wills of their own. They spent most of their time with the appearance of a young woman, so wielding them felt like getting help

from another person. If Inglis went into battle with one in hand, that wasn't a one-on-one fight but a two-on-one. If she had to, she had to, but she'd like to avoid that if possible. It went against her own goal of mastering the blade. The best fight was a fair one-on-one.

"By the way, Academician Wilkin. While you're patching up Eris, is there any way we could get you to remove the side effect of sapping the life of the hial menace's wielder? It'd be absolutely great if you could," Inglis said. If that was possible, then Leone or Silva could wield Eris too, and a hial menace as a weapon would be available at all times.

"Well, that would be tough. It's something that's unavoidable with how hial menaces are put together. And besides, the machinator would purge me! It'd present a big problem for not just Illuminas, but Highlanders as a whole."

"I see..."

His rejection was polite but firm. Inglis's experience with hial menaces, though, suggested that it was not technically impossible. The circuit which drew mana from a special-class Rune, and that which sapped away the wielder's life force, were disconnected, independent. That she could use aether to block the one that sapped life force without preventing the hial menace from transforming was proof. It was basically like getting access to a hial menace for free. That was a technique she'd poached by watching the Steelblood Front's black-masked leader wield Sistia.

"Again, Eris's opinion is the most important. While a new feature would be great, it would be a shame to miss a year or two of training with her. We've only just recently had the chance to start sparring frequently. I'm ambivalent on the matter."

"Can't you say my strength is needed 'for our country' or 'for the greater good' like a normal person would?" Eris protested.

"That isn't why I fight." Inglis smiled gently but spoke firmly. In her life as Inglis Eucus, she did not want to mix power with ideals or ideology. That would lead her to use the former for the sake of one of the latter, and in doing so detract from her pure pursuit of power.

But that didn't always apply when Rafinha disagreed. That, too, was how

Inglis Eucus was.

“Ah, well, that’s just how you are... You haven’t changed a bit since the time I first met you.” Eris sighed.

“I’m honored!”

“That wasn’t meant as praise,” Eris said coolly. “Anyway, Rafinha, what do you think?” She turned to Rafinha.

“M-Me...?”

“Inglis listens to whatever you say.”

“You wield me like I wield her, so in the end it’s kind of up to you, right?” Inglis added.

“Well, in that case, I guess...I think new features sound good! I’ll miss you while you’re gone, Eris... But we can’t have Chris lose her rematch with Dux Jil! I don’t want her to have to move up to Highland! She belongs with us in Ymir, where she can be the next duchess!”

“I don’t intend to get married, but...” Inglis muttered.

“Of course, it’s important to be prepared in case a stronger enemy appears too. So I’m for it!” Rafinha finished.

“Then I am too!”

“Excellent. I can agree with that too. There’s no replacement for strength. I’ll report to Ambassador Theodore; pending his approval, let’s go through with it,” Eris said.

Eris being gone for a period of time measured in years would have a significant impact on Karelia, and especially on the activities of the Paladins. It would be necessary to report back and get approval. Though, given that the Paladins had recently had their strength bolstered with the addition of Arles, that approval would likely be forthcoming.

“So, it’s decided, Academician Wilkin. This new feature you’re talking about... Please install it for me,” Eris said.

“Okay! Wow, I haven’t felt this engaged in a long time. Hurry up and get your

approval! I've got some prep work to get done too!" Wilkin rose from his chair, obviously pleased.

Inglis called out to him from behind. "Academician Wilkin. I'm sorry, but there is one other thing..."

"Hmm? What's up?"

"I have a question for you first. Are your superiors privy to this conversation?"

The other mission with which Ambassador Theodore had entrusted Inglis was the treatment of Cyrene, who had been turned into a magicite beast.

"Superiors? The only one above me on Illuminas is the machinator himself. And as you can see, with the Floating Circle malfunctioning, he's gone silent. I don't think he has the bandwidth to listen in."

"Yes, I saw how much of a panic everyone was in... But what do you mean by 'gone silent'?" Inglis still didn't quite understand what Wilkin meant.

"The short answer is, the machinator *is* Illuminas. The long answer is, he forms the very core of Illuminas's control system. You've seen how convenient having everything here automated is. Automatic construction of battleships, doors that open when you speak to them, self-piloting Flygears that take you wherever you want. And every single one of those requests is processed by the machinator. He abandoned the flesh to become the system's core and guide us."

"I see... That's certainly very advanced technology." So this highly developed portion of Highland known as Illuminas was built around a single leading Highlander. Adding in what Dux Jildegrieva had said, he retained his personality and was able to communicate, but with the Floating Circle malfunctioning that had become impossible. That was why almost everyone here was in such a panic, although Wilkin didn't seem all that shaken. In any case, with no eavesdropping happening, this was a good opportunity.

"I see. I guess now's my chance, then. There's something I'd like to ask you in private..." As Inglis spoke, she signaled to Leone with her eyes.

"Yes... Rin! Come out, Rin!"

Rin could normally be found nesting in either Inglis's or Leone's cleavage.

Jiggle, jiggle, jiggle!

"Sheesh...! Don't squirm around like that, Rin! Eep?!"

And now, with Inglis still in the form of a child, Leone had to deal with that alone.



The next day, Inglis and friends were guided to the central laboratory's basement levels by Wilkin. That was where the facilities for creating hial menaces were, and hence where Eris would be repaired. They were there to see her off. Once the process began, they would not see her for perhaps a year or two, and she would be missed. They had been able to use Illuminas's facilities to contact Ambassador Theodore, and as Eris had hoped the decision had been arrived at to install the new feature Wilkin had suggested. And besides, Inglis wanted to see what the machinery for producing one of Highland's most important technologies—hial menaces—looked like.

"And right over there. That's the equipment for producing hial menaces."

They were in a vast subterranean space, carved into the bedrock. Inglis didn't know when Illuminas itself had been cut away from the land, but this must have dated to around that time. And there was only one thing within.

"What is that?" Rafinha gasped.

"A huge stone box?" Leone asked.

"It's like a massive sarcophagus..." Liselotte said.

They looked up—it was large enough to do so—at a huge stone sarcophagus. At least, that seemed to be the best way to describe it. Even in such a vast space, it towered monumentally.

"It's pulsating with a mysterious light..." Leone was right. The surface of the sarcophagus had a pale, unstable glow.

"But it's... Calming, in a way. It makes me feel at home," Rafinha said.

"So beautiful, yet so fragile," Liselotte agreed.

Inglis, meanwhile, silently listened to the others. She had a reason to stay silent. This was something she remembered. Something she remembered from her past life as King Inglis.

“That’s a Greyfrier sarcophagus. We get Eris in here, and then we can start the repairs and upgrade.”

“I never expected to enter that again. Never even wanted to see it again...” Eris sighed, brushing her hair back from her shoulders in a way she rarely did. She was obviously tense.

“Wait, isn’t...” Inglis began. *That wasn’t right.* Inglis wasn’t sure whether Greyfrier was someone’s name, or what it was supposed to mean. But its original purpose was not the creation of hial menaces. *That’s a liminal sepulcher! To think that I would see one again here!*

Inglis couldn’t help but be shocked. It was a training ground created by the ancient gods. The goddess Alistia had called it a liminal sepulcher. Inglis had visited such a place in her previous life, before founding Silvare and just after receiving Alistia’s protection and becoming a divine knight.

As a fresh divine knight, Inglis had not yet had full control over aether. Even just learning to use Aether Strike and Aether Shell required years of practice. But those had been turbulent times. Mankind warred against mankind, monsters and demons roamed the land, and hope was faint indeed. Inglis, then as a young man, could not afford to spend years training.

And thus, Alistia had led the young Inglis to the liminal sepulcher. It was only loosely attached to this world, its position flitting from place to place, and inside, the flow of time was separate. From the outside, it appeared to be a featureless cube of rock, sealed tightly, but gods and divine knights could create an entrance. Once within, though, they could not open it from the inside. Only opening an exit would allow them to escape.

Thus confined, Inglis had trained herself in the control of aether. It had taken her what felt like several years to finally acquire the knack for basic use of aether in combat, yet when Alistia had released her, only a few days had passed in the outside world.

That was a memory from her far-off youth, in a whole different lifetime. King

Inglis would have loved to have visited again but never could due to being a ruler, and circumstances did not allow him to do so before his death.

Now, though, she felt no need to reenter—as time passed inside, so would it for her. It was a training ground for those with no time to spare, those with a crisis looming for which they needed strength as soon as it could be mustered, those who needed to fit fulfilling practice into the shortest gap in their schedule. Inglis Eucus, with her lighter duties, had no need for that.

“Just look at how it glows! We don’t even know why it does that!” Wilkin said.

“So even Highland doesn’t understand this technology...” Leone began.

“Incredible...” Liselotte said.

A mana-based analysis would produce that result. The faint light surrounding the sarcophagus was elemental aether. The stone itself was not mere stone, but the work of the gods. Yet somehow, it had become more firmly anchored to this particular spot. How? What had happened to cause its reuse as a production facility for hial menaces? In any case, between the ancient dragon Fufailbane and now the liminal sepulcher, Inglis was seeing a lot of things she recognized from her past life lately.

“Chris...? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, uh, nothing!”

Rafinha didn’t buy it. “You’re up to no good again, aren’t you?”

“No, it’s fine, I’m definitely not planning anything— Ah!” A thought suddenly sprang to her mind. A good idea. One that would improve their current situation...

“What? What is it?”

“Oh, I was just thinking I wanted to see inside.”

“Now hold it right there! You really are up to something, aren’t you!”

Listening to them, Wilkin managed a strained laugh. “I’m afraid I can’t allow *that*. Only Eris and I can go inside. If something happens and it gets contaminated, we might not be able to make new hial menaces, and then where would we be?”

“Of course! Sorry! I’ll keep a good hold on her!” Rafinha picked up Inglis like a mother cat carrying her kitten.

“If you would.” Wilkin smiled.

Well, I suppose I couldn’t have expected to be allowed inside, Inglis thought. *And it wouldn’t be good to antagonize Highland by forcing my way in.* Inglis’s actions would be taken as the will of Karelia. Maybe she could see it one day—but by the time that opportunity came, she might have no need for it.

As the conversation continued, she and the others approached the sarcophagus.

“Well, we’re making progress, but is there supposed to be a visible entrance?” Eris asked.

“Oh, about that. With administrator privileges, you can open one right up! Watch this!” Wilkin took the white glove from his right hand, and brushed his hand across the surface of the sarcophagus.

“Ah!” Inglis gasped.

The hand itself was out of place. Wilkin’s appearance was very similar to that of the Papal League’s Archlord Evel, a boyish form he had called a hi-mana coat. But the right hand he revealed was not the slender one of a boy, but the burly one of a grown man. Just one hand being larger aroused her suspicions.

And that mature hand began to glow with a faint light, the same as the light from the liminal sepulcher itself. That is, elemental aether. Thus, that hand must have been a relic of a god or of a divine knight. It seemed like it had been cut off and transplanted into the hi-mana coat.

Inglis had not sensed the divine in the modern world, nor had she encountered another divine knight other than the black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front. Could Highland be responsible for that? Had they destroyed the gods and the divine knights in order to use them like this?

“Ha ha ha...” Inglis’s face lit up on its own, serenely, like a flower blossoming. If Highland had wiped out the gods and the divine knights, that guaranteed they had a certain level of strength. Dux Jildegrieva’s own would have sufficed to defeat divine knights weaker than her—but not for the divine itself. If Highland

as a whole could overwhelm the divine as a whole, that meant there were many others among them at least as strong as the dux, if not stronger. Finding them all and taking them on sounded like great fun. There was still so much to look forward to in this world, still so many dreams to pursue.

“Mmm? Something up?” Wilkin asked.

“Oh, no. I was just reflecting on how fascinating your interests must be.”

“Yeah, they are! Look at this light up! Isn’t it beautiful?” Wilkin answered with a smile.

The part of the sarcophagus he had brushed lit up with a spiral of aetheric sigils, which seemed to spread and tunnel into its exterior.

“Wow, a hole’s opening up!” Rafinha exclaimed.

“In such thick stone...” Leone said.

“And you say the equipment for becoming a hial menace is inside here?” Liselotte asked.

The walls of the sarcophagus were thick, and Inglis couldn’t see very far inside. What she could make out were a large number of things that appeared to be columns.

“From here, it’s only me and Eris, okay? You all stay put. We can’t have any accidents happen. Once it closes up, you can’t open it from inside. If you’re not careful, people shrivel up and die.”

“Wh—?!” Rafinha gasped.

“Shrivel up and...?!” Leone grimaced.

“There’s a bunch of old bones rolling around in there from people who slipped up and got stuck inside!” Wilkin said.

“Well...that certainly isn’t a pleasant thought,” Liselotte said.

“When the entrance is open, it’s connected to the outside world, but once it closes, you’re completely cut off, like you’re in another dimension. Even time flows differently inside; only a few moments might pass on the outside, but inside you’ll be a-rattling!”

“Umm, so if time out here is like that, and inside is...” Rafinha began.

“Time flows much faster inside, then,” Leone explained.

“Leone has the right idea,” Liselotte said.

“Ah, now I get it!” Rafinha nodded intently.

“Rani? Are you sure?” Inglis asked.

“Yeah, of course!”

As someone with a parental view of Rafinha, Inglis certainly hoped so. She was already sixteen; she needed to be sharp enough to keep up with the conversation around her.

“So, anyway! The process of making a hial menace is long, hard work. Long enough that if we didn’t have such a place, we’d run through their whole lifetime waiting on it, you know? And what use is a weapon left incomplete on one’s deathbed?”

Inglis nodded, following along. “I see. So, what would normally be a far-reaching and overly time-consuming magical procedure can be accomplished practically using this sarcophagus, then?” Inglis asked.

Inglis wasn’t familiar with the details of the process, but it struck her as a clever use of the liminal sepulcher. Alistia and the other gods had thought of it as a training ground, but others had apparently found their own use for it. A different conception of it than that of the gods—she wanted to see exactly what the process was, but it wouldn’t be easy, even though doing so would come in handy for her future use.

“That’s right! This sarcophagus itself is extremely valuable! A relic of an ancient era that we can’t replicate even with our technology! No one but an administrator has ever been able to get it open. It’s on a completely different level from our magic or the simplified dimension created by Artifacts. In a way, it’s kind of a separate world.”

“By the way, is this sarcophagus the only one you have?”

“No. There are more...but where and how many is kind of a secret.”

“That’s understandable.”

Judging by Wilkin's response, at least the Papal League had a sarcophagus of their own. After all, Eris had been sent to the surface by the Triumvirate, and Ripple and Arles by the Papal League—each great faction seemed to produce hial menaces and grant them to the surface.

"Anyway, that's enough explanation. Let's go, Eris."

Eris turned to Inglis and the others and spoke. "Yes... Take good care of Ripple while I'm gone. And Arles and Rafael, and Karelia..."

"We will, Eris!" Rafinha replied first, clearly and cheerfully.

"We'll do our utmost, Lady Eris!" Leone said.

"Please don't worry at all!" Liselotte said, her back straight.

Inglis was the most disappointed. "I know it's decided, but I really do feel like I'm missing an opportunity not being able to spar with you for a year or two. Ah, what a waste..."

Eris groaned. "You *really* do think of nothing else, do you? Well, if I make it back in one piece, I'll make up for lost time then, so don't make that face. You're making me worry about you." Eris held an awkward expression as she stared at Inglis, still held by Rafinha.

"Eris, you really do love kids, don't you? Here you go!" Rafinha, smiling, held Inglis toward her. "In one or two years she'll probably be back to normal, so here, one last hug!"

"Y-Yes... Thank you." With a smile, Eris accepted Inglis.

"It's a promise, Eris! When you get back, we'll make up for all the training we missed!"

"Yes, yes, I know. And you—I hope you're stronger then too! Though I'm sure I don't need to tell you that."

As Eris hugged Inglis, Inglis reflected that her scent was different from her mother Serena's or Rafinha's, like that of an elegant, delicate flower.

After a moment, Eris put Inglis down and gallantly turned.



“I’m going. Be well, you all.” Side by side with Wilkin, she entered the liminal sepulcher—the Greyfriar sarcophagus.

“You too!” Inglis and friends, able only to watch them go, nodded as a group.

Chapter III: Inglis, Age 16—Far-Off Highland (3)

Several days later, Inglis and friends were on the shore of Illuminas, which had become a remote island. She was sure that Highland, which normally floated far above the surface, was less than pleased with the idea that its boundaries were now determined by shoreline. But the landing strip for flying battleships was almost like a pier, and it made for a great beach.

“All right! Go for it, Leone!”

“Do your best, Leone!”

“H-Here I go!”

Rafinha, Liselotte, and Leone were all wearing swimsuits. Of course, they hadn’t initially expected to have such a trip when they had departed for Highland. Once things turned out the way they had, Rafinha had suggested the beach trip, and she’d taken it upon herself to sew swimsuits for everyone—even a kiddie-sized one for Inglis.

Inglis was transfixed by her reflection in the water. She was like a little angel. She wondered what she would have looked like in a swimsuit in her normal sixteen-year-old body. She was sure she would have appreciated seeing how she’d blossomed into a glamorous, alluring appearance. She didn’t get to visit the beach very often; it was a shame she had to miss the opportunity to wear an attractive swimsuit. Who knew when she’d get another chance? Anyway, she planned to ask Rafinha to make her another once she was back to normal.

“C’mon, Chris! Cheer on Leone too!” Rafinha called, safely holding Rin. Ambassador Theodore had requested Rin be examined—in addition to Eris—to see whether she could be returned to her human state. Rin would have to be stuck as a small magicite beast for the time being; unlike the process for hial menaces, which was independent of the machinator’s systems, most other equipment was disabled; Highland couldn’t conduct a proper examination of Rin under the current circumstances and thus currently couldn’t do anything for her.

If it were only a matter of Eris's repair, which would take years, Inglis and her friends would have already been returning to the knights' academy right about now. She was also concerned about the Rangers, who had been set to deploy to Alcard shortly after her departure for Highland. She hoped to join them if necessary.

However, since there was the matter of Rin as well, she had decided to wait until Illuminas's current problems were resolved and she could get a second opinion from Chief Academician Wilkin.

Thus, there was nothing to do but wait on the beach. She was allowed to stay in return for a pledge to help intercept any attacking magicite beasts. Illuminas seemed to be holding up under emergency power while the machinator was silent. However, due to that, the island's ability to predict the Prism Flow or activate defensive barriers was nonfunctional. In fact, it couldn't even move. According to Wilma, with Illuminas's defenses weakened and the island in danger, aid from Inglis and her friends would be welcomed.

And thus, that brought the group to where they were with Leone today. Her toned-yet-voluptuous curves—surpassing even those of Inglis in her normal state—stood out in her bold swimsuit, but that wasn't important now.

She was wielding three Artifacts at once: the dark greatsword Artifact in her right hand, Rafinha's Artifact bow Shiny Flow in her left, and Liselotte's halberd Artifact strapped to her back.

"You'll be fine. You can do this now," Inglis said. "Give it your best shot!"

She had a special-class Rune now, inscribed by Chief Academician Wilkin, and from the back of her right hand, it shimmered all the colors of the rainbow. Those with special-class Runes could wield not only hial menaces, but all Artifacts as well. Therefore, Leone should be able to wield all three at once. The plan today was to experiment with that as they enjoyed their day at the beach.

"All right... I'll give it a try!" Leone's expression was serious, in a way that didn't match her outfit at all. "Wings!" Pale wings sprang from her back. Flapping them forcefully, she soared into the air. "Eek?!" As this was her first time using that Gift, Leone lost her balance in the air, but that wasn't a major problem. "Like this? Like this, right?!" She quickly became used to it, and she

stabilized.

Then she stopped, hovering, and gripped Shiny Flow. “Arrow of light! I don’t think I can aim it as precisely as Rafinha, but I’ll try for a barrage!” High up in the sky, she drew the bow. The arrow of light created in her hand swelled. Then, just after firing, she called out:

“Burst!”



At her command, the arrow split into countless smaller ones, all leaving trails of light. It seemed to be a fairly accurate recreation of how Rafinha wielded the Artifact, though Rafinha could then manipulate the trajectory of the smaller arrows to provide area denial or diversion.

The burst of light fired by Leone pierced the surface of the sea, raising countless splashes. The sound of roiling water then subsided, and a few seconds passed before something floated to the surface of the water—a large number of fish. Leone had spotted their silhouettes from her vantage point and rained Shiny Flow's arrows of light down upon them. This wasn't just training; it was also their plan for lunch.

"Wow, fantastic catch! You did a terrific job, Leone!"

"That's quite impressive!" Liselotte agreed.

"Thanks," Leone said. "I guess you really can use any Artifact if you have a special-class Rune. This is amazing! Oh, wait, I need to hurry and gather all the fish!" She dived, using the wings to hover just above the water's surface, and extended the blade of her greatsword as far as she could. Using its broad blade, she scooped up the floating fish, securing them. Counting them on her return, she found that she'd caught almost twenty of them.

Rafinha's eyes lit up in excitement. "Wow! They look delicious! Mmmm, fresh ocean fish! ♪"

"We don't get to eat ocean fish very often. I bet you're looking forward to this," Inglis remarked.

"Mm-hmm! After all, Ymir's far inland, and even Chiral is separated from the open sea by fresh water. I bet they're nice and salty, since they live in salt water."

"No, I don't think they taste that much different..." Liselotte said.

"Oh, right, you're from Charot, and that's on the western coast, isn't it?" Inglis asked, and Liselotte nodded in agreement.

"Yes, this kind of fish is often part of our catch. Though these are especially impressive examples, I suppose because we're surrounded by the ocean. They

seem as though they'll be delicious."

"Anyway, Rani, let's start a fire and grill them," Inglis suggested.

"Yeah! We'll grill 'em up! Oh, Leone, could you catch a few more? I don't think this will be enough!" Rafinha said.

"This still isn't enough?" Leone laughed wanly.

"I'm worried that you'll overfish them to extinction..." Liselotte said.

"It'll be fine," Rafinha insisted. "The sea here is so wide and vast—I'm sure it will provide!"

"I guess..." Inglis said. "The Lake Bolt fishers complained that we were catching too many, but here we can have as many as we want!"

"Well, I hope you'll at least leave enough that they can still be caught in Charot..." Liselotte said.

Geographically speaking, they had proceeded west from the shores of Karelia into the open ocean. They had passed over the lands of Duke Arcia, Liselotte's father, and the town of Charot as they went.

"C'mon, Rani. Let's get the fire started."

"Whoo! I'll get some skewers! ♪"

Inglis, Rafinha, and Liselotte grilled the fish, while Leone brought more. Soon, the beach was filled with the delicious aroma of cooking fish. However, even with the scenery of a chalk-white city surrounded by clear blue sky and clear blue sea, the city itself was quiet. The Highlanders who lived there seemed to be mostly staying in their subterranean shelters rather than returning to the surface, in preparation for a potential falling of the Prism Flow or attack by magicite beasts; Highlanders were vulnerable to the effect of the Prism Flow. But for the friends, it was as if they had their own private beach.

"Let's eat!"

"Rani, you're gonna have a hard time eating if you pick up that many at once."

"But I'm worried they'll get away from me!"

Nom! Nom! Nom! Nom, nom, nom!

Inglis's comments were of no concern to her. Rafinha held three skewers in each of her hands, and the fish on them were rapidly being reduced to just head and bones.

"Mm fan fell va vuffayn ha flow he vown! (I can tell you're just trying to slow me down!)"

"Mno eh, vathnn—! (No way, that's not—!)" Inglis, trying to keep up the pace, held two in each of her own. But as small as she was, her normal ability to match Rafinha bite-for-bite had paled. In barely a moment, there was a small mountain of fish bones around them.

"Leone! Seconds please!" the two requested, smiling.

"Sure, sure. I'll get you some more..." Leone sighed, producing a jiggle that Rin *didn't* peek out of.

"Huh? Leone, where's Rin?"

"Huh? Err... She's not here, where did she get off to?"

"I haven't the foggiest..." Liselotte said.

"Oh, she's over there." Inglis pointed behind them. At some point, Rin had escaped Leone's top and headed for the shade of a nearby beach house.

"Rin! Where are you going?" Rafinha called out.

But just then they heard the shocked voice of a young boy. "Whoa?! Wh-What is this thing?!"

"Huh?! Is someone there?!" They turned to see a person with a forehead stigmata.

"A Highlander boy...?" Rafinha muttered, and she was right. He seemed to be around Alina's age, ten or so, a bit older than Inglis currently appeared. He had pale indigo hair and something about his face that gave Inglis the sense that he was a clever kid.

"H-Hello..." He was a bit guarded, even as he greeted them, but that was natural given the circumstances.

Of course, Rafinha, friendly as ever, greeted him warmly. "Hi! I'm Rafinha! Do

you want some of this?" Smiling, she held forth a fish skewer.

"Rani, there's nothing but bones left on that one."

"Huh?! Oh no! Um, how about this one?"

"That one's all bones too. All of them are." That was why they had just asked Leone for seconds.

"Well, sheesh! Just hold on a minute, umm... What's your name?"

"M-Myce... I'm Myce." He seemed a bit overwhelmed, but he still answered Rafinha's smile with one of his own. And before long...

"It's tasty!" Myce beamed as he held a skewer bearing part of Leone's new catch.

"Yeah, it's great! Fresh fish is the best!"

"Fish are so pretty too. I've never met one outside pictures and books."

"Huh? You'd never eaten fish before?" Rafinha replied, shocked.

"I have, but we only see them in Highland after they're already cooked, so..."

"I see, so you've eaten fish before, but by the time you see it it's already filleted? With the bones taken out and everything?" Inglis tried to build a picture of how Highland fed itself.

"Yeah, that's right! So I knew what fish are supposed to look like, but I still kinda thought they might just be fish sticks swimming in the sea...but nope! The real thing is so pretty and so tasty!" Myce had a carefree smile, as if the meal had taken away his nervousness.

"Yeah, you're right! Eat up and get big and strong, Myce!"

"Here, Myce, have another." As Inglis spoke, she and Rafinha continued converting fish to bones at many times his speed.

"Ha ha ha... I can't keep up with you two... I didn't know surface people ate like that..." As he took the new skewer from Inglis, Myce's smile was strained.

"Don't get the wrong impression!" Leone insisted. "It's just these two who are like that!"

“Indeed!” Liselotte agreed. “The rest of us eat at a reasonable pace.”

“I-I see... I’ve just never met people from the surface before, so I was wondering if you guys all eat like animals...”

Leone took a moment to converse with her fellow normal surface person. “I’m glad we’re here and it’s not just those two.”

“Yes, otherwise he would have had quite the mistaken idea...”

Leone and Liselotte patted their chests in relief, but Myce seemed a little disappointed.

“Oh. I thought I was learning something they didn’t teach me at school, but I guess I was wrong.”

“Viaveh, Nmayf, wa ya yu hih? (By the way, Myce, why are you here?)” Rafinha asked as she continued eating. It was a bit unbecoming of an older girl.

“Umm...?”

“Rani meant, ‘By the way, Myce, why are you here?’”

“Wow! Surface people can understand what they’re saying even when their mouths are full!”

“No, again, that’s just them!” Leone said.

“Come on, you two! Behave yourselves! You’re being a bad influence on Myce!” Liselotte scolded them.

“Ohay! Mmm...” Rafinha took a big gulp of the remaining food in her mouth. “Sorry, it’s just so tasty.”

“I didn’t even do anything wrong,” Inglis grumbled, unhappy about being included in the callout.

“It’s fine. It’s just because we’re such good friends.” Rafinha patted Inglis on the head to smooth things over.

“Yeah, Rani.” Inglis, however, saw herself as more of a grandparent to Rafinha. A doting one inclined to indulge her whims, though.

“So, anyway, what were you doing there, Myce?”

“I heard the Highlander civilians were all in the underground shelters?” Leone asked.

“Yes, Leone’s right,” Liselotte said. “The Prism Flow can’t be predicted or defended against right now, so it’s dangerous... Did you come out here on your own?”

“Y-Yeah... I always wanted to see the surface with my own eyes! I know Illuminas just fell into the sea for a little bit, so it’s not like a real surface country, but I still really wanted to see! Even though the city is the same, everything looks different, it even smells different! The world is so big!” Myce lit up with intellectual curiosity.

“Ha ha ha... It’s nice that you’re having fun, but you probably shouldn’t go out alone,” Rafinha said.

Myce frowned with his eyes a little. “Yeah, I’ll probably get in trouble for it. But that means I’m already in trouble, so please let me stay a little longer! I’ll go right home after!”

“That’s fine. But only for a little bit, okay? And stay near us.”

Myce’s eyes lit up. “Thanks, Rafinha!”

“Rafinha, we can’t just... I mean, if the other Highlanders are all sheltering, then it’s probably pretty important...” Leone pointed out.

“Exactly,” Liselotte agreed. “If anything were to happen...”

“That’s why I’m saying that,” Rafinha said. “He’s safer with us, isn’t he? The most dangerous thing would be the Prism Flow, but that doesn’t hurt us, so we can protect him. If worse comes to worst, we can cover him ourselves.”

We wouldn’t even have to do that, Inglis thought. We could have Leone extend her greatsword and use it as an umbrella or something. The problem would normally be that whoever’s holding that would be caught out in the flow, but it doesn’t hurt us, so that’s fine.

“Plus, don’t you want to talk with a Highlander kid a bit more? He says he wants to talk to us.”

“I don’t think that’s precisely what he said, Rani.”

“No, if I can stay, I will! When am I ever going to get the chance to talk to people from the surface again? And hey, are all girls from the surface pretty like you and Leone and Liselotte?” Myce’s carefree question lacked any particular undercurrent.

“Huh? Oh, Myce, you flatter us! ♪” Rafinha said. Myce could barely breathe through her pats on his back.

“Hmm, I guess. But only for a little while,” Leone conceded.

“Agreed... It certainly is a worthwhile experience to learn more about another culture.” Liselotte didn’t seem seriously concerned either. They were leaning toward Rafinha’s suggestion.

“Haven’t you ever seen people from the surface, Myce? Aren’t there any here?” Inglis asked. She had heard that Highlander had taken people from the surface as slaves, yet Myce had never met any? Strange.

There hadn’t been anyone from the surface at the central laboratory with Chief Academician Wilkin either. Her assumption had been that it was because that was a specialized research facility staffed by Highlander elites, but apparently even in day-to-day life surface slaves were not present.

“I heard there used to be, but that was bad, so I’m glad I never met any...” Myce’s expression became somber.

“What do you mean, Myce?” Rafinha asked.

“Well...”

“Treating people as slaves is terrible, right?” Inglis spoke in the place of Myce, who seemed to be having a hard time finding words.

Rafinha and the others gasped in unison.

“Yeah... That’s right! It was a bad thing. That’s why in Illuminas, we have the machinator to do everything, so we don’t need to anymore. I think it’s better like this. I don’t think it’s right to do mean things to people to make your life easier, and I wouldn’t like it if my parents or friends did that...”

“I see... Illuminas sounds like a good place, then.” Rafinha gently patted Myce on the back.

He lit up again, as if that had relieved his worry. “Yeah, it is! But I wish not doing mean things to people from the surface didn’t mean I didn’t have any to make friends with. There are a lot of things I want to ask.”

“All right, go ahead and ask me then! I’ll tell you anything!” Rafinha thumped her chest.

“Thanks!” Myce said. “Then, when you walk down the street on the surface, are there really just magicite beasts hanging out everywhere?!”

“I wouldn’t really say ‘everywhere,’ but there are a lot after the Prism Flow, and Prismers can even use their power to create weaker ones.”

“Prismers! Those are the superstrong ones, right? They say those are why we can’t live on the surface... Rafinha, have you ever seen one?”

“Seen one? We just fought one!” Rafinha pumped a fist proudly.

“Wow, that’s so cool!” Myce looked at her, obviously impressed.

“And this girl is the one who beat it! ♪” Rafinha scooped up Inglis, who obliged with her own fist pump.

“Whoooa!” Myce’s cheer came out almost like a scream. “The monster that’s supposed to be able to even wipe out Highland if it gets up here? That’s so cool! Wait, does that mean that if a Prismer showed up here, I could watch you fight it?!”

“Sure, I’d love to if you could find one for me,” Inglis answered with a smile.

Without Eris, she’d have to fight any Prismer that appeared now without a hial menace, but, well. It would give her a chance to truly test her own strength, so that could be a plus. She was always changing and improving. And she had her new dragon magic. Someday, she would have to take down a Prismer completely under her own power.

“Wow! I wonder if one will come. I know it’d cause big trouble, but I want to see!”

“Yeah, I hope one comes too!” Inglis nodded along with Myce.

“Ha ha ha... I don’t really want that to happen...” Rafinha said.

“Seriously, could you all not wish for such dangerous things! It might end up being more than a joke,” Liselotte protested with a frown.

“Huh? What do you mean, Liselotte?” Rafinha asked.

“Wait, have you heard of a Prismer around here?” Leone’s expression was nervous.

“Ooh! Great! What do they say about it? Where is it? How do I meet it?” Inglis asked.

“Don’t be so happy about it! Well...I do suppose it’s too late to be telling you that, but...” Liselotte sighed deeply, and began to recite. “Sailing west from my hometown Charot, you reach here: the Shaquell Sea. Legends of it tell of sea serpents and sunk ships. By Arcia family records...we sent many expeditions to explore the area, but only one party returned, and those members that survived described seeing the monster for themselves—a gigantic fish with rainbow-colored scales.”

“Rainbow-colored scales... That means...” Rafinha began.

“A...Prismer,” Leone concluded. They frowned.

“Yes. Now, it is a vast sea. I don’t think we’re just going to run into it, but it’s not completely unthinkable. And it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“That means Illuminas needs to get back in the sky as soon as possible,” Leone pondered.

“That’s right,” Rafinha agreed. “I wonder how much longer it will take. Does this kind of thing happen a lot, Myce?”

“No, this is the first time ever! At least that I know about...” Myce shook his head.

“Oh, something’s coming.” Inglis pointed toward the ocean. A huge waterspout made it clear that something was coming, though the spout and the distance made it hard to see exactly what.

I need to get a little closer, Inglis thought.

“Ehhhhhh?!” Meanwhile, Rafinha and the others had a bad feeling about this.

“Wow, something is! What is that?!” Rafinha asked.

“I-Is it the sea serpent?!” Leone said.

“Of all the times!” Liselotte said. “And we don’t even have Eris here with us...!”

They had just been talking about this. About a Prismer known as a “sea serpent” that lurked in these seas. Speak of the devil, perhaps. “All right! See, the Prismer knows just what we need!” Inglis, alone, was full of enthusiasm. A powerful foe that appeared right when she wanted a fight—what could be better?

“Sheesh!” Rafinha remarked. “Big or small, you’re always like this, Chris! But if it *is* a Prismer, I’m glad we’re here. These are friendly Highlanders, just like Cyrene and Ambassador Theodore. We’ve gotta protect them, Chris!”

“We’ll absolutely do that!”

“Neither Lady Eris nor Lady Ripple are here, but if there’s anything we can do...” Leone offered.

“If we can defeat the Prismer here, ships will be able to safely cross the Shaquell Sea! This is for Charot, and for Karelia, as well!” Liselotte said.

Each was willing to fight the Prismer if it showed itself. Then—

“Then I’m gonna go take a look!” Inglis couldn’t let herself be beaten to the prize. She wanted a one-on-one victory against a Prismer. Plus, when she had fought the rime-bound bird Prismer, it had shown the ability to transform not just Highlanders, but also surface people, into magicite beasts. That might have been a result of its evolved, part-bird part-human, form, something the sea serpent Prismer wouldn’t have. And Rafinha hadn’t been affected even up close, so she should be fine. As would Liselotte, also with an upper-class Rune, and especially Liselotte with her special-class one. But with how much she cared for her beloved ersatz granddaughter, Rafinha, Inglis didn’t want to take any chances. Such was her parental—well, grandparental—concern.

Running her fingertips over herself, Inglis activated her dragon magic.

Gwohhhh!

The dragon ice armor. An azure suit of armor with a draconic design materialized around her with a roar. And beyond that—“Haaaa!” *Aether Shell!*

The dragon ice armor increased her defenses and all-around capabilities, like a weaker Aether Shell. “Weaker” said more about aether than about it; it was quite effective. And most importantly, it could be layered with Aether Shell.

Inglis had combined the three kinds of abilities she could use at once—aether techniques, dragon lore, and magic—into one. The dragon ice armor was dragon magic: dragon lore and magic combined. And Aether Shell was an aether technique. She was using everything she could.

“Ah, h-hold it, Chris!” Before Rafinha could stop her, she had started running toward the ocean. No, to be precise, she was probably running toward it. She was moving too fast to be seen. Too fast indeed. In just a moment, she was far out at sea, her only visual trace a trail of frozen footsteps.

“Wh—! Ehhhh?! She disappeared! No, wait, are those footsteps in the water hers?!” Myce gasped.

“Myce, now you can watch Chris fight as much as you want—if you can see her,” Rafinha said.

“Y-Yeah. Do your best, Inglis!”

“We should get going after her!” Leone said.

“I’ll get there first! You two take the Flygear!” Liselotte said.

They began to follow her. At that point, Inglis had already seen what was actually coming from the sea.

“It’s not a Prismer?!” It wasn’t even magicite beasts. “Is that a flying battleship?!” It seemed to be significantly older than the ship Wilma commanded that had brought them to Illuminas, maybe even older than Karelia’s. It didn’t seem to have much of an armament at all. It must have been an older class.

Whatever it was, it was somehow still barely steaming forward, skipping

across the surface of the water while spouting smoke fore and aft. If she left it alone, it would probably completely lose propulsion and sink. A flock of birdlike magicite beasts chased after it, and near the surface there was also a school of fishlike ones, there to devour what they could from the eventual wreck.

“Was it attacked by magicite beasts?!” A flying battleship bound for Illuminas that had met with an attack by magicite beasts and began to sink. That must be the current situation. “Then...” Inglis closed in on the ship, then changed direction to run beside it.

As she did, she deactivated Aether Shell and shot down a few of the nearby magicite beasts. But that was just an afterthought. She would have to leave the bulk of the beasts for later. Rafinha and the others would arrive and handle them—she herself had to do something about the sinking ship. She didn’t think anyone else could.

Splasssssh!

The flying battleship shuddered forward again, skipping up a bit from the surface as it had been doing. And this was Inglis’s chance.

“There!” She reactivated Aether Shell. Ducking under the ship, she jumped up from the water and thrust her hands toward it. Twisting, she put all her strength into it and flung the ship as hard as she could!

“Haaaah!” The force she supplied visibly raised the ship’s trajectory and increased its momentum. But it still wouldn’t be enough for it to reach landfall on Illuminas. It would only hasten the sinking. She needed to keep at it.

“I’m not done yet!” When Inglis landed, she sped past the ship she’d just thrown, and again set herself up directly beneath it. Again, she jumped up to the ship, twisting around in the air.

“Again!” Again, she sent it flying higher and farther. The trick was to continually apply force while it was still aloft. If she tried to do it with her feet on the ocean’s surface, there would only be ice below her, and she would sink under the weight.

What was needed was to be speedy enough to run across the surface faster than it flew, and strong enough to throw it again. Even with Aether Shell and the dragon ice armor overlapping, she could feel its weight. That was good training in its own way.

She'd keep going, bringing it all the way to the safety of Illuminas.

The next time she brought herself under the falling ship, she found herself passing by Rafinha and the others, coming from the other direction.

"Chris! Keep going!"

"Got it! Rani, can you deal with the magicite beasts that are chasing it?"

"Okay! Leave it to us!"

Afterward, Inglis continued to throw the ship toward Illuminas, then get back in its path. As she did, she also passed mechanical dragons coming from the island. She had gotten there first, but their counterattack against the magicite beasts was coming as well.

"Mechanical dragons! And they weren't paying any attention to me!" The mechanical dragons had passed her and the ship by. They seemed to understand what she was doing.

So I can just keep going! "Again! Again! And again!" Landfall on Illuminas drew closer and closer. "And this is it! Haaaaaaaah!" Her last throw was different from all the others—this one sent the ship definitively toward land. That meant she had to get ahead of it and catch it.

"All right!" On the shore of Illuminas, as the ship began to fall, Inglis prepared herself.

"What are you doing?! It's going to land here! Run away!" It was a Highlander woman in black knight's armor—Wilma—calling out to her. She was commanding the mechanical dragons, which must have been why they understood what was happening.

"Wilma? It's fine, I'll stop it!"

"That's absurd! You'll be crushed!"

"I threw it; I can catch it. Leave it to me." Inglis grinned calmly at her. "Here it

comes! Wilma, get out of here!”

“No, I don’t care how strong you are, I can’t let a child be left to bear that alone! And it’s my duty to protect Illuminas!” Wilma had no intention of falling back, so there was little more to say, and little time in which to say it.

“If you think it might be dangerous, get away, okay?”

“You don’t need to worry about me like that!”

Inglis and Wilma caught the falling battleship together.

“Haaaaah!”

“Guhhhh?! This is heavy! Keeping it away is—!”

The mass and force of it were so strong that they were pushed back on their feet, leaving furrows.

“No, not yet!”

“It’s easing up?!”

The force pressing on the two slowly eased.

“Just a little more!”

“This is incredible! Just what are you?!”

Thummmmmmp...

In the end, the flying battleship, its momentum expended, landed with a dull thud. If they hadn’t done anything, it might have crashed and exploded.

“Phew... Well, that was pretty good training...” Inglis smiled in satisfaction, and wiped the dripping sweat from her brow.

Crshshsh!

At the same time, the dragon ice armor encasing her shattered. For it to have withstood the aether load of a full-power Aether Shell for so long was

impressive. She had no complaints about its performance.

“Well done! This means there will be almost no damage to Illuminas. And we certainly didn’t need any more.”

“I threw it, so it makes sense I could catch it. Are you all right, Wil—?!” Inglis froze up midsentence as she checked on Wilma. Looking at her, she noticed that her arm was bent at an impossible angle. Her right ankle as well—the heel was twisted to the front. “W-Wilma?!”

She had pushed herself too hard. Inglis had let her choose to rather than stopping her, but should have pushed her away.

“Yeah, don’t worry. I’ll be fine.” Wilma’s expression was calm. “These aren’t going to do me any more good...” She touched her twisted arm and foot, and as she did, they fell away. But there was no blood, no exposed flesh. The stumps were packed with machinery like that of a Flygear or Flygear Port.

“Ah! A mechanical body...” Just like that of Ian, Lahti’s friend from Alcard. Wilma’s seemed more advanced, like it was the newest model.

“Yes. It’s more convenient for Highland knights to operate abroad in such bodies. This way we’re not affected by the Prism Flow.”

“I-I see... So do all of Illuminas’s knights have them?”

“Yes. It’s the most efficient way to limit personnel requirements for command of the mechanical dragons and flying battleships.”

“Efficiency, hmm...”

That was fine enough, but what about Wilma’s original body? Inglis thought of Rahl and Fars of the Rambach Company, two surface people who had become Highlanders. Their position seemed to have been that of knights of Highland, similar to Wilma’s. Though, given that she had been given command of a flying battleship and of the overall defense of Illuminas, perhaps hers was higher. Maybe even on a level with the Archlord Evel.

In any case, they were like ambassadors in that they performed duties outside Highland, except ambassadors retained their flesh. Or at least *someone’s* flesh, given that Evel, like Chief Academician Wilkin, had a hi-mana coat.

But from what Wilma said, Illuminas's knights all had mechanical bodies. It might have been that this was simply a difference of doctrine, of culture, between the Triumvirate and the Papal League. Perhaps, even among the Triumvirate, Dux Jildegrieva's Rüstung differed. Other parts of Highland weren't necessarily the same as here. Dux Jildegrieva seemed like the kind of man to refuse a mechanical body on the grounds that exercise would no longer strengthen him. No, she was sure he would, given how closely they were in agreement. He and Inglis had very similar preferences—they clicked well. Plus, Inglis enjoyed her blossomed appearance when she stared at herself in the mirror, or when she felt her soft hand on her skin. She knew it would be displeasing no longer really being *herself*.

It seemed that each Highlander leader had a very clear influence on their followers. Compared to that, the differences between surface countries seemed trivial.

“Don't make that face. I wanted this... I had an incurable disease, and this was the only way I could survive. All of Illuminas's knights share the same sort of story.”

“Oh, I see...” Inglis replied. That made sense to her, then. It had been necessary to survive. And it was not only lifesaving, but a way to ensure that there would be knights to protect Illuminas—Illuminas, which prized efficiency above all else.

“Now, what's more important is to find out what's aboard this ship.” Wilma turned her eyes to the flying battleship which lay beside them.

Chapter IV: Inglis, Age 16—Far-Off Highland (4)

Within Illuminas's arsenal, a surface man disembarked from the flying battleship that Inglis and the mechanical dragons had rescued and gave her a deep bow.

"That was quite helpful. We were flying low, searching for you, when we were attacked by magicite beasts... I thank you from the bottom of my heart for rescuing us."

He was young and handsome, with auburn hair and a distinctive monocle. His soft-spoken yet energetic air was on target for Rafinha's type.

"Ah..." Rafinha breathed.

"No!" Inglis hopped up on Rafinha's back and covered her eyes with her hands. No need to let Rafinha see too much.

"Hey, stop it, Chris! What are you doing?!"

"You shouldn't be gazing at him with that look!"

"I thought this was supposed to be a serious conversation..." Leone said.

Liselotte shared a sigh with Leone. "You're being a nuisance."

Like that pair, Inglis and Rafinha had also put on something functioning as cover-ups over their swimsuits. They had gotten cold, and they didn't want to be showing off their swimsuits forever. The white fabric they wore seemed like an elaborate ceremonial robe. On the chest was an embroidered emblem much like a stigmata. Given to them by Wilma, the long tunic seemed like it was a garment designed for foreigners staying in Illuminas. As long as they were wearing it, they had access to self-piloting Flygears, certain restricted areas, and the distribution of food and other supplies even without stigmata of their own.

Though it seemed that with the city's core functions silenced during the state of emergency, only some of these were working. They had been fortunate during their visit with Chief Academician Wilkin that at least the lab's functions

were still online, but even their trip to the beach had required the use of the *Star Princess*, as Illuminas's self-piloting Flygears were not operating.

"What seems to be the problem?" the monocled man asked, watching them in confusion.

"Oh, don't worry about it," Wilma began, her eyes fixed on the man. "Aethelstan Trading, was it? That's strange, I don't recognize you."

"Yes, I believe this is the first time we've met. My name is Yuber Aethelstan. My father has had to retire due to illness. I intend to follow in his footsteps and maintain our business relationship. By all means, I hope it can continue to be fruitful."

"I will report this to my superiors. I doubt there will be any issue, but I must ask you to wait here in the meantime."

"Yes. Very well. But may I be allowed to unload my cargo? Otherwise, my repairs may be delayed."

"Go ahead. Will you require any assistance?"

"No, I believe they can march out on their own two feet."

Yuber was soft-spoken, but the reality he referred to was hard. Inglis suspected his wording implied his "cargo" was human. She'd heard both that Highlanders kidnapped surface dwellers and that some surface dwellers sold people to Highland. This seemed to be the latter case. Signs pointed to his being a surface slave trader.

She was surprised that he would have a flying battleship, but it would definitely be the most effective way to go about his trade. She had not, however, heard of any slavers with such ships in Karelia, so he must have been chartered by another country. Aethelstan Trading was a name to remember, then. An organization quite possibly far fouler than even Rahl and Fars's Rambach Company.

But Inglis couldn't understand why they would be doing business with Illuminas. After all, Myce—the Highlander boy whom they had just met at the beach—had said that Illuminas had no surface slaves, and he'd been taught that slavery was wrong.

“Let go of me, Chris!” Rafinha, her tone forceful, pulled Inglis’s hands from her eyes. “Wilma! What’s that supposed to mean?! Just what kind of cargo is it?!”

Wilma silently looked at Rafinha, a troubled expression on her face.

“Wilma!”

“Never mind that, what about him? Why is that boy here?” Wilma asked, turning to Myce.

“Well... While we were at the beach, we met a kid who said he came from the city. Between the ship and the magicite beasts showing up, he ended up coming with us...”

“I see. Thank you for taking care of the little rascal. Now, shall we return him home? I’m sure his parents are worried.”

“Wait, that isn’t—”

“I wouldn’t want to have to reach the conclusion that you abducted him. Please don’t let it come to that.”

“But—!”

It was Myce who halted Rafinha’s insistence. “R-Rafinha... I don’t want to cause any trouble for you, so I’ll go home. Mom and dad are probably looking all over for me. Can you take me home? I’m ready to go.”

It probably wasn’t a good idea to argue with Wilma, but if Rafinha ordered it, Inglis would search the ship, by force if necessary.

“Myce...okay.” At his urging, Rafinha had no choice but to acquiesce. Inglis’s group squeezed into the *Star Princess* with the boy.

As they took off, Myce, his face serious, spoke up again. “Rafinha, once you bring me home, can you hurry back there? That knight was hiding something... She was just using me as an excuse to hide whatever it was from you all. I don’t think she could’ve if I hadn’t been there. Sorry for getting in your way.”

Myce was a smart kid; he’d kept his head and wanted answers from Wilma.

“Sure, Myce! We’ll go right back and find out what’s up!”

“Thanks! Can you tell me whatever it was? I’ll come back and ask you!”

“Wait, wouldn’t that mean you’re gonna sneak out again? You’re not supposed to do that!” Rafinha poked Myce.

“Once the machinator gets better and Illuminas is flying again, everything’ll be okay.”

They smiled at each other. Inglis was glad to see them getting along well. One of the best things about Rafinha was how quickly she made friends. Inglis was proud of the girl for that. Her parenting had been a great influence on her. Well, Duke Bilford and Inglis’s own aunt Irina had raised her, but she herself had spent the most time with Rafinha. She could have some pride in that.

“All right—Rafinha, Leone, Liselotte, Inglis, we didn’t spend that much time together, but it was great! And the fish were so tasty! Bye-bye!”

By a large road a bit closer to the city than the beach where they’d met, a stairway led underground. It was probably where he had come up to begin with. There was a thick barrier of some kind blocking it, but it reacted to his stigmata and opened an entrance just large enough for one person. Smiling and waving goodbye, he entered.

“Bye-bye! Next time, let’s eat some meat!” Rafinha waved even more enthusiastically than Myce did.

“Goodbye! Come play with Rani again sometime!” Inglis said.

“Take care,” Leone said.

“Try not to worry your parents too much,” Liselotte said.

They bade him farewell with a smile and then returned to the arsenal. There, Aethelstan Trading’s damaged ship had already begun its repairs. Many of the automated mechanical hands were working on its hull. Yuber was already gone, and the only people present were Wilma, who was preparing to board a transit Flygear, and a girl accompanying her.

The girl looked to be about Inglis’s age—her real age of sixteen, not her current appearance. Her hair was pale, with a calming bluish tinge, and she wore it in a bob above her shoulders, a bit shorter than the average woman.

She seemed gaunt, but still graceful and beautiful. Her forehead bore no stigmata, and she wore the same robe Inglis and the others now did; she must have arrived aboard the Aethelstan Trading ship.

She looked at them, and called out desperately: “Y-You there! Are you from the surface?! Please, please! Save the people who were taken along with me! All they did was agree with me and follow me here! They’re innocent!”



Rafinha was the first to react. “Huh?! What do you mean?! Who are you?!”

“I am an imperial princess of Venefic!”

“Let’s go. Someone’s waiting for you.” Wilma cut the girl off and launched the Flygear.

“Ah! Wait, Wilma!” Rafinha protested.

“Barrier—privilege level: administrative. Disable reopening for one hour.” They flew away, and the path from the arsenal closed. It seemed like it would remain closed, as Wilma had commanded, for some time.

“She said she was an imperial princess from Venefic!” Leone exclaimed. “Did you hear that?!”

“I did as well, Leone!” Liselotte replied.

“Was that ship meant to bring her here?” Rafinha asked.

“I don’t think it was just for that, Rani,” Inglis said. “She said she wanted us to save the people who were taken here with her.”

“Yeah, she was more worried about them than about herself... I bet she’s nice.” That was, of course, Rafinha’s default assumption about people.

“What do we do, Rani? Shall we heed her words?” That is, would they save the other people who had been taken with her?

“Yeah, let’s! The barrier closed and we’re stuck in here for a while, so let’s try to find them! When it opens again, then we can go after her. They’d get mad if we broke it.”

“Okay, Rani.”

“Leone, Liselotte, are you two okay with that?”

“Yes, that sounds like a great idea, Rafinha!” Leone replied.

“You can count me in as well,” Liselotte said. “If she’s really an imperial princess of Venefic, then this might be an opportunity to improve the relationship between our two countries.”

“Smart thinking, Liselotte! That would be great, wouldn’t it, Chris?”

“Huh? Well...perhaps? According to some, you don’t truly understand someone until you fight them...” Inglis said.

“Letting your fists do the talking, huh? I think that only works for you and Dux Jil!”

“Really? But Venefic’s army still has others of the same rank as Mr. Rochefort, so I think there’s a lot to look forward to. I hope they all come at us at once.”

“Wouldn’t that be all-out war?! That’s no good at all! Now let’s get going!”

“Okay, if you say so.”

Total war against Venefic sounded interesting, but if Rafinha didn’t want it to happen, then its avoidance was acceptable—pleasing, even. After all, Rafinha’s smile was more important than anything. And for opponents who pulled no punches, at the very least Inglis still had Dux Jildegrieva, whom she knew she could count on for a sparring match.

“Where to, Rani?”

“Over there! That’s the Aethelstan Trading ship! There might still be people aboard!”

“Yeah. And it does technically belong to a surface company, so even if we cause a ruckus, it’s not Highland’s problem!”

“All right, let’s go!”

Inglis and the others went to board the Aethelstan Trading ship. The mechanical hands surrounded the ship’s hull, but they continued working rather than attempting to stop them. The ship was braced on a large poppet, and there was a gangway from a hatch to the pier. As they crossed, they saw no one on deck, but there still may have been people inside.

“We’re coming in!” Rafinha was first in the impromptu boarding party. As she ran across the gangway, no voice answered her—but something else did.

Shing!

The moment she set foot aboard, a pair of sentries were on either side of her.

The long guns they carried had spear-like blades attached—bayonets—which crossed in an X shape, silently blocking Rafinha’s path. The unspeaking sentries were Highlander soldiers under Wilma’s command, clad head to toe in black armor. They must have been sent to both guard and monitor the ship.

“Er, ’scuse me! May I go inside?!”

Rafinha’s request went unanswered.

“I can’t?! Then at least tell me, are there any of the people who were forcibly brought here still aboard?!”

Rafinha’s question had changed, but the Highlander soldiers’ lack of a response persisted.

“Was the girl Wilma took away really an imperial princess of Venefic?!” Leone asked.

“What are you going to do to her?!” Liselotte added.

More questions led to more silence from the two sentries.

“Can’t you answer at all?! C’mon, c’mon! C’mon!”

Still, silence. The probing had reached the point where an angry roar might be expected, but at least in that aspect they were gentlemanly.

“What do we do, Chris?!”

“Well...” Inglis could force her way in, of course, but the consequences made that unappealing. They were here at Ambassador Theodore’s request, as representatives of Karelia. If something were to happen, it would become an international incident between Illuminas and Karelia, thus weakening his position. And, most importantly, Eris was currently being repaired in the Greyfrier sarcophagus. In other words, she was essentially a hostage. They had little leverage to work with—which, then, indeed produced the question of what was to be done.

“The people who were brought here have already disembarked,” a voice finally answered. It was calm and quiet, unlike the frenetic questions. “The girl who the Highlander knight took away is, indeed, an imperial princess of Venefic. Imperial Princess Meltina, to be precise. She was brought here after being

judged a likely candidate to become a hial menace. Is that not an honor?"

The answer came from Yuber, the leader of Aethelstan Trading whom the group had just met. He appeared from the passageway that the soldiers had blocked. He must have noticed the commotion.

"Oh, you're—!"

"Yes. These are the perfect soldiers—loyal to a fault, fearless, but not even remotely flexible, so I will answer in their stead. And besides, I hadn't even properly thanked you for saving my ship. Does that answer your questions?"

"Th-Thank you..." Rafinha responded politely, but her expression was still guarded. As was only natural, given that Yuber appeared to be a slave trader. "But what about the people other than Her Imperial Highness? She said she wanted us to save the people taken with her. And I'm sure she's a good person! She wouldn't have sold them away! That's terrible! So how could you do this?!"

"Now, now, calm down. I have no intention of causing you any trouble, given your generous aid, and I'd prefer if possible that we remain amicable."

"Then answer my question!"

"Yes, of course. But of course, I can't keep you waiting out here. Please, step inside, I'll have refreshments prepared. You understand, these people are my guests." At Yuber's final line, the two soldiers stepped aside. It seemed like they would at least listen to the ship's owner.

Passing through the ship's lower decks, they arrived at something of a large meeting room where tea had already been served. Its aroma was wonderful—this was good tea, with a refined flavor. The cookies served along with it were delicious as well.

"Delicious, isn't it, Rani?"

"Yeah..." Rafinha's nervousness had her in a half pout. Her usual gleaming smile when encountering delicious things was missing. Given the circumstances, Inglis wasn't shocked.

"I'm sorry, we have not heard much of Aethelstan Trading in Karelia. What is it that you trade in?" Inglis asked.

“We trade in wares from Venefic and its friends to the southeast. Our market area does not approach Karelia, so I’m unsurprised that you’ve not heard of us.” Even though Inglis appeared to be a tiny six-year-old, Yuber was unfailingly polite in his answers.

“As so much of your business is in Venefic, of course you can’t expand into Karelia—that could well lose you what you have. And with relations worsening, you might even be suspected of playing one side or the other,” she reasoned.

“Hm...? And what brings you to that conclusion?”

“The decision to take an imperial princess and deliver her to Highland is one no ordinary merchant would make to line his pocket. That would be high treason—the company itself would be forfeit. Now, on the other hand, if internal conflicts in Venefic resulted in the loser, an imperial princess, ending up in Aethelstan Trading’s custody, that would simply mark you as an official purveyor.”

From that perspective, trading in Karelia—Venefic’s enemy—would be dangerous. It would be more advantageous to remain loyal to Venefic.

“Mm-hmm. Small as you are, you’re quite the perceptive young lady. That’s correct, I’m proud to serve by appointment to His Imperial Majesty, as well as all of Venefic. And it is quite lucrative indeed. Ah, would you like more of the snacks?” Yuber nodded along to Inglis, as if impressed, and offered more to eat.

“Yep!” She might as well take him up on that. “Which would make those who came along her followers, wouldn’t it? Political prisoners, to put it bluntly. Powerful people, those whose execution could spark an uprising, or who could, if imprisoned, someday lead a rebellion—selling them to Highland instead is a clever way to deal with them, I must admit.”

“Yes, and in return we receive Artifacts with which to defend our country—far more profitable than simply executing them. You might even say that they’re belatedly doing their duty to Venefic. It’s a wonderful thing—especially because we share in the proceeds.”

“Meaning, then...their lives are forfeit?” Inglis replied with a grin. All the better of an argument for acting now.

“Oh my, I do believe we’re getting into the weeds here.” Yuber returned a dry chuckle.

Thunk! Rafinha arose with a start. “Where are they?! If we don’t save them right away, it’ll be too late!”

Yuber watched her, silently, calmly, but gave no answer.

“Say something! If you don’t tell us, we’ll force it out of you!”

“Before that, I must ask: are you sure this is your concern?” Yuber’s monocle glinted sharply.

“What do you mean?!”

“You are from Karelia, are you not? This is an internal matter for Venefic, and perhaps aiding the princess would be sticking your neck out too far.”

“If we don’t help them because they’re enemies, how will we ever be friends?! I don’t want that! We need to help anyone we can!”

“Even if it prolongs that enmity? Think this over. She and her lot are political prisoners.”

“Wh—?!” Rafinha, her expression steeled, glanced over at Inglis in silence.

“We aren’t even sure why they’re political prisoners,” Inglis filled in. “They’re dissidents of some sort, but what if they were hard-line opponents of the establishment of the Rangers and peace with Karelia? Helping them might lead not to peace, but to all-out war, is what he means.”

“You truly are a perceptive young lady. That’s exactly what I wanted to say. And are you willing to assume that level of risk?”

Rafinha bit her lip in silence.

“Very well, then. What, precisely, are Her Imperial Highness’s opinions?” Inglis asked.

“*Wrong*, presumably. I’d prefer not to be pressed any further on the matter.” As could be expected, Yuber stonewalled her.

This left Inglis with only one possible response. “It’s okay, Rani. Do what you feel is right. I’ll make it work out,” she whispered from Rafinha’s side so only

she could hear.

In response, Rafinha nodded, and turned to Yuber with a smile. “Then we’ll save them! Even if we have different opinions, I’m sure I’d be able to find common ground with someone willing to put others before themselves! I want to believe the world is like that!” Rafinha insisted, her expression firm.

Yuber chuckled. “You live in quite the beautiful world, don’t you? I envy you. If only we could all be so lucky. However...about that level of risk—what will you do when your innocent hopes are replaced with Karelian corpses? Pretend you didn’t know? Even though I’ve given you fair warning?”

“That won’t happen! And if it looks like it will—” Rafinha paused to scoop Inglis up. “This girl will beat up all the bad guys!”

“She isn’t kidding,” Inglis added. Perhaps she owed Rafinha a fist pump again.



“Ha ha ha! I see, given that you were strong enough to throw and catch my ship, I suppose I have to take that seriously. And besides, all-out war with Karelia, which has shown it’s capable of defeating a Prismer, would be unfavorable for Venefic. As a merchant, I certainly wouldn’t welcome the lack of customers.”

“And is that the prevailing view in Venefic?” Inglis asked. That was a bit disappointing in its own way. She wanted a good war where the hawks would throw everything they had at her. Taking on overwhelming numbers alone seemed like it would teach her a lot.

“Perhaps. In the end, I am only a merchant; I cannot speak for my betters. I’m unaware of even the finer details concerning Her Imperial Highness. However, I can say that we in Venefic were shocked that the Prismer was not merely chased off or sealed away, but actually destroyed in the early fighting. We had hoped that it was powerful enough to, if not completely neutralize Karelian resistance, at least leave it crippled. It was to ensure this that General Rochefort and the hial menace Arles made their death ride to your capital.”

Rochefort and Arles were now instructors at the Chiral Knights’ Academy, and Inglis had no intention of giving them back. They were too important to her right now to lose. As powerful as they were, they were still willing to train with her every day after class. She couldn’t ask for a better learning environment.

“However, there are some who hold that Karelia’s reserves are depleted, and that now is the time to go on the offensive. It seems to me that the division runs deep.”

“I see...”

“Never mind that!” Rafinha broke in. “What about the people who were taken along with Her Imperial Majesty?! We have to hurry up or it’ll be too late!”

“We seem to be getting along quite well like this, so while I’d like to answer you, I must warn that you may regret what you learn,” Yuber said.

“I won’t regret it! C’mon, tell me!”

“Well, to bring it all together... You’re asking where they are, when you’ve

already met. If there is a late to be, then late you are—since you have, of course, found them already.” Yuber’s statement was cryptic.

“What?! We’re too late?!”

“Yes. Nothing can be done for them now,” Yuber insisted with a calm smile.

“What do you mean?!” Leone remarked in confusion.

“Explain yourself!” Liselotte demanded.

Those sent to Highland would be forced into slave labor, or selected as hial menaces if their aptitude was high enough, was Inglis’s impression. Simply killing them would accomplish nothing. So if Yuber said that she and her friends had already met them...

“The soldiers at the hatch, then?” Inglis offered.

“Huh? Those were Highland soldiers, Chris.”

“Yes...but if Yuber insists we’ve already met the taken people, it has to be them; there’s no alternative.”

“When you put it that way, it makes sense...” Leone said.

“But then what could he mean by it being too late?” Liselotte asked.

“Wilma said that their soldiers were homunculi. I think maybe the raw materials for those homunculi are people taken from the surface,” Inglis said.

“What?!” Rafinha and the others gasped.

Meanwhile Yuber nodded and clapped, pleased. “I certainly appreciate your being so quick-witted. I’d prefer not to play the villain being the only one saying such unpleasant things.”

“What exactly are they, then?” Inglis asked.

“Artificial humans called mana coats. Their near-complete lack of a self-conception means, as you can see, that Highland uses them as soldiers.”

“In that case...what exactly does it mean for them to be created from humans?”

“The people sent here are first placed in a reactor, which is filled with a fluid

called mana extract. In only a few seconds, they melt away, becoming part of the mana extract, it seems. I have not seen the reactor itself.”

“What?! Then...” Rafinha began.

“Everyone was turned into mana extract?!” Leone asked.

“So that’s what you meant by it being too late!” Liselotte said.

“And the soldiers generated by processing that mana extract are the ones you just met. The entire process takes only a moment. It is truly a fearsome technology,” Yuber explained.

“It definitely sounds that way. It didn’t take much time at all to drop Myce off and come back,” Inglis said. If those were mana coats, maybe hi-mana coats were made from only the purest and highest-quality mana extract. How many lives had to be sacrificed to create one? She didn’t know, but it seemed like an extremely ruthless process.

“The convenient thing about mana coats is, once one is finished with them, one can simply turn them back into mana extract. Living slave soldiers eat, and fall ill if unfed—supplies are necessary. But not for mana coats. They truly are the perfect soldiers. Illuminas’s flying battleships are equipped with mana extract tanks, from which they create soldiers as needed. There is no waste at all.”

“That’s—! How can you say that so calmly?!” Rafinha yelled. “That’s even worse than being forced to fight or work as a slave! At least that way you’re still yourself, you’re still alive in your own body! If you’re mana extract, you may as well be dead!”

Yuber regarded Rafinha with confusion. “And why are you saying that to me? It is the Highlanders of Illuminas who cause it to happen, is it not?”

“Ugh...” Rafinha slumped at his response. On this point, at least, Yuber was correct.

“When I first saw your faces, I thought, with all due respect, that you were entirely too easygoing. ‘How could someone smile like that in such a terrible place?’ I asked myself. Every moment I spoke with that Highlander knight, I was trembling, wondering when I, too, would be turned into mana extract... But I

suppose, if you weren't aware, it's understandable."

"Right... We didn't know. Maybe I was just on cloud nine after receiving a special-class Rune..." Leone said.

"It wasn't just you, Leone. I was as well." Liselotte slumped, frowning.

"You seem to know quite a bit about this. The Highlander boy we met in the city said that unlike some places, Illuminas had abolished slavery, that people didn't support it," Inglis said. Even Wilma didn't seem to completely grasp the process behind the mana-coat soldiers, though she might have wanted to muddle the topic. At the very least, she must have had some idea, given that she was aware that Illuminas still bought slaves. But there was a good chance that Myce, or even the average adult Highlander, knew nothing, given what Myce himself had been taught.

"I suppose. My family has kept close contact with Highland for generations; we've had many opportunities to learn."

That must mean they had had opportunities to speak candidly with Chief Academician Wilkin or others in the upper strata. If the average person didn't know, it had to come from the top.

"How can you be against slavery but then turn people into mana extract and use them?! It makes no sense... I just can't..." Rafinha's tone shook, her shoulders shook, as she sat back down next to Inglis. Her initial momentum had faded away.

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right, Rani." Inglis softly stroked her back as she spoke. For someone who had been enjoying sightseeing in Highland, this must have been quite the wake-up call. She was clearly shocked.

"I fully agree," Yuber said. "For surface people like us, it seems like some cruel deception... It makes me angry. But mana extract can be made into mana coats, or used to power the city's functions. It must be an extremely useful material."

"Seeing slaves must scar them on some level, but unseen slaves would not. What they don't see can't hurt them, I guess. In their own way, Highlanders are not so different from surface dwellers," Inglis mused.

Yuber laughed wryly in return. "Ha ha ha, I suppose... Those aren't words I'd

expect from a young child.”

“To be honest, I’m in a child’s body, but I’m actually sixteen.”

“I see... But even for a sixteen-year-old, that’s impressive. I’d expect a normal girl of your age to react more like your friends here.”

Rafinha and the others didn’t seem to have the energy to respond.

“They’re good girls,” Inglis said. “I’m the only one who doesn’t think about things all that deeply.”

Yuber chuckled. “I understand why you believe they’re good girls, but I simply cannot understand why you believe you don’t think deeply about things.”

“I suppose.” Inglis smiled and tried to pass it off.

“Anyway, the truth is that there is no—and can be no—‘good Highland’ from the perspective of the surface. If you come to believe that Illuminas is a good place, friendly to us, you’ve simply deceived yourself. We are the best at what we do, you realize? And I hope you realize as well what that means.”

It meant that they were the prime purveyors of surface slaves. With the technology to convert them to mana extract, slaves didn’t need to be fed, and they were cheaper to keep. Which meant that Aethelstan Trading could operate in volume.

“Does that mean the other parts of Highland don’t have this technology?”

“Correct, as far as I’m aware. The Papal League has declared it forbidden, so I do not expect it to be taken up on a broad scale. It seems like for now it is exclusive to Illuminas—which, if I might say, makes Illuminas the most fearsome part of Highland there is. As well as our best customer.”

“I see... Thank you for telling us this.” Inglis bowed politely.

“Well... No matter where you go, we’re nothing but livestock to a Highlander. They take our lives just as we eat the cattle or swine that we raise. An even footing is impossible, and we can only sweeten our words in the hope that our own turn never arrives. So do take care, please.”

“Yes, we certainly will. Rani, Leone, Liselotte, let’s go. We could use a short rest. We can ask Wilma about Her Imperial Highness later.”

Soon, the passage which Wilma had sealed would reopen.

Chapter V: Inglis, Age 16—Far-Off Highland (5)

Two days later, Inglis and Rafinha returned to the beach together in the evening. Leone and Liselotte were apparently already in bed, but for these two, it was dinnertime. They were hungry, so they had caught some fish and were eating them. After grilling their catch, they enjoyed the meal under the stars and by the waves.

“Honestly...I’m getting a bit tired of these,” Rafinha said, having already reduced several fish to bones.

“Well, that’s natural if this is all we choose to eat,” Inglis replied.

“But I don’t want to eat any food using mana extract...”

Technically, they could order food whenever they wanted, but that was just another function of the city’s mana-extract-powered systems. Whether it came from a desire to boycott how the food was made or just an inability to really enjoy it, the four had primarily subsisted on fish during their stay in Illuminas. So in a way, being so close to the ocean was a blessing. In the end, they could always rely on Mother Nature.

“Should we head back to Karelia for a while?” Inglis asked reluctantly.
Illuminas isn’t back online, and we haven’t been able to get Rin checked out yet, though...

“I’m not sure. I’d really like to help Rin, but...” Rafinha picked up Inglis from next to her and plopped the girl into her lap.

“I don’t think Ambassador Theodore was expecting Illuminas to fall from the sky, so I don’t think he’ll be too mad.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. And I don’t even know what to say to Myce the next time we see him.” Rafinha clutched Inglis like a rag doll, as if this would calm her worries, a duty Inglis was happy to perform.

“Yeah. That’s going to be hard.”

Officially, Illuminas was against the enslavement of people from the surface and had taken a more friendly approach. However, behind the scenes—unbeknownst to Myce or an average citizen—they were quietly gathering surface dwellers and converting them into mana extract to power an extremely advanced city built around the machinator.

Would Myce believe them if they told him the truth? And if he did, how badly would that shake him? It might be too hard on him. When Inglis considered that, it would probably be difficult for them to be honest with him. Plus, they had only heard Yuber's side of the story. They of course hadn't broken into the mana extract processing facilities, nor had they confirmed it with Wilma or Chief Academician Wilkin—nor could they do so carelessly. What kind of consequences would await them for pressing them on this dark truth? Eris was in Highland's custody. They couldn't afford to endanger her.

"So the surface and Highland really can't be equals, huh," Rafinha muttered.

"That's what Yuber said."

"Looking at Rin...at Cyrene and Ambassador Theodore, I couldn't feel that way...but this is Illuminas, where she came from. Maybe he's right."

"That's his opinion. You're entitled to your own. In fact, it's probably easiest to have none at all."

"I don't want that to be true. It's not right... Plus, if I'm not careful, there's no telling what you'll do."

"Indeed. As your squire, it's my job to do what you say, Rani."

"Same ol' Chris—no worries at all."

"Yeah. All I want is to be with you and to fight strong foes."

No questions of good or evil there, no ideology or advocacy.

"You never change, do you? Life's more complicated than that... You should try looking sad or being hurt sometime, just a little bit, I feel like." Rafinha pinched and pulled at Inglis's cheeks.

"Hahr hahr hahr. (Ha ha ha.)"

"I think we've really tried our best. We've beaten plenty of magicite beasts

around Ymir, stopped the flying battleship from landing on Chiral, saved Ripple, prevented His Majesty's assassination, traveled to Alcard, and even taken down a Prismer."

"Hfeh, Rahi, yuray. (Yeah, Rani, you're right.)"

"But after all that...I guess nothing's really changed?" Rafinha's voice cracked weakly as she looked up at the stars. "The Prism Flow still falls, and we need Artifacts to protect ourselves from magicite beasts. But that comes at the cost of the surface's food stocks, and sometimes even our lives... Whether it's the Triumvirate or the Papal League, being turned into mana extract or held as slaves, it's all the same. Maybe it doesn't matter whether we're killed by magicite beasts or by Highland... Even if Karelia's banned selling slaves to Highland, Venefic treats it like it's normal. As long as people like Yuber are willing to work with them, and people still get sold to Highland, nothing's going to change..." Rafinha let go of Inglis's cheeks and hugged her tightly. She was shaking, barely holding in tears. "And...even if every country and every person on the surface stops selling slaves to Highland, that just means life in Highland becomes impossible. That'll just lead them to kidnapping, and if we tried to stop that, I guess that'd mean war with Highland."

"Yeah. If that happens, a lot of people will die, and we won't be able to get Artifacts... And if we win and take the technology to make our own Artifacts, it's at the cost of people like Myce."

"And that's what the Steelblood Front is after, isn't it?" That was a necessary part of anti-Highland groups like the Steelbloods and people opposing all Highlanders, after all: to seize Highlander technology. "That just changes who's doing it to who, not what it is."

If the Steelblood Front did succeed not only in seizing the technology to make Artifacts but also in spreading it to the surface, the Highlanders might lose their ability to live above the surface. If things got really bad, it wasn't like they'd be able to survive below due to their susceptibility to the Prism Flow. Without supplies from the surface, even Highlanders who didn't starve wouldn't be able to maintain their standard of living. They would go on the decline at some point, maybe even die out in the worst case. None of these options appealed to Rafinha.

“Ugh! I don’t understand! What do we do?! No matter what we try to change, I know there are going to be costs! But I really don’t want to just keep going like we are now!” Rafinha scratched at her head in exasperation.

“We’ve learned a lot, haven’t we, Rani?” Inglis stroked Rafinha’s frazzled hair back into place. “Reality is complicated. There’s no getting around that.”

These complications weren’t present for no reason; they existed out of necessity. But there were so many different processes and factors at play that it was difficult to grasp them all. And even if someone did, there was no guarantee that it would match the next person’s reality. Surface dwellers were essentially prey for the Highlanders, to whom they were a necessary if regrettable sacrifice. Others might have vehemently disagreed and believed that Highland must be crushed.

Perhaps other perspectives and paths were on the horizon.

All Inglis could say was that the people of this era had to be the ones to move forth its history. To put it coldly, no matter what conclusion they reached, what world they built, it would eventually fade away. The passage of time had a cruelty all its own, and nothing in this world was eternal or unchanging. There was neither trace nor shade remaining of Silvare, which she had built up in her past life as King Inglis.

However, that did not mean action was pointless. If there was anything Rafinha felt was necessary to live life to her satisfaction, Inglis would see it done. Inglis would live alongside her as she did, and she’d watch over her.

And if she dared to hope, it would involve as many strong foes as possible.

“I don’t think we should just do nothing, you know?” Rafinha said. “But I don’t know what to do.”

“We don’t need to rush. Even just knowing the truth makes all the difference in the world. I think Ambassador Theodore wanted us to discover it for ourselves. That’s why he sent us along with Eris.”

If he hadn’t wanted them to know, he would have insisted Eris go alone. There was the matter of Rin, but that hardly required the presence of Inglis or her friends specifically. He had wanted them to know, or at the very least, he

didn't care if they knew.

"So...you think Ambassador Theodore knew everything?"

"Yeah. He is the machinator's son, after all. He could perhaps even be the next machinator. I would be surprised if he hadn't known."

"The next machinator... So you think he's going to become one with Illuminas?!"

"Maybe someday. I don't know if he wants to, though. Maybe we should talk with him about that when we get home."

"Mm... Ah! But then even Rin... Even Cyrene knew it all from the start, didn't she!" Rafinha stared at Rin, who was perched on Inglis's head.

"Yeah, that makes sense... She is the machinator's daughter and Ambassador Theodore's little sister."

"I see... I guess she didn't have any real way to tell us... Even if she wanted to say it, I bet she didn't know how." Rafinha patted Rin's tiny head. Rin, who had a bit of a temper, normally hated this and would try to bite in response, but now she was accepting it calmly. "Did Cyrene really seem like she was desperate to make a change?"

"I think so. We saw how serious she was, didn't we?"

Although, they hadn't seen exactly what she was striving for. Nonetheless, they were confident that she took surface people, not just Highlanders, seriously. She had seemed a bit unsure of her footing, but definitely possessed a strong will and a pure heart. Like Rafinha herself, in that respect.

Maybe that's why they hit it off so quickly, Inglis thought.

"I want to talk with her again. I want to talk with Cyrene, knowing what we do now... Isn't that right, Rin?" Rafinha squinted back tears and rested her face next to Rin's. In return, the tiny magicite beast snuggled up to Rafinha rather than biting at her. Somehow, it seemed like she really did understand how Rafinha felt.

After a pause, Rafinha's tone completely changed. "All right, I've decided!"

"Mm? What will we do, Rani?"

“We *do* stay here until we can get Rin looked at! I want to talk with her as soon as I can!”

“Got it. Then we should probably do some more fishing.”

“That’s right!” Rafinha agreed. “But I really am getting sick of them. I want meat. Or at least some veggies!”

“But we’re in the middle of the ocean... Wait, I know, what if we gather some seaweed?”

“Yeah, seaweed! Great idea, Chris! Go get some!”

“Eh? Just me?”

“You’re the one who can run on top of the ocean and find it, right?”

“You could always fly the *Star Princess* low, Rani...”

“I don’t wanna! I’m all worn out from thinking, and I have to take care of Rin, so you do it, Chris!”

“C’mon... Okay, fine. Give me a minute.”

If Rafinha was acting selfish, then Inglis figured she was probably in a better mood. Rising from Rafinha’s lap, she focused her mana and dragon lore at the same time, as was necessary for dragon magic.

“All right!” Activating the dragon ice armor, she hopped out onto the water. The ice which froze in a snap supported her light weight. “Hmm, but it’s dark, so I can’t really see...”

“That’s okay, Chris, you can just glow!”

“Yeah, I guess there’s that.” If Inglis were swathed in the glow of Aether Shell, it would be so bright that it would even attract fish to the surface. Aether was truly a divine power, and of all the things it should be used for, finding seaweed in the dark was not one. But if it was for Rafinha’s sake...

Oh, fine.

“Here I go... Haaaah!”

At that very moment—

Kaboom!

A tremendous roar filled the still night air—one that Inglis, of course, had not produced. “Ah—?!”

Rafinha leaped up in shock. “Whaaaaa?! Wh-What’s going on?!”

“Rani! Look, over there! The central laboratory!” It was spewing smoke and flames.

“Wh-What’s going on?! Was it attacked?!”

“I don’t know. It could be an accident, but...”

Boom! Boom! Boooooom!

More explosions rocketed in succession.

“Rani, did you see that?!”

“Yeah! There was a flash of light from outside! That must have been someone’s attack!”

“I wonder who! They must be pretty confident to start a fight here! I can’t wait!”

Inglis’s eyes gleamed, but Rafinha immediately scolded her. “Don’t get so excited when people might be in danger! This is terrible!”

“Anyway, let’s go!”

“Yeah!”

The two hurried aboard the *Star Princess*. By the time they were close enough to see what was going on, the battle was already in full swing. Highlanders who had flown forth from within the laboratory were using magic to strike back at their attackers.

“Who would do this?!”

“We don’t have time to think about that! To the counterattack! The knights will be here soon!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Wilma and her knights were still not on the scene, but Highlanders could use magic unaided. Their volley of spells came out as a cacophony of flashes, flames, and ice arrows aimed at the attackers.

“Wow! That’s incredible!” The power of the Highlanders’ magic was enough to make Rafinha’s eyes widen. Each of the individual spells seemed on par, in surface terms, with the Gift of an upper-class Artifact. And unlike Gifts, Highlanders could presumably control more than one spell. Elite though those in the central laboratory may be, a gathering of noncombatants on par with upper-class knights was a force to be reckoned with. It underscored the gap between Highland and the surface.

“Ooh! That one looks fun!” Inglis said. Taking it would let her test the hardness of the dragon magic armor.

“C’mon, which side are we supposed to be on?!”

“If possible, I’d like to fight both!”

“Don’t do anything weird, Chris!”

“Okay, if you say so, Rani. Just taking on those ones sounds fun too.”

Inglis was referring, of course, to the attackers who still seemed to be alive and well, even veiled by a hail of fire. The Highlanders’ counterattack was like having dozens of the Rafinha-Leone-Liselotte trio open up at once. Well, maybe not Leone, now that she had a special-class Rune. Anyway, it was that powerful. And anything that could survive that had to be even stronger. In other words, something that would be a fun fight.

“Th-That should be enough!”

“D-Did that do it?!”

The Highlanders ceased their fire and looked toward the attackers. And from within the haze of smoke that obscured them...

Rrrrrrrumble!

A gigantic shock wave came shooting back.

“What?! It didn’t work?!”

“Defensive barriers! Hurry!”

“Aaaaah!”

Its tremendous force threatened to swallow up the Highlanders who had sallied to the defense. If it hit them, it would wound those lucky enough not to be killed.

But directly before it flitted a tiny shape. “Sorry to drop in!” It was Inglis, of course. She couldn’t pass up an attack this powerful. It was the perfect chance to test just how durable her dragon ice armor was.

“Wh—?! Who are you?!”

“It’s just a kid! This is dangerous! Get out of here!”

As shrieks of dismay arose from behind her, Inglis turned with a smile. “There’s no need to worry. Watch this!” Spreading her little arms wide, she stood in the oncoming shock wave’s path.

There would be no dodging, no parrying. She would take it head-on. That was how she could gauge the dragon ice armor’s strength. She knew it could hold up to aether for a while, but she still hadn’t got the chance to try it out purely as armor and see what it could endure.

A crash arose, and a tornado swirled around her as the shock wave met the armor.

“What?! She’s taking it head-on?!”

“Th-The shock wave stopped?!” The Highlanders’ eyes widened at the sight before them.

Inglis chuckled. “That’s a nice attack! If I hadn’t have taken it seriously, I would have been blown away!” Her small feet, firmly planted, were still pushed backward a little. There’d been a real *oomph* behind it.

It was perfect for her experiment.

“Is that girl laughing?!”

“Wh-What’s wrong with her?!”

Just as the Highlanders' shock turned to horror, the struggle between Inglis and the shock wave ceased. She'd stopped it in its tracks, and in return the dragon ice armor fell to pieces. The match was a draw. But taking that strong of an attack meant the armor could endure a lot.

"Hm. That's pretty strong as armor. I guess it passes the test." Inglis was satisfied with the results. And now she had a good fight with a strong foe to look forward to.

"Anyway, I'm not sure who you are, but I'll take you on!" Inglis called out to a figure still half-shrouded in the aftermath.

"If you stand in my way..." a voice began.

The smoke cleared. As her foe became visible, Inglis realized she had misspoken. She knew this person very well. Before her stood a slender, beautiful woman with long, gleaming blonde hair.

"Huh?! L-Liselotte?!"

"No way! Liselotte?! Wh-What are you doing?! You can't be—!"

Inglis wasn't mistaken; Rafinha was yelping in dismay from the *Star Princess* as well.

Liselotte, meanwhile, was blasé about the whole matter, just turning her head to ignore them. What was pointed their way, though, was the tip of her halberd.

"Liselotte?! Can't you tell it's us?" Inglis called out.

"Liselotte! What are you doing?! Come on, listen! Liselotte!" Rafinha said.

As the two called out, something ate at Inglis—a sinking feeling that something was amiss. This person didn't seem like Liselotte at all. Neither this woman's intensity, nor her presence, nor her aura was that of a knights' academy student.

"No! This isn't our Liselotte!"

"Huh?" Rafinha asked. "What do you mean, Chris?!"

“She’s like Eris! She’s a hial menace, Rani!”

The halberd Liselotte held did not have its usual appearance. Instead, it had a golden gleam and a larger axe-head. It was the weapon version of themselves that hial menaces could summon to use on their own.

“What the heck?! Liselotte became a hial menace?! They said she had the aptitude for it, but wouldn’t she tell us if she actually became one...? Wait, did the process make her forget us?! Is that why she’s attacking us?!”

“I’m not really sure, but...!”

When someone became a hial menace, did they lose their memories or change somehow? Judging by Eris and Ripple, that didn’t seem to be the case, but Inglis couldn’t know for sure. She hadn’t known them before they became hial menaces. Nonetheless, there was definitely something off about Liselotte here; she was even attacking the central laboratory. If they had manipulated her memories, it had obviously gone very wrong.

“If you do not intend to fight me, stand back. I am not here merely to chastise a child,” Liselotte said.

“In no way will I just stand back!” Inglis replied.

Not that fighting Liselotte under these circumstances would be all fun and games. Inglis needed to safely subdue her and find out what had happened.

“Then, I will show no mercy!” Liselotte announced as she leaped forth. The wings of her Gift did not sprout from her back, nor did her footwork resemble anything Inglis would have expected from the Liselotte she knew.

“You’re fast!” Inglis had thought she’d dodged the thrust, but a lock of her hair shredded and fell away. That was solid proof that Liselotte’s attack was more than she had expected. The follow-up flurry also managed to land a few scratches on her clothes and skin.

Inglis would have easily handled even Eris’s or Sistia’s attacks at this point. Small as she was, Inglis wasn’t weaker. If anything, her ceaseless training, day in and day out, should have made her even stronger now without aether than she was then with. Yet Liselotte’s attacks still caught her.

“In that case—!” Don’t just dodge. Block. Parry. I have my own weapon—the dragon icebrand.

But that would take a bit of time to activate. Inglis sprang backward while avoiding the attacks. But at that very moment, Liselotte closed in.

“Got you!”

She swung her halberd in a sweeping arc, like an axe, and another shock wave struck Inglis dead-on.

“Ah!” It immediately sent Inglis flying, and she crashed against the wall of the central laboratory.

Slammmmm!

The wall shattered, leaving a large hole.

Rafinha gasped. “Chris?!”

The Highlander onlookers were just as surprised.

“Whoa!”

“That was so powerful!”

Liselotte swung her halberd toward the terrified Highlanders.

“We’re next!”

“Everyone, scatter!”

But the shock wave did not come. A high-pitched clang arose as Liselotte’s halberd stopped dead in its tracks—stopped by a clear blue blade in the form of a dragon’s claw. It roared like a living dragon.

Inglis had activated Aether Shell for just a moment while escaping the shock wave, then cast her dragon magic and closed in again with Liselotte.

“Don’t. If you keep this up—!”

“You don’t look like you’re seriously trying to stop me.”

Inglis chuckled, amused. “It’s because you’ve gotten stronger, Liselotte.”

The challenge presented had brought an involuntary smile to Inglis's face. And a challenge it was indeed—as their blades clashed, Inglis felt like she might be pushed back. Liselotte was far stronger than she had been, stronger even than the other hial menaces, Eris, Ripple, and Sistia. Chief Academician Wilkin had spoken of her aptitude to become a hial menace, and it seemed that exceptional aptitude had made her a cut above the rest.

But that wasn't what would shock Inglis most.

"That is not my name!"

"Huh?! What do you mean?"

Were Liselotte's memories so confused that she had forgotten even her name? Or was it possible that she actually was someone else? Taking a close look at her foe, Inglis noted that she looked a few years older than Liselotte. It was noticeable enough, but perhaps it was a normal part of the process of becoming a hial menace.

"What's wrong, Chris?!" Rafinha asked.

"She says she isn't Liselotte!"

"Whaaa—?! Th-Then who in the world is she?!"

What Rafinha was saying made sense. Her voice, her face—the resemblance seemed too strong for it to be anyone else, but she claimed to be someone else. That seemed far more likely than this person truly being Liselotte, her memories clouded by the process of becoming a hial menace—but what was the truth?

The answer came at that moment.

"Inglis! Rafinha!"

"What in the world is happening?!"

Two voices rang out from above her head: Liselotte on her pale wings in confusion and Leone cradled in her arms, as they both called their friends' names.

"Liselotte?!" Both Inglis and Rafinha were astounded.

“Y-Yes... Why are you so surprised?” Liselotte asked.

“Well...!” Inglis began.

“Look at the person Chris is fighting!” Rafinha said.

It was only then that Leone and Liselotte paid attention to Inglis’s foe.



“Huh?!” Leone gasped. “There are two Liselottes?!”

“Sh-She looks just like me!” Liselotte said. “What’s going on?! Wh-Who are you?! Why do you look so much like me?!”

Comparing the two, Inglis thought that the hial menace looked a bit more mature than Liselotte. Maybe it was just that she looked a little bit older, but next to each other Liselotte possessed a more youthful cuteness while the hial menace had a more refined beauty.

Refined or no, though, the hial menace’s eyes snapped open in shock. “I could say the same of you! Why do *you* look so much like *me*?!”

“Whatever the reason is, that means she definitely isn’t you, Liselotte! And that means I can go all out on her!” Inglis put all her strength into pushing the halberd back from its clash with her sword.

“Ugh! For how tiny you are, you’re strong!”

“It certainly doesn’t do to have a hial menace attacking Highland, now, does it? Does this mean the Triumvirate and the Papal League have come into direct conflict? That sounds fun—let me join in too!”

If this hial menace wasn’t Liselotte, then a rival faction must have sent her. The Papal League was the only one Inglis thought might attack Illuminas, the home base of the Triumvirate’s machinator.

Perhaps she was from the Steelblood Front, but if a hial menace who looked like Liselotte’s twin was in their service, surely either their black-masked leader or Sistia would have reacted when they’d seen Liselotte before. Besides, when considering how she might have gotten there, the most likely scenario was that she had been concealed aboard Yuber’s ship.

Illuminas was a remote island for the moment, and Wilma and her knights had control of who came and went. The only two recent arrivals had been Inglis with the other knights’ academy students and Yuber with his ship. Maybe even the magicite beasts’ attack had been a ploy to avoid arousing suspicion. After all, Yuber had been transporting surface-dweller slaves bound for Illuminas. Inglis’s group had seen Venefic’s Imperial Princess Meltina and even briefly heard from her. Even if it was a way to strike at Illuminas, it was hard for Inglis

to imagine the Steelblood Front, dedicated to surface liberation, using such tactics. They almost certainly had nothing to do with this hial menace.

That left only a strong probability that this was a direct attack by the Papal League. They must have been trying to use the cover of Aethelstan Trading, but would that story hold up? If it didn't, this could expand into a direct war between the Triumvirate and the Papal League.

Or had they taken a chance on this because war seemed inevitable? Until now, the Triumvirate and the Papal League had been engaged in a proxy conflict, using surface countries as pawns, but perhaps the situation was developing beyond that now. On the surface, Ambassador Theodore and Prince Wayne were the core of a thrust to leverage the creation of the Rangers into reconciliation between the powers. This may have been retaliation or a counterthrust to that. Illuminas was Ambassador Theodore's homeland.

From a surface-dwelling perspective, both sides were Highlanders, and it may have been best to have it made clear which faction would be dominant, the one which they must fall into line behind. At least, as long as the surface didn't bear the brunt of the fighting. But as for Inglis, she wanted nothing more than a lineup of powerful foes to test her might against.

"A war with the Triumvirate? Surely you're mistaken. His Holiness the Pontifex does not desire such barbarism. And there would be no reason for such a move."

"No meaning? What's that supposed to mean?!"

If that's true, then what was this attack? Was it not by the Papal League taking aim at the Triumvirate?

"You prefer chatter to battle, then?!"

Inglis had only one answer to that. "No! Take me on! Please!"

"Then!" the hial menace announced. "Taaaaah!" She delivered a furious flurry of halberd thrusts.

"Thank you! Haaaaaaaah!" Inglis's dragon icebrand rose in response.

Rat-tat-tat!

The high-speed series of clashes produced a deafening racket and a shock wave to match. Inglis's speed was superior, but her weapon's durability was not, with the ice chipping away bit by bit every time they met.

Soon, though, that balance was broken.

"Bind her!" The hial menace tapped the heel of her halberd on the ground, and in that very moment Inglis felt her body suddenly grow heavy.

"Enhanced gravity?!" She felt the same sort of magic that she often cast on herself to help with her training spread over the area around her.

She was, of course, not utilizing that gravity magic right now. Dragon magic was a combination of magic and dragon lore. While using it, she could not secretly increase the gravitational pull on herself. In other words, this would have an unavoidable effect on her movements.

"Ooh! Impressive!" The shock wave which had blown her away and this enhanced gravity appeared to be completely separate forces. She had seen Eris and Ripple wield powers similar to higher-tier Gifts, but each had only had one. Meanwhile, this hial menace had two separate ones. She was obviously distinct in some way. Beyond that, she had seen bursts of light before she arrived. That might be one too.

Those weren't the full extent of this hial menace's powers, though.

"Tailwind!"

Whoosh!

A swirling gale covered the hial menace. It constantly changed its flow and direction according to her movement, accelerating her halberd's thrusts. It was, as she'd said, a tailwind. Inglis herself was weighed down, and her foe's movements buoyed. In just a moment, the situation had turned to her disadvantage.

Clang!

When she blocked the halberd's axe-head at an awkward angle, her dragon icebrand rang out and shattered.

"Heh heh heh... Wonderful!"

If Inglis were to fight using only the dragon icebrand, she would be at a clear disadvantage, but she had no regrets with that. If anything, she was overjoyed. The more powerful foes she could face, the better.

"Is this a time to smile?!" The hial menace's expression was cruel as she leveled her halberd, aimed between Inglis's eyes.

"It just might be! Haaaaah!"

Aether Shell!

As the pale blue light of aether surrounded her, Inglis casually grabbed the oncoming tip of the halberd and shoved it away.

"What?! Guh!"

As the hial menace went pale, Inglis had already continued on to her next move. Letting go of the halberd's tip, she moved in close and twisted, winding up a knee strike.

Clong!

It was the unmistakable sound of a blow striking against metal. The halberd's shaft had blocked Inglis's knee.

"Agh...?!" The hial menace was overwhelmed and forced back. Her sabaton footwear dug grooves in the paving stones below.

"I knew it! You're out of the ordinary even among hial menaces, aren't you?" Inglis said.

Inglis had used this attack before; she'd caught Sistia from the Steelblood Front off guard with the same technique, knocking her off her feet. But this

hial menace, while pressured by it, had managed to react in time. The difference was obvious.

Inglis had thought that all hial menaces were on the same level, but now she knew that wasn't the case. This one was clearly a cut above. Inglis wasn't sure exactly what her limits were, but the true power of hial menaces was revealed only when they transformed into weapons. It could vary depending on who ended up wielding her, but she might even show power comparable to Dux Jildegrieva.

Inglis's recent worries about finding a new foe after her victory over the Prismers had been unfounded. The world was still full of powerful foes—and it was unstable, as well. The hial menace had said that this wasn't a war between the two factions of Highlanders, but everyone would say that until the war began. That they didn't want to fight, but they were compelled to. Redefining that war in terms of "self-defense" was the first step in causing fighting to break out. So Inglis had a lot to look forward to. Her arms were almost calling out to her.

"I am no hial menace!" her opponent declared.

"Huh?" Inglis asked. "You aren't?" She certainly had the aura and the power of one.

"'Hial menace' is the name for those failures discarded to the surface! But I am different! I am an archlord in His Holiness's service!"

"An archlord...? Like Lord Evel, then..." The title brought him to the forefront of Inglis's memory. He'd transformed the ancient dragon Fufailbane into a mechanical ancient dragon before bringing it to Highland. Inglis had heard of no archlords among the Triumvirate, so this person must have been with the Papal League. She must have held quite the high rank among them.

Inglis wondered if particularly apt and capable hial menaces might be kept in Highland rather than being sent down to the surface. Inglis surmised that she was even under the direct command of the Pontifex, not merely working with the organization on the whole. She asserted this with a point of pride, distinguishing herself from the hial menaces sent to the surface. Inglis could only imagine the look of displeasure on Eris's face if she heard such a

statement.

“So you say you’re no mere hial menace. You’re definitely stronger than Eris and the others... If you don’t mind, may I ask your name? This is a bit late for introductions, but I’m Inglis Eucus. A student of the knights’ academy here on business.” Inglis bowed politely.

“Charlotte. *Archlord* Charlotte.” The response was blunt.

Even her name is similar to Liselotte’s, Inglis thought.

Liselotte gasped in shock. “What?! Th-That’s impossible!”

Inglis quickly turned around. “Liselotte?!”

“Wh-What’s wrong?!” Leone asked.

“Charlotte... My mother’s name is Charlotte!”

“Huuuh?! Your mother?!” the other girls exclaimed.

It was true that the two looked so much alike that it seemed they had to be related, but their apparent ages were too close to be mother and daughter. They seemed like sisters. But a hial menace didn’t age once they became one. Or, if they did, it was extremely gradual.

“I— I was told my mother passed away almost before I could even remember! That’s what I’d always heard, but...what if she were taken away to Highland and made into a hial menace?!”

“That seems...almost possible!” It was making more sense to Inglis. Charlotte appeared to be around the right age to have given birth to Liselotte and separated before Liselotte could form clear memories. Around Eris or Ripple’s apparent age, maybe a little older. And her power, beyond that of other hial menaces, may have stemmed from an especially high aptitude to become one.

Chief Academician Wilkin had said that Liselotte’s own aptitude was extremely high. Perhaps it ran in the family? It seemed that way to Inglis. Eris had apparently taken months, years, to become a hial menace, but Wilkin had said that Liselotte would take, in the worst case, around half a day. Was it possible that Charlotte, within a few years of Liselotte’s birth, had been transformed into a hial menace, and then, due to her performance, been kept

in Highland as an archlord rather than being sent to the surface? Without hearing the details from either her or former Chancellor Arcia, it was hard to be sure.

“What nonsense are you spewing?!” Charlotte did not react like Liselotte, but instead frowned uncomfortably.

“Um, well...! What is your family name?! Arcia?!” Liselotte asked. “Are you Charlotte Arcia?!”

“Arcia?! I’ve never heard that name!”

“Then, where were you born, who were your family?! Surely, even if you’re a hial menace, you were once human, with parents and a hometown! Didn’t you have a family?!”

“I don’t know! I am an archlord! Not like you!”

“But...! Look, we share a face! Don’t you think we look too similar to be unrelated?!” Liselotte landed close to Inglis, holding her halberd toward the ground so as not to point it at Charlotte. She took measured steps toward her. “If you don’t want to speak, I will! So please, listen!”

“It’s true that you look like me... Too much like me for it to be a coincidence.” Charlotte did not appear to be readying an attack as Liselotte approached. It seemed even she recognized some relation to Liselotte.

Leone turned to her friends and said what was all on their minds. “I-Is this going to be okay? Just walking up to her defenseless like that...”

“We’ll keep an eye on things, and make sure she’s okay. If she’s really Liselotte’s mother, we shouldn’t stop this,” Inglis said. If she had met Serena under the same circumstances, she would be doing just what Liselotte was now. It was only natural to do so. And thus, Inglis was content to support Liselotte here. Rafinha had to feel the same way.

Slap!

Inglis felt a pat on her back. It even stung.

“That’s right! Sometimes you say just the right thing, Chris!” Rafinha had just gotten down from the *Star Princess*.

“Ah ha ha... That hurt a little, Rani. I think I’ve been doing the right thing the whole time, though.” After all, hadn’t she been listening to Rafinha and consoling her after she learned the truth about Illuminas?

“You’re right, Inglis,” Leone said. “Liselotte’s done so much for us. Now we need to be there for her!”

“Yeah, that’s right!” Rafinha agreed. “I just know that’s Liselotte’s mom! We need to get her back somehow!”

“And wouldn’t it be wonderful if she became an instructor at the knights’ academy too?” Inglis asked.

“Stop just using our teachers as your personal menagerie of strong people! You already have Mr. Rochefort and Miss Arles, don’t you?!”

As Inglis and the others watched over her, Liselotte spoke to Charlotte. “I am Liselotte Arcia. The only daughter of Duke Arcia, of the kingdom of Karelia. Do you know of Karelia?”

Charlotte paused before answering. “One of the larger surface countries. One that’s had the misfortune of falling under the sway of the Triumvirate.”

Inglis suspected that was the way the Papal League thought of Karelia, but that it might not be Charlotte’s personal perspective.

“There’s a grand city on the west coast of Karelia named Charot. It’s famous as a sightseeing destination for its white cliffs and beautiful beaches. The Duchy of Arcia holds many fiefdoms spreading out from Charot. And Charot was where I was born.”

“Charot...” Charlotte said, testing the word.

“Yes! Could you have heard of it?!”

“Why would an archlord know of any surface town?! Is that all you have to say for yourself?!”

“No, it’s just—! My father’s name is Albert. Albert Arcia. Actually, he married into the family when he wed my mother, and inherited the title of duke,” Liselotte rattled off nervously.

“Huh, so that’s how it went down,” Rafinha said.

“I never knew,” Leone said.

Inglis hadn’t known either. But when she’d met the former chancellor, she’d gotten the impression from him that he was more of a capable administrator than an aristocrat.

“And what do you mean by that?!” Charlotte asked.

“So, my mother was also from Charot! And her name was Charlotte! I was always told she passed away before I could remember, but people that knew her told me I looked just like her! Don’t you recognize the names Albert or Liselotte?!”

“I don’t! I don’t know who you are, but...somehow...something... Ugh?!” Charlotte wavered as she held her head. Her halberd clanged to the ground.

“Ah! A-Are you okay?!” Liselotte reached out her hand, having no idea what was coming for her.

Liselotte’s peaceful intent was met only with hostility—but from somebody new. An intruder slipped in to grab the halberd and sent it flying at her. It caught Liselotte completely on the wrong foot.

“Ah—?!”

Charlotte’s golden halberd plunged toward her chest as if drawn in. Its force was extraordinary; only someone with superhuman strength could’ve thrown it with such speed.

“Liselotte!” her friends cried.

Fwap!

But the projectile stopped just short of her, stuck between Inglis’s hands clapped around it. True to her word, she’d kept an eye on the situation. With Aether Shell kept at the ready, she’d been prepared to intervene at any point.

“Inglis...!” Leone began.

“Chris! Nice!”

“Y-You saved me, Inglis!”

“Pay it no mind. We’re here to ensure that you can safely have your conversation. You can just keep talking. If that really is your mom, I think it’s only natural that you’d want to bring her back. Rani and Leone feel the same way too.”

“Th-Thank you, everyone!”

“But in exchange, when we do make it back safe and sound, could you ask her to join the knights’ academy as an instructor?”

“Huh? Er, okay...”

Despite Inglis’s softness, Rafinha had overheard, which meant Inglis wasn’t safe from a scolding. “C’mon, Chris! This is enough of a mess without you trying to slip extra conditions in!”

Inglis cleared her throat and turned her attention to the intruder. “This is an important family moment. You mustn’t intrude.”

Plus, if Liselotte’s conversation with Charlotte went well, it would be a great chance to acquire another excellent instructor. Inglis wouldn’t allow interference.

A girl with blue-green hair in cute braids spoke, her eyes wide in shock. “I’m amazed anyone could catch that so swiftly...much less a child like yourself.” Her visage was refined, but her clothing revealed feminine curves. She was both lovely and bewitching—a frighteningly attractive combination. Her aura carried the unmistakable presence and power of a hial menace. And her face was familiar.

“You’re...Tiffanyer?!”

A hial menace with the Papal League, she’d made herself known during Inglis’s expedition to Alcard. Inglis had put an end to Tiffanyer’s ravaging of the Leclair region. She was Archlord Evel’s subordinate, and she’d taken over command there after his departure. Evel himself had shown his cruelty visiting Karelia and demanding Carlias’s arm, and Tiffanyer’s own personality marched to the same drum. Her depredation of Leclair had been abhorrent.

And not only that, but she had tried to take Rafinha's life. Even Evel had not dared to try. From that perspective, at least, Tiffanyer's sins ran the deepest. Inglis had not forgiven her and never would. Never.

"You know me?"

"Well, yes. Circumstances have me stuck as a child, but I am Inglis Eucus. It's been so long! How are you?" Inglis grinned calmly at Tiffanyer.

"Ah! I see. It certainly has been a while. Still as inexplicable as ever, I see." Tiffanyer reflected the same calm smile, as if her loss to Inglis had never happened. She was a tricky, unreadable opponent.

"I'm glad to see you're well."

Tiffanyer's wounds from her previous encounter with Inglis appeared to be completely healed. And her willingness to suddenly throw a halberd at Liselotte when she was defenseless showed that she still had no time for a fair fight. As elegant as she looked, her personality was anything but.

"I can't say I very much appreciate your attacking without so much as a greeting, though," Inglis added.

An attack like that could finish a fight before it really got fun. Betrayal or surprise were dangerous tools, ones which could conquer a foe before they showed their true strength. Even if the victory was easy, it took from one the chance to truly learn from the fight.

"That's right! You're still as rotten as you are cute!" Rafinha said.



Tiffanyer laughed. “More ineffective yapping from the puppy?”

She and Rafinha had personalities like oil and water. Rafinha, with her sense of justice and belief that people were fundamentally good, and Tiffanyer, with her willingness to embrace any means to an end, seemed to push each other’s buttons just by existing.

“What did you call me?!”

“Am I wrong? Without your squire, you can do nothing. Every ounce of authority you have is borrowed. But if you object, perhaps you’d like to take me on alone?” Tiffanyer laughed again, a smile as beautiful as a flower becoming a provocation in its own way.

“I’m not borrowing anything! What’s Chris’s is mine, and what’s mine is hers! We’ve always been together, and that’s what matters!”

“Rani’s right,” Inglis agreed. “Your assessment isn’t quite accurate.”

“What Chris said! Blehhh!” Rafinha stuck out her tongue in a childlike manner. It may have come from honest rage on her part, but Inglis found it adorable.

And Rafinha wasn’t the only one who had objections to Tiffanyer. “What are you—?! What is the meaning of this?!” Charlotte glared at Tiffanyer. The halberd that Inglis had grabbed disappeared from her hands and appeared in Charlotte’s own, as if it had blinked across space to her. Charlotte really did wield a wide variety of powers—unfortunately for Inglis, as she’d wanted to keep that halberd for herself if possible.

“I could ask the same of you! Here you were, disarmed by the enemy, and all I did was come to help.” Tiffanyer gave Charlotte a choreographed blank look.

“I don’t need help from a failure who was cast down to the surface!”

“Ah, apologies, then. Why don’t you finish off these girls all on your own, then? I didn’t come here for playtime.”

Charlotte paused. “Our orders say nothing about killing them.”

“Oh? You don’t want to kill someone who resembles you so closely? And why may that be?”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t... Why does she look...?”

As Charlotte gritted her teeth, Tiffanyer sighed ostentatiously. “If you don’t even understand yourself, how can you expect to be a reliable pawn for His Holiness? I wonder which one of us is truly the failure.”

Inglis could see that Charlotte and Tiffanyer weren’t on good terms. A coordinated pair of hial menaces presented an alluring challenge, but even aside from their being best friends in the mold of Eris and Ripple, Inglis was concerned that they wouldn’t cooperate at all. Specifically, she was concerned about whether they’d pair well in combat. As always, Inglis wanted to fight relying on only herself, in order to learn the most she could from it, and it was all the better if she faced multiple opponents at once, especially these two. A hial menace that was a cut above the rest in Charlotte, and a hial menace of uncommon shrewdness and ruthlessness in Tiffanyer—that would be a fascinating fight.

“Anyway, why don’t you worry about Liselotte later, and fight me now? I don’t think there’s any reason to hold back from that,” Inglis said.

“Why?” Charlotte asked.

“I would so much prefer if you didn’t try to derail the conversation,” Tiffanyer said. The two were in unison on one point—the point of not engaging Inglis.

“But why not?! I’m your enemy, aren’t I? You’re supposed to defeat your enemy!”

“We did not come here to strike down enemies,” Charlotte said.

“Then why? Why else would you attack here? And you were willing to fight me at first!” Things had just started to get interesting. She didn’t want them to cool off.

“You should understand very soon,” Tiffanyer said. “Now do be quiet and watch.”

“Tiffanyer, if you’re here, that means the preparations are complete, then?” Charlotte asked.

Inglis wondered if Charlotte had been buying time for Tiffanyer to work.

“Yes, all according to plan. In five, I believe.” A charming smile rose to Tiffanyer’s face. “Five, four...” She put fingers down one by one as she counted.

“Wh-What?!” Rafinha gasped.

“What’s going on?!” Leone asked.

“Just brace yourselves!” Inglis said. All they could do was wait to see what happened.

“One...zero.” As Tiffanyer finished counting...

Rrrrrrrrrumble!

“Wh—?!” Inglis gasped. The deafening roar was followed by the ground shaking. It came from all sides, loud enough that she couldn’t hear what the others might have said. But the shaking was so strong that they couldn’t keep their footing.

And the cause—explosions. Countless explosions. They felt unrelenting, and flames rose from all over Illuminas. In a moment, the chalk-white city had been transformed into an inferno.

“Rani! Is everyone okay?!” Inglis reached out a hand to Rafinha, who had fallen flat on her butt.

“What’s going on?! This is the heart of Highland, isn’t it? How could this have happened?”

“How did they do this?” Leone asked. “I mean, the whole city! All at once!”

“I-If any civilians were left above, how many of them must have been...?” Liselotte trailed off.

The hellscape which had unfolded before them in the blink of an eye left Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte quivering in shock. That wasn’t surprising. Even Inglis was surprised. Illuminas, as grand in scale as Karelia’s capital, Chiral, had become a sea of flames in an instant. It was destruction on an incredible scale.

Highlanders from the central laboratory screamed in shock. “Wh-What?! What’s going on?!”

“Our Illuminas!”

“I can’t believe it!”

Tiffanyer smiled ecstatically in heartfelt glee. “And what wonderful orders these were, to allow such destruction in Highland. Now the people who thought they could rise above it all are dragged down into the mud with the rest of us. You should be smiling too! Isn’t it exhilarating to see the Highlanders who looked down on you swarm in panic?”

“Wh-Who could feel joy at this?!” Rafinha protested.

“That’s right!” Leone said. “We can’t just overlook something like this, no matter who’s the victim!”

Liselotte turned to Charlotte. “Why?! Why would you do such a horrible thing?!”

“I am an archlord! I do His Holiness’s will. That is all!” Charlotte said.

“But—! An indiscriminate attack like this!”

“Charlotte,” Inglis said, “you said this was not a direct war between the Triumvirate and the Papal League, but these are clearly the flames of war... Do you really think this won’t trigger a confrontation?”

“If we had done it...I suppose,” Charlotte said.

“We just lent a hand,” Tiffanyer added.

“Huh? Then—?” Inglis replied, confused.

The deep, clear voice of a man broke in. “I don’t believe it’s anything to get too worked up about.” He was a young man with auburn hair and wearing a monocle.

“Yuber?!” Rafinha gasped.

“A-Are you...?!” Leone asked.

Liselotte was just as stunned as the rest of the group. “Is he cooperating with the enemy?!”

“Ah, Yuber, so you *are* working with them,” Inglis said.

“Oh? You saw through me?”

“Not exactly. I had a hunch based on circumstantial evidence. The easiest way for two hiral menaces to get into Illuminas had to be aboard your ship.”

“I see... I should note, I can assure you that everything I told you aboard the ship was true. And if I may ask you something...”

“What is it?” Inglis asked, but Yuber’s eyes turned, not to her, but to Rafinha, then Leone, before finally resting on Liselotte.

“Who is your enemy? Is it not those who threaten your very lives? You call us your enemy, but here in Illuminas, is that the right choice? What I told you of mana extract is true. They may have the faces of innocent civilians, but they are the most fearsome Highlanders to exist. The world would be better off without them... Don’t you think so? I certainly do. After all, I hail from the surface.”

“Those are totally different things!” Rafinha fired back, but as she did, Yuber’s eyes gleamed.

“They are the same in the end! That’s the wishful thinking of a child! All you’re doing is watching the world go by! If we let this continue, our brothers on the surface will have their will, their dignity, their very lives and forms snatched away! Don’t you want to stop that?”

“Ugh...” Rafinha fell silent.

“Well...” Leone muttered.

“That’s true in its own way, but...” Liselotte frowned. The three wilted in the face of Yuber’s tirade.

“I see...” Inglis said. “So you meant to discourage us? Clever.”

Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte were all kindhearted girls. Of course the revelations about mana extract had come as a huge shock to them, and that had been reflected in their hesitation when he linked the idea of letting him continue with that of stopping the production of mana extract. They thought that it might indeed be true. And effectively, that played directly into Yuber’s hands as he sought to avoid interference. Leaving aside the ethical issues, he had skillfully manipulated his adversaries.

“How ungrateful you are. I simply felt that it would be unfortunate for you to know nothing about the situation, and thus informed you,” Yuber said.

“Your spite calls into question everything else you’ve said.” Inglis hadn’t completely corroborated his story about mana extract. It seemed to be true, but it was hard to say that he’d told them just out of kindness.

“Then...shall I present proof?” Yuber turned to Inglis’s right. There lay the arsenal and the flying battleship dock.

Boooooom!

The walls of the facility shattered, and from within arose a titanic figure.

Rafinha gasped. “What is that?”

“A g-giant?!” Leone stuttered.

Liselotte stared up at it. “No, that’s—!”

It was far bigger than a mechanical dragon, nearly the size of the ancient dragon Fufailbane. Like Leone had said, its form was nearly perfectly human, certainly enough to be called a giant. But what was most remarkable was not its striking size. It was its palpably disgusting corpse-blue color. And more than anything, its bare visage—lacking in hair, eyes, ears, and a nose—was terrifying. It was bereft of anything that should be on a living creature’s head. It was a disgusting-colored puppet.

A faceless giant.

“Grahhhhhhhhh!”

Inglis couldn’t tell where its thundering roar came from.

“A faceless giant?!” Rafinha yelled.

“Y-Yes! It rose from the arsenal!” Leone said.

“And it’s extremely off-putting!” Liselotte said.

“You recall the armored soldiers you met?” Yuber asked. “This is what was inside! It’s just a bit bigger, since that was all the mana extract there.”

The faceless giant smashed its fist over and over into the flame-wreathed arsenal, beginning its indiscriminate destruction. The very land around it began to crumble as its blows, impressive even for its size, fell.

“Behold! The rage of those whose pride, whose very forms were taken along with their lives, comes to fruit! Isn’t it wonderful? Beautiful, in fact!”

“That isn’t all there is to it, though, is it? I can only assume you’ve added your own twist. I can sense something else,” Inglis said.

“What do you mean, Chris?” Rafinha asked.

“That may well be all the mana extract...but I also sense an undying in there!”

“Undying...? You mean like the people who attacked us at Leone’s mansion?! And that attacked Liselotte too?!”

“What?!” Leone gasped.

“So that’s the same?!” Liselotte asked.

“I think so,” Inglis said. “The undying we saw before were normal corpses reanimated with an Artifact’s Gift...but this one is that same Gift applied to a large amount of mana extract.”

Yuber laughed. “Mana extract is a terrible thing. Humans turned to fluid. Corpse juice, you could call it. I did so want to see what would happen if it were to be used as a base for the undying.”

Between the explosions around Illuminas and the giant’s rampage, a corner of the arsenal was destroyed completely. The ground itself crumbled away, falling from Illuminas and sinking into the deep sea below. Once separated from Illuminas’s flotation, it was simply rubble to plunge to the depths. The faceless giant, meanwhile, swiftly spun around and jumped high to avoid the collapse.

“Th-The arsenal!” Rafinha said.

“It’s sinking!” Leone said.

“That giant is so swift!” Liselotte said.

They watched the giant pensively, but Tiffanyer smiled and clapped like an adult watching over a children's play. "Ooh, that's it! That's it! Go for it!"

"Yes, Lady Tiffanyer. A combination of the foulest material in all Highland, and the foul Gift of defiling the dead. Its sinfulness grants its power... And what tremendous power it is." Yuber brushed his monocle as he smiled calmly, just as he had while talking to Inglis and the others.

"It looks like that monocle is an Artifact. And it seems to be quite a powerful one as well," Inglis observed.

It didn't have the appearance of a weapon, which struck Inglis as a good way to conceal what it truly was. It must have been an Artifact on a level with Karelia's Dragon Claw or Dragon Fang, a super-class Artifact.

Those two Artifacts were distinctive because they were made from the fang and claw of a dragon comparable to Fufailbane. That was the source of their power, which outstripped normal Artifacts. That meant this Artifact must have been of similar provenance. If its Gift was to create the undying, it must have been made from the body of a lich, the ultimate undying.

But Inglis could only think of one lich. Unlike dragons, their stronger form didn't seem to be common. More importantly, she had sealed away that one lich in her past life. Just like Fufailbane, she had only been able to seal it rather than completely defeat it. If that seal had been broken, people had been careless with what had been sealed away. However, if a part of it had been turned into an Artifact, they must have been able to defeat it. Compared to turning the divinely created liminal sepulcher—that which they called a Greyfrier sarcophagus—into a facility for creating hial menaces, it may not have even been a big deal.

"Quite perceptive indeed. You're everything I'd expect from the hero who defeated a Prism, Lady Inglis Eucus."

Inglis didn't recall having given Yuber her full name. Yuber must have known who she was from the beginning. And if he had an Artifact which could control the undying, she had some idea who he was as well. Rochefort and Arles had told her before she left for Illuminas.

"Yuber Aethelstan isn't your real name, is it?"

Rafinha gasped. “Huh?! It’s not?! Then who is he?!”

“C’mon, Rani. Remember talking to Mr. Rochefort and Miss Arles before we came here? They said Venefic had a general with an Artifact that could create undying... I believe his name was General Maxwell.”

“Ah! Yeah, I think they did! But didn’t Mr. Rochefort say he had a face as ugly as his soul, and we’d loathe him at first sight?”

“Presumably that was figurative.” Inglis wished she had been able to hear more.

He laughed. “I suppose it’s all in how you look at it. Which is really worse—a loyal general like myself, or one who turned coat to Karelia?”

“Leone and Liselotte were attacked by undying under your control, and I have to say, that was a fight I’d like more of.”

“Ha ha ha. Quite the demanding one, I see.”

“Then there never was a Yuber! You’re General Maxwell!” Rafinha insisted.

In response, Yuber—rather, General Maxwell raised his hand to interject. “No. Well, I am Maxwell Rockwell, a general in the service of the emperor of Venefic. But there’s one point I’d like to correct: Yuber Aethelstan really did exist. As did Aethelstan Trading. My cooperation with these two necessitated taking control of Aethelstan Trading. Though its previous ownership was...less than compliant, shall we say, so there was a situation.”

Rafinha’s brow furrowed. “So you just killed them and took it?!”

“Ha ha ha, of course not. They’re alive and well—right over there.” Maxwell pointed to the rampaging faceless giant.

“What?! Then—! You captured them and put them aboard that ship, didn’t you?!” Leone accused.

In response, Maxwell nodded. “Indeed. It would be barbaric to simply purge those with differing opinions. Instead, they will become a shield with which to protect Venefic. They, like myself, are firm patriots... Isn’t such a spirit of cooperation beautiful?”

“How?! You turned people into a disgusting puppet for yourself! That’s worse

than just killing them! How could you be so cruel?!” Rafinha asked.

“Ah, but it was the people here who turned them into mana extract. Every denunciation you could speak, every accusation of evil, should be directed at them first.”

“Well, yes, but...! But you’re working with them! How could you do that, knowing what would happen?!”

“It’s because I knew that I did what I did. My goal is to strike at the root of evil. I know there isn’t much difference with my actions. Still, we of the surface are powerless. We cannot afford to make principled stands. We must fight fire with fire... They will be the last to ever become mana extract. That was my determination when I made that creature. As I said, the destruction of Illuminas will save many more of our brothers on the surface from such a fate. That baleful technology will sink to the depths. Can you really call that cruel?”

“That’s not—! That’s not what I meant!”

“Enough!” Maxwell’s sudden bark made Rafinha cower. “Criticizing others for taking action when you refuse to do so yourself is childish! You’re an upper-class knight cadet! The future of Karelia is supposed to be in your hands! If you have a problem with what I’m doing, show me what you’d do differently! Show me how you can stop Illuminas right now with that brilliant leadership you’re supposed to exhibit! Otherwise, shut up and get out of the way! You’re comfortable if something’s out of sight, out of mind! I, on the other hand, will get results!”

“Ugh... No...but—!” Rafinha slumped, unable to find words. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Rafinha’s personality was incompatible with General Maxwell’s in a different way than it was with Tiffanyer’s. He was a man who was able to insert himself into the gap between her sense of justice and reality, and from there he clawed away at her pure heart. His words, his actions, weren’t precisely wrong. Not precisely, but— “Then, I will take action.” Inglis smiled, and lifted her palm toward the giant.

Aether Strike!

Blammmmm!

The blast of aether tore toward the giant!

“What?! G-Get out of the way!” Maxwell called out as he lifted his hand to his monocle, but the giant couldn’t respond in time. Caught by surprise, it fell over sideways and rolled around the ground. “Gah! Open!” His command was somehow obeyed, as a gap was gouged in the giant’s flesh beginning where Aether Strike had hit it in the chest. The hole let the Aether Strike pass through and disappear beyond the horizon.

“Ooh, that’s some attention to detail! Since it was made out of liquid, you can shape it however you like?”

“What are you doing?! Don’t you realize what this means?!” Maxwell’s face went red as he raged at Inglis.

“You said to do something. So I did.” Inglis smiled back, all prim and proper.

“Yes, and the problem is what that thing is! If you take down that giant, nothing can stop Illuminas! Weren’t you listening to me?! Taking it down means that we can’t stop the terrible things that happen here! Yeah, you’re doing *something*—you’re doing something idiotic!”

“I don’t think that’s necessarily true.”

“Mm? What makes you say that?”

“Perhaps by saving Illuminas when it is threatened by the giant’s rampage, we can in exchange negotiate an end to the use of mana extract. The threat it poses is comparable to that of a gigantic magicite beast, so I imagine they’d be quite grateful.”

“You...! You’re using us as leverage?”

“Well, I can’t afford to make principled stands. I must fight fire with fire. And it is *something*... Right, Rani?”

“Y-Yeah, Chris! Exactly! You really are smart! Let’s go with that, Leone, Liselotte!” Rafinha said.

“Yes, let’s!” Leone said.

“I would prefer that as well!” Liselotte said.

“So...I’d like to fight that giant now,” Inglis concluded. That would give her a lineup of respectably strong opponents. Charlotte, Tiffanyer, Maxwell, and the giant.

Maxwell laughed. “You’re terrifying. The slayer of a Prismmer with a sharp mind to match...but I do object to being lumped in with magicite beasts who destroy for no cause or goal.”

“Causes or goals can be made up after the fact. I’m sure they’re good self-motivators, but isn’t it a bit naively idealistic to expect others to judge you by them?”

“Shut up, you snotty little brat!” There Maxwell was, angry again.

Well, with the lecture Rafinha and the others had caught, Inglis didn’t feel singled out. “Did I not tell you that I’m actually sixteen?” she responded, imagining sticking out her tongue for extra fun.

“Exactly, a snotty little brat! You mean to tell me you don’t have any cause or goal?!”

“None at all!” Inglis quipped as she puffed up confidently. Watching over Rafinha and mastering the blade were all she needed.

“Ha ha ha, so you’re not going to discuss this seriously? A clever move, not revealing your true intentions.”

“I’m being completely honest here.”

Ah, well, it’s up to him how he wants to take it, Inglis thought.

“It’s because you keep saying weird things. What you consider normal isn’t what the rest of us understand, Chris. It’s kind of embarrassing.” Rafinha sighed.

“That’s not very nice,” Inglis objected. “But I guess that means you’re feeling better now, Rani?”

“Yeah! Time to do something! I’m no good at thinking in circles!”

“I’m not sure you should be proud of that... Anyway, that’s about how it lines up, Wilma. I trust I can rely on you to speak in my favor?” Inglis turned her head

sideways and spoke, sensing that Wilma was there.

“Ah! Wilma!” Rafinha said as she saw her.

“I’m sorry... I realized what was happening, but I couldn’t do anything...” Wilma gazed downward rather than looking at them directly as she spoke. She had come off as brusque and unfriendly at first, but Inglis suspected that had been from guilt rather than contempt toward surface dwellers.

“We can talk about that later. I’d appreciate your aid in the negotiations as well.”

“Of course! Let’s talk with Chief Academician Wilkin...with my father about it! I’m sure he’ll understand after all this!” Wilma nodded.

Rafinha nodded along as well. “I’m so glad not all of Illuminas is rotten! Others will understand too. I’m sure even Myce will agree when he hears what we have to say!”

“Wilma, we can’t spare anything to help civilians or put out the fires in the city. Can you handle that?” Inglis asked.

“Yes, leave it to me. I know exactly what to do. Mechanical dragons, switch to firefighting!”

Wilma’s armor lit up with a pattern of sigils. As if answering her call, the mechanical dragons rose from the sea near where the arsenal had sunk. Jets of water sprayed from their mouths over the burning city of Illuminas. Seawater, presumably. They must have filled themselves with it to put out the fires. In any case, they could be relied on to handle that, and Inglis could fight without worrying about it.

“Negotiations? With Academician Wilkin, *that* guy in charge here? What a waste of time.” Tiffanyer cackled.

“We won’t know until we try!” Rafinha protested. “You can’t make us give up that easy!”

“Just consider it a fair warning. You’ll understand soon,” Tiffanyer said, assured.

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

A voice entirely too relaxed for the situation rang out around them. “Oh my, oh my. Seems to be quite the party going here!”

They saw a boy with duotoned hair, refined features, and a calm expression; it was none other than the person they’d just been speaking about.

“Academician Wilkin?!” Inglis gasped.

“Dad! It’s dangerous! Get out of here!” Wilma yelled.

“Naaah. That won’t be necessary, Wilma.” Wilkin grinned at her and shook his head.

“Huh? What do you—”

As Wilma tilted her head in confusion, Charlotte, Tiffanyer, and Maxwell kneeled before Wilkin. “We have arrived, Chief Academician Wilkin!” they said in unison.

Extra: Rafael's Special Training

"Sixty seconds left, everyone! I'm turning the gravity up! Do your best!" Principal Miriela called out with a smile in the school courtyard of the knights' academy. Students played tag with rock golems in the stone ring.

Silva raised his voice, cheering on the students who hadn't succumbed to the pull of gravity yet. "Go for it, everyone! Tomorrow we're Rangers! Tomorrow we leave for Alcard! Gotta get your training in now!"

The students had split up into groups, and of course he'd survived the entire time limit during his turn. But it wasn't enough for just him to be sharp. His role, both as a senior and as the holder of a special-class Rune, was to bring everyone together. Their mission to Alcard was a political one, one not at all expected to carry danger, but one never knew what might happen. Their preparations needed to be perfect.

"That's right!" Miriela said. Then she added with a grin, "And those who stay standing will get single rooms!"

"This training is always so tough!"

"We're headed off to Alcard tomorrow! We should get a break today!"

"You there! Pay attention, or you'll get bounced!" Silva barked.

"O-Okay!"

"Sorry, Silva!"

Silva was thorough, his admonitions extending even to Yua, who was dozing off after her turn. "And—Yua! I know your turn is over, but that doesn't mean you can go to sleep!"

"Hwah?"

"Cheer them on! Tell them how to stay in the ring!"

"Just bash 'em until they break. Simple as that."

“We can’t do that!” a student yelled back.

“We’re not absurd like you, Yua!” another shouted.

“You’re not supposed to break them regardless!” Silva protested.

Yua ignored them all and drifted off to sleep again.

“Looks like Inglis isn’t the only rule-breaker here,” Rochefort observed.

“Yeah... It’s not good for students to sleep through lessons,” Arles added with a half smile, half wince. As new instructors, part of their job was to attend to training sessions like this.

“Then why don’t you wake her up, Arles?”

Arles was a kind, gentle lady, not suited to scolding or admonishment. Yua would be good practice for her—it was already well known that Yua wouldn’t take the reprimand personally.

“Please, Miss Arles,” Silva said. “If you scold her, maybe she’ll learn for once.”

“I... I guess...” Arles nodded. She went to tap Yua on the shoulder, but before she could, Yua’s eyes snapped open. She suddenly spun around and began to run away from Arles.

“Oh, you *are* awake, Yua—wait, where are you going?!”

She was running toward two newcomers: one with a demihuman’s ears and tail like Arles.

“Ripple! And—”

The other was a young man with a fearless expression, dark hair, and a special-class Rune—none other than the holy knight Rafael. Yua scampered up to Rafael and greeted him with a bow. “Hi there, Huncules.”

Rafael chuckled. “Ah, hello, Yua.”

“And hi, Lady Dog-Ears.”

“Hello, Yua,” Ripple said. “I see you’ve come up with quite the name for Rafael.”

“Ha ha ha...” Rafael laughed it off with a quiet smile, but Arles couldn’t help

feeling anxiety and a good amount of guilt. This was the first time they'd met face-to-face since the battle along the border between Karelia and Venefic. She felt like she needed to make a proper apology.

"Ah, Rafael, Ripple... Are there new orders from Prince Wayne and Ambassador Theodore?" she asked.

"Oh, no, not really," Rafael said.

"We were just thinking we could join in the training!" Ripple said.

Silva beamed. "That would be excellent, Sir Rafael, Lady Ripple!"

"Yeah. If it's just gonna be li'l ol' me training with this guy, I'm gonna get all worn out."

"What do you mean, Lady Ripple?"

"Lately, Rafael's been all hung up on training. It's never overwhelmed me before, but now suddenly he just wants to keep going and going..."

"I'm a holy knight. I can't afford to just rely on Chris whenever anything happens," Rafael said. "We need to focus and bring ourselves up a notch!"

"See what I mean? He's been worked up since Inglis said she'd only consider a relationship with someone who could beat her. And especially with one of the Triumvirate with his eyes on her..."

"L-Lady Ripple!" Rafael protested.

"Oh my. Well, if it gets her to act more grown-up, I certainly can't complain. Good luck, Rafael," Miriela said with a grin.

"So," he said, getting back on track, "may we join in, Miriela?"

"Yep, go right ahead! That works for us too."

Rochefort laughed. "So you fell for a girl, and now you want to polish yourself up and get stronger? Can't say that's a bad motivation. At least as a person, the holy knight bit aside. Right?"

"Uh, thanks."

The conversation between Rafael and Rochefort was tense. That wasn't surprising. The last time they had met was on the battlefield, crossing blades

with their lives on the line.

“Er! I’m really sorry about—!” Arles tried to interject, but Rochefort stopped her.

“Hey, there’s something I’ve gotta say first. If you’ll excuse me.” He stepped toward Rafael, then folded down to the ground and bowed, his hands and head pressed low. “I recently caused you quite a bit of trouble. I’d like to apologize.”

“M-Me too!” Arles added. “I’m so sorry!” She lined up alongside Rochefort, bowing in the same way.

Rafael was silent.

“Rafael, Mr. Rochefort and Miss Arles are serving as instructors now, so...” Miriela began.

“It’s fine,” Ripple added. “The more people on our side for what might be coming, the better. It just freaked me out a little when Arles transformed into a weapon and they attacked. It’s okay. They’re not bad people.”

Rafael sighed in relief. “I understand. I’ve heard what was going on. I can’t just hold things up myself. And besides, Dragon Claw is an Artifact that’s a match to my Dragon Fang. You’d be the perfect sparring partner—if you don’t mind, Sir Rochefort.”



“Man, that’s all you people want me to do, isn’t it? Reminds me of before I got my big break. Ah well, guess it’s a good chance to get both my mind and my body back into shape.” Rochefort shrugged casually.

Miriela turned to the rest of her students. “Then, everyone, why don’t you take a breather while you watch Rafael and Mr. Rochefort spar? It will be a good learning experience.”

“Whoo! A break!”

“I needed that! Phew!”

The students had little attention to pay to Rafael and Rochefort climbing into the ring as they sat down for their rest.

“You’re not here to just relax, everyone!” Silva insisted. “Watch closely how Sir Rafael fights, and try to take something from it! See, like Yua is! She’s actually paying attention for once!”

Yua was already set up right next to the ring, ready to take in every detail. “A little bit of eye candy before it’s back to the grind tomorrow won’t hurt.” Even as she stared at Rafael, her eyes looked as bored as always despite her clear interest.

“Ha ha ha, don’t get too close and get yourself hurt, though.”

“It’s fine. If he gets blown away, I’ll catch him, so bring it.”

“Er, Yua, I’m not exactly planning on that,” Rafael said. “I can’t let myself lose to an Artifact that’s a matched pair with mine.” He drew Dragon Fang, and its crimson blade shimmered with light.

Rochefort laughed. “Well, if you’re not in danger, I guess that means I am. If I get blown away, will you catch me?”

“Nah.” Yua shook her head.

“Gee, it sure must be nice to be popular with the students,” Rochefort said.

Rafael sighed.

“Ross, I’ll catch you. Go ahead and give it your all,” Arles said.

“Of course. That’s exactly what I was going to do.” Rochefort unsheathed

Dragon Claw, and its azure blade shined beautifully. "I'm gonna really put my back into this. No holding back!" He held his sword out in front, ready.

"Gwoooooohhhnnn!"

To the sound of a dragon's roar, azure winged armor encased him.

Rafael gasped. "You've already mastered what even Leon gave up on!"

"Your lucky day, ain't it? Smile while you can."

"Yes, thank you! Then, it's my turn!"

"Gwoohhhh!"

Rafael was sheathed in crimson winged armor. "Shall we?"

"Yeah, let's get it on!"

They both took off flying at once, before coming together to clash in the middle. Their speed was equal, as were the blows they unleashed.

Clang!

With a raucous sound, crimson blade clashed with azure.

"How do you like it? Think I'm up to the job?" Rochefort asked.

"Very!"

They were red and blue blurs, flitting around each other wildly in the air. As they momentarily intersected, the sound of blade on blade filled the area.

"Wow!"

"Incredible!"

"Pay close attention! That's how we should try to fight!" Silva said.

"But I can't see a thing!"

“Then work on that! Learn from Yua—she’s watching seriously for once!”

“Hmm, do I want to be here or there when it starts raining men?” Yua said.

“I don’t really think that’s what Yua has in mind...” Ripple chuckled.

Meanwhile, the combatants returned to above the ring, clashing even faster and more forcefully than before.

Rochefort grunted in surprise.

Rafael roared, “I can do this!” He seemed to have the upper hand.

Rochefort fell back a pace and took a defensive posture.

“Grrraaaaauhhhh!”

As their intensity reached a peak, the crimson and azure light surrounding them mingled and swelled explosively.

“What?!” Rafael gasped.

“What is this?!” Rochefort barked.

The explosion of light sent them both flying.

“Whoa?!”

A shadow flitted into Rafael’s trajectory. “Sweet. Here’s my chance.”

Yua caught him tightly and held on, not letting go.

“Y-Yua? Thanks, but, uh... I’m okay, you can let me go now...”

Meanwhile, Arles had caught Rochefort, as she’d said she would. “Ross! Are you all right?!”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry about that.”

“But... What just happened? It seemed like the power of the two Artifacts combined and exploded?” Rafael asked.

“I couldn’t really tell either, but that sounds about right.” Rochefort got to his feet before approaching Rafael to hold Dragon Claw out to him. “Just going back and forth with me isn’t gonna catch you that girl you’re after. I don’t know if these went wild or what, but what just happened... You’ve gotta figure out how to do something with that, right?”

“I see. So you want me to use them both at once and try to control the effect...”

“Not like I can regift something that came from His Majesty, but letting you give it a spin during training shouldn’t be a problem, right? We’re off to Alcard tomorrow. Hurry up and try it now while you’ve got the chance.”

“I will! Thank you.”

“Principal Miriela, do you have another Artifact I can borrow?”

“Of course, Mr. Rochefort. Just hold on a moment.”

“All right! I’ll get in on the fun too!” Ripple cheered. “That gave me a chance to rest up.”

“Then I’ll join in as well,” Arles said.

Silva joined the growing chorus. “Sir Rafael! Please allow me to participate too!”

“Thank you, everyone! Then, Yua, could you finally let me go?”

“Nah.”

It took some time longer before she could be peeled away and they could resume.

Afterword

First, thank you very much for picking up this book!

So, that's the tenth volume of *Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire* ♀. I hope you enjoyed it.

Ten whole volumes! We're up in the double digits! Personally, I feel like that's quite the achievement. Like I'm really a light novel author now, or like it's a badge of honor. When I started out, ten volumes felt almost unreal, like an impossible barrier. I guess there are good things about sticking with this path. It makes me really happy. And it's all thanks to you readers, so thanks a ton!

In terms of the plot, I've been thinking, *Hmm how about this?* and adding so many details and characters that even I wonder how I'm going to fit them all in, but if it keeps things interesting, then that's all the better!

To be honest, when I finished writing the first arc (up through the eighth volume), this wasn't completely my plan. I was thinking that maybe Leone and Liselotte could kind of fade into the background and I could add new characters and see how they interacted with Chris and Rani. But seeing them running and posing together in the anime opening, it really hit me that I couldn't break up the quartet—rather than cutting down on them, I was going to explore them more deeply.

The sudden change of direction makes me feel like maybe some things were left hanging, but that's how strong of an impression watching the anime had on me. Looking back, it was a great experience. I'm truly grateful to everyone who worked on it. When it ended, I felt a bit empty, like I'd lost something. I finally understood how writers can end up feeling gloomy at the conclusion of their anime adaptation.

But I'm fine! I've got afterwords and more to write, for one! I'm just about to dig into volume 11, so look forward to it.

Finally, I'd like to thank my editor N, the illustrator Nagu, and everyone else

involved for their hard work and dedication. Goodbye for now!

Bonus Short Story

Skippping Stones

The sun glimmered off Illuminas's inviting seas.

"Whoa! It's so hot! Chris, Chris! Let's make snow cones!"

"Sure, that sounds good, Rani." Inglis nodded. She focused the aether covering her and converted it into mana, weaving a spell. "Ice!"

A narrow pillar of ice grew from under the water's surface with a *clink*.

"Ooh! That's so cool! Like, literally! It feels great!" Rafinha wrapped her arms around the pillar of ice.

"Don't be silly, Rani. We can't eat that if you're holding on to it while it's still in the ocean."

"Just make another one. We'll use that one to make snow cones. 🎵"

"Sure, sure. If you insist." Inglis did as requested.

"Hey, Leone, try hugging one of these! It feels nice and cool!" Rafinha said, gesturing at the two ice pillars.

"Pardon me, then... Yes, it does feel quite nice."

"I'm a little bit sunburned—enough that it stings. Cooling down feels so good."

"Yes, my skin is getting a little red too."

Liselotte chimed in, "I suppose I should try as well... Ah, this certainly is refreshing." She smiled as she embraced a pillar, even though she didn't appear to be sunburned.

"Liselotte, you seem fine. Does your skin sting too?"

"I'm used to the sun. Charot is a port city, after all."

“You’re so lucky having lived by the sea! I’m a little bit jealous,” Leone said.

“Right? Ymir is all mountains and forests,” Rafinha said.

Liselotte chuckled. “I used to go to the beach every day when I was little and come back bright red all over.”

“That happened to me too, but it’s totally different in the hills compared to by the sea.”

Inglis knew exactly what Rafinha was talking about. “Yeah, Rani used to always set up a hammock in tall trees and fall asleep up there, then wake up with a sunburn in a net pattern on her face.”

“That’s not what I meant! And you did the same thing too!”

Inglis laughed. “We were so little back then.”

“I wish I could have seen that,” Liselotte said.

“Hey, Liselotte, what do people do at the beach anyway?” Rafinha asked.

“Well, there’s swimming, of course. Or getting a boat and going fishing... And I used to love to make sandcastles. And then there’s this one thing only kids can get away with.” She plucked up a flat rock from near her feet.

“Oh, skipping stones?” Leone asked. “I used to do that in the river near my hometown.”

“Yes. And I’m quite good at it,” Liselotte said.

“I haven’t tried it much,” Rafinha said. “All right, let’s have a competition! I’ll go first! Mmph!” She threw a stone toward a calm patch of sea, but it only bounced once, twice, thrice before sinking. “Hmm... Guess I got three.”

“My turn next, then,” Leone said. Leone’s stone skipped a steady five times and even made it to a sixth before dropping below. “New record here! Mine made it six.”

“Allow me.” Liselotte’s stone skipped across the sea like a living thing, sailing far into the distance.

“Wow!” Rafinha gasped. “That was great! How many skips was that?!”

“Twenty or so,” Leone observed. “I’m impressed but not surprised.”

Liselotte chuckled. "I suppose I win, then."

"Chris!" Rafinha said. "Chris, you try it too!"

"Okay, Rani. But you know I take these things seriously." *Aether Shell!* Pale blue light washed over Inglis as she wound up and threw a stone as hard as she could.

Whooooosh!

The force of her throw parted the seas, and her stone flew over the exposed seabed.

"How was *that*?"

"No good! It didn't even skip once!"

"Wait, what?!"

"Ha ha ha..." Leone and Liselotte shared a strained laugh.



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Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire ♀
Volume 10

by Hayaken

Translated by Mike Langwiser Edited by Carly Smith

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