

# Reborn to Master the Blade:

From Hero-King  
to Extraordinary  
Squire ♀



Author: Hayaken  
Illustrator: Nagu





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“She’s  
transforming?!”

*When the  
blinding light  
dissipated, Leone,  
now clad in golden  
armor, stood before  
Rafinha.*

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*“Sistia...  
and Yua?!”*

*For some time,  
she passed through  
empty darkness.  
Then she came upon  
the faint glow of  
pillars—no, some  
kind of cylindrical  
device.*



A young woman with dark, wavy hair tied with a white bow is shown from the chest up, floating in water. She has a distressed expression, with wide, tear-filled eyes and an open mouth as if crying out. Her hair is dark and slightly messy. The background is a dark, murky blue, suggesting an underwater environment. There are some small, light-colored bubbles or particles floating around her.

“Ah! Chris!  
Chriiiiiiiiiiiiiis!”

*But the Greyfrier  
sarcophagus quickly  
sank to a hopeless  
depth. The beautiful,  
clear water made it  
easy to see it drifting  
farther and farther  
away.*



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## Chapter I: Inglis, Age 16—Far-Off Highland (6)

Illuminas, the island home to the machinator—one of Highland’s Triumvirate—was aflame. And in the heart of the city, before its central laboratory, the authors of this destruction—Charlotte, Tiffanyer, and Maxwell—knelt as one before Chief Academician Wilkin, one of Illuminas’s movers and shakers.

“Huh?! What?! What’s going on?!” Shocked, Rafinha looked at each of them in turn.

Inglis, however, wasn’t so surprised. “I see. So it was you who brought Tiffanyer and the others here, Chief Academician Wilkin?”

It would be impossible for Illuminas to burn so intensely without serious preparation. And without the machinator, who acted as the city’s core, Illuminas had ground to a halt. The city was empty, so any suspicious behavior would have been quickly detected and snuffed out. Wilma was currently in command of the mechanical dragons fighting the fires across the city, but it should have been the machinator himself deploying them to eliminate the intruders. So Tiffanyer must have known in advance that the malfunction would occur, and then waited to make her arrival until the preparations for the arson were complete.

“And I assume, then, that the malfunctions and the splash landing were your doing as well,” Inglis continued.

“What?!” the rest of the group exclaimed.

“D-Dad! Is that true?!” Wilma shouted.

Wilkin listened to Inglis with a grin on his face, one which did not change even as his daughter questioned him. “That’s right, yep! When the machinator was working properly, I had to watch my step,” he responded cheerfully.

“What?! But why?! How can you smile like that?! Illuminas is being destroyed!” Wilma insisted.

“That’s right!” Rafinha agreed. “Sorry, Wilma, but I knew it! You can’t trust



anyone with a face like that!”

Wilkin shared a striking resemblance to the Papal League’s Archlord Evel, an unpleasant person they had faced off against before. Both he and Evel used artificial bodies known as hi-mana coats.

“Honestly, I didn’t really mind Evel,” Inglis said. He was aggressive, even violent, but that meant he was a good sparring partner.

“We all know better than to trust your opinions of people!” Rafinha immediately fired back.

“Awww, so you don’t like me? That’s a shock. I thought I was more than kind enough to you guys,” Wilkin said.

“I’m reserving judgment for now,” Inglis said. “Though if you’re trying to be kind, may I suggest offering me a fight?”

At that, Charlotte, Tiffanyer, and Maxwell immediately rose and placed themselves between her and Wilkin as if to protect him.

Inglis chuckled. “Looks like you’re popular, Chief Academician. That’s nice to see.” That meant that the other three would join in any fight with him as well. She could have a little extra—as a treat.

“You might have gotten smaller, but your ego’s still huge,” Tiffanyer snapped.

“So, according to the Papal League, the culprit in the destruction of Illuminas will be Chief Academician Wilkin himself, and it won’t be a reason for war? Chipping away at the enemy, stripping away some valuable talent, and securing it for yourselves. Maybe the Papal League isn’t as monolithic as I thought,” Inglis said.

“Yeah, I guess,” Wilkin said. “I’m just looking for anyone who’ll take me and let me enjoy my research, you know? This is just a gesture of good faith.”

“You’re so selfish!” Wilma objected. “What was so wrong with Illuminas anyway, dad?!”

“I can’t help it, Wilma. Illuminas...well, really, all of the Triumvirate...they’re on the way out. Like a sinking ship. And I don’t wanna have to give up my research.”



“A sinking ship how?!”

“Highland’s lifespan.”

Wilma furrowed her brow at him.

“Not just Illuminas—all the Triumvirate’s bits of Highland. They all come from the period of the Highland-Surface war, the last year we ever fought with the surface dwellers more than four hundred years ago... The archlords who won themselves glory were granted their own private pieces of Highland to rule as they wanted. That was the start of what became the Triumvirate.”

“And it turns out that that was too much power to hand them, and they ended up able to rival the Papal League that had previously been the legitimate rulers?” Inglis asked. This was the first time she’d heard much about Highland’s history, or how it came to have two struggling factions. Perhaps the fate of her beloved Silvare Kingdom from her previous life was hidden within this history somewhere.

Wilkin nodded approvingly. “Well, that’s what it seemed like, but that’s not how it turned out.”

“Meaning?”

“Without the Floating Circle, you don’t have a Highland, and unless you’re the Pontifex himself, you can’t make them. They last a long, long time—hundreds of years—but not forever. How long one survives is how long that part of Highland survives. And there wasn’t much life left in the Floating Circle here; I just sped it up by a little. It doesn’t matter what we do—Illuminas will never soar in the skies again.”

“That’s terrible! Then what happens to the people?!” Wilma demanded, shaken and agitated. This was clearly news to her.

“Well, I have my doubts that His Holiness is all that interested in giving a member of the Triumvirate another Floating Circle. That was a onetime-only deal. So...yeah. The Triumvirate’s a sinking ship, literally. Sooner or later—well, pretty soon, actually—they’re going to fall to the surface, just to be slaughtered by the natives for what they’ve done, or maybe they’ll be turned into magicite beasts by the Prism Flow. Neither one of those is a particularly appealing fate.”



“I see,” Inglis said. “So that’s why the Triumvirate has been so intent recently on appeasing the surface. The plan is to look like they might join forces with the surface against the Papal League, but really, their aim is to keep the surface content enough to cool down, all the while hoping the Papal League is pleased and grants new Floating Circles...” That must have been why they’d sent down new weaponry like Flygears and Flygear Ports in recent years.

“Yup, and I don’t think their bet’s gonna pay off, so I decided I’m all in on the Pontifex now. That lets me keep doing my research.”

“I see...”

Inglis hadn’t realized that the Triumvirate was on the downswing due to the limited lifespan of Floating Circles. This put a big question mark next to Karelia’s decision to deepen its relationship with the Triumvirate, including Theodore, and use the Rangers as a way to bring surface countries closer together. The reliable backing they thought they had might suddenly collapse. If the Triumvirate’s pieces of Highland came crashing down, then the supply of Flygears, Flygear Ports, and even Artifacts might be cut off. It may have been a better choice for Karelia to side with the Papal League to begin with, despite how oppressive they were.

Venefic’s General Maxwell lightly adjusted his monocle Artifact as he triumphantly said, “I understand your country believes they have firm backing from the Triumvirate, but they may well be a tower built on shifting sands. Is that really the correct choice for something to lean on? I’d recommend that you reconsider your decision.”

“What a strange coincidence. I was just thinking much the same.”

Maxwell chuckled. “A clever one, you are.”

“Hey, c’mon, Chris!” Rafinha interjected. “I don’t think that’s right! I don’t know what problems the higher-ups might have, but with Flygears and Flygear Ports, and us all working together to form the Rangers, we can protect more people than we ever could! I don’t want to give up on that!”

Leone and Liselotte nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, that’s fine. It was just a stray thought,” Inglis said. If that was Rafinha’s



opinion, and Leone and Liselotte agreed, she didn't mind following it through.

"Mm," Maxwell continued. "Purehearted, definitely. But ignoring everything outside of what you see in front of you. Not trying to see what's really happening. It's what you could call naive honesty."

"They're children," Tiffanyer added. "And that narrow vision is proof."

The two looked mockingly at Rafinha. Meanwhile, Charlotte listened quietly.

"Ugh!" Rafinha had no words to offer up in return, even though she probably wanted to.

Inglis stepped in front. "I think that the only people who have ever changed the world are those who stick to that childish naivete. Don't you?"

Herself included. Granted the divine protection of Goddess Alistia, she'd resolved to use it not for herself but for the greater good, and while she thought she'd managed to stick to that, she'd become so busy dealing with emergent situations that she hadn't been able to see much of what was really going on. She began to understand this only after she stopped and looked back at her fervent effort.

Rafinha, Leone, Liselotte—they were all young. Of course they were caught up in what they saw happening in front of them. Of course their field of vision was narrow. That was fine. The naivete that Maxwell and Tiffanyer sneered at was something Inglis thought might change the world if seen through. Rather than people naturally leaving that childlike honesty behind as one grew up, she believed they struggled to maintain it.

Maxwell laughed. "And you think she'll change the world?"

"Well, who knows?" Inglis couldn't tell. Honestly, she didn't care. She was going to stick by this sweet girl and watch over her as she grew up, just as any loving grandparent would do. That was enough for Inglis.

"A few have that power, but most are crushed and disappear," Maxwell pointed out.

"Yes, I suppose. That's convenient for me." If the world wanted to crush that spark out of Rafinha, that meant conflict. If that led to fights, it meant Inglis



could be happy both fighting off opponents and helping Rafinha. A good thing for both of them.

“If you want to change the world so badly, how about changing it so we can get new Floating Circles?” Wilkin asked. “If they weren’t dying, I wouldn’t have to take the side that I am.” He placed his hands together a bit pleadingly and looked at Rafinha.

“Why don’t you figure out how to make them, then?! I thought you were supposed to be some genius researcher!” she shot back.

“Oh, sheesh, ha ha ha. That’s right, that’s kind of awkward. Guess I’ve gotta work real hard over with the Altar to get to that point!” Wilkin replied coyly, a bit self-consciously, though it didn’t hold him back.

“You can’t, dad! I won’t allow it!” Wilma protested. “I want you to stay here and help us restore Illuminas!”

“No, wait, wait, Wilma. That’s not how it works, if anything you should be coming with me.”

“Huh?! Why?”

“Why are you so surprised? Of course you’d follow! You’re my daughter. I wouldn’t leave my daughter behind, would I?”

“That’s absurd! Altar, Throne, it doesn’t matter! I am the knight-captain of Illuminas, and my responsibility is to protect it!” Wilma argued.

Wilkin shook his head, his usual grin replaced with a calm and serious expression. “That responsibility wasn’t anything you wanted, though, was it? You were born so sickly, you wouldn’t have survived without that mechanical body. And a knight’s duty came along with it. I know you had such a hard time with that... Didn’t you, Wilma?”

“D-Dad...”

“I wish I could have given you a hi-mana coat, but that wasn’t possible. The machinator wouldn’t approve it. Well, maybe he just didn’t want me to give special treatment to my own daughter. Anyway, his word is law in Illuminas, so doesn’t it feel like the whole place crashing down because he can’t get a new



Floating Circle is exactly what he deserves? That's why nothing's come of the research into how to make a new one—kind of.” Wilkin’s grin gradually returned. “Maybe if I’d really been able to focus my effort on it? Ah ha ha ha, I guess I’m kinda bitter.”

“I take it back. Maybe someone can have *that* face and still be a good person,” Rafinha murmured.

Inglis chuckled. “You seem a bit conflicted over there, Rani.”

“Well of course I am! It’s not like I have any good memories of Evel.”

“I remember having a good time.”

“Of course you do, because you’re *you*!”

While they were conversing, Wilkin stretched his hand toward Wilma. “Come with your dad, Wilma. You’ve tried your best. It must have been really hard on you. I know how kind your heart is, but you’ve done enough. If we go to the Papal League, we can even get you a hi-mana coat.”

“Wilma...” Rafinha searched for words, her expression conflicted as she watched Wilma. If Wilma did decide to go with Wilkin, Rafinha wouldn’t be able to stop her.

“Dad! I’m happy you feel that way...but even if this wasn’t something I wanted, even if it was hard, it’s something I’ve become proud of! I have no intention of stepping down as knight-captain of Illuminas!”

Wilkin’s shoulders dropped. “I see... Wilma, you’ve gotten so strong... I’m overjoyed to see how you’ve grown up, but I can’t just go along with that. It’s obvious what would happen to you if I leave you here.” He glanced over at Tiffanyer and the others. “You three—sorry, but can you bring her along with us? I know it’s a lot of work, but think of it as helping a father in trouble.”

“Very well.” Charlotte nodded.

A creepy smile rose to Tiffanyer’s lips. “I might have to break a few limbs, is that okay?”

“Those parts are mechanical, so sure! Go for it!”

“The mechanical dragons she’s controlling are helping with civil defense...



Wiping them out wouldn't hurt." Maxwell didn't seem to object either.

"Gah! Try it!" Wilma barked.

"Chris, let's protect Wilma! We need to save Eris, Myce, the evacuated Highlanders, and Princess Meltina from Venefic too! And even Charlotte!" Rafinha said.

"Indeed we do, Rani." Inglis chuckled. "Sounds like a busy day."

"The shelters are below! They're the level above the Greyfrier sarcophagus! Her Highness is inside the sarcophagus!" Wilma pointed toward the central laboratory.

"Which means we just have to protect the central laboratory," Inglis summarized. That was an easy task to understand. The trio of Maxwell, Tiffanyer, and Charlotte would be focused on Wilma, so Inglis only needed to concern herself with intercepting them.

"I wonder, will it really be that simple for you?" Maxwell grinned as he brought a finger to his monocle.

*Rrrrrrumble...!*

Inglis could feel her footing sway again. "Ah!"

"What?!" Rafinha gasped.

Although it wasn't as strong yet as the initial wave of explosions, they could clearly feel the intensity increasing.

"Below us?!" Leone began.

"Something's rising up!" Liselotte said.

*Thump!*

A hole opened in the ground near them from which Maxwell's faceless giant leaped out.



“It’s that giant from before!” Rafinha yelled. “I thought you blew it away, Chris!”

It had disappeared in the direction of the beaches near the arsenal, but now it split the earth and reappeared.

“Hmm, it changed its form and slipped underground, then circled around beneath us. How underhanded, to do that while we’re talking!” Inglis said.

“This is war, not sport! Especially with how much of a grudge you’ve earned yourself!”

“And how exactly did I earn it?”

“Maybe you should ask yourself that!”

*Well, Inglis thought. I did attack his giant without warning, and there was that conversation that didn’t go so well. And before that I took Rochefort and Arles prisoner, captured their flying battleship, and fought off Venefic’s strategy of using the Prism.*

*I guess there might be a lot he’d be angry with me about, as a Venefic general.*  
“Well, I do suppose that, as a loyal and patriotic servant of Venefic, you might not be able to stomach me.”

As she watched Maxwell, she realized something: Maxwell, like Rochefort, had a special-class Rune. She could see its rainbow glimmer on the back of his right hand, but it kept disappearing, then reappearing again. It was blinking. She’d never seen a special-class Rune do that before.

Maxwell’s monocle Artifact had the powerful ability of creating and controlling the undying. It must have been an Artifact on a level with Dragon Claw or Dragon Fang, a superclass Artifact so to say. The eerie aura of the undying that it emitted seemed to be eating away at Maxwell himself. Its blinking seemed like proof.

“No, wait, that’s not— What *are* you?” she asked.

Maxwell laughed. “Aren’t there more important things than chatter right now?”

“Chris!” Rafinha said. “The ground! It’s collapsing!” Cracks ran from the hole

the giant had made, spreading rapidly into gaping fissures.

*Krrraaaak!*

Illuminas, already heavily affected by the explosions, was at its limit. The land separated from the central area by the fissures began to sink into the sea.

“Th-The island’s breaking apart!” Leone yelled.

She was right. The land separated from the central laboratory area along the cracks and immediately slipped away into the depths. Weak as the Floating Circle had become, it could still keep things afloat in water—but once physically cut off, they would inevitably drown.

“This part is going to tip over!” Liselotte shouted with urgency.

The central landmass with the laboratory and the Floating Circle shuddered and began to angle itself as well. It wasn’t sinking immediately like the others, but with its center of mass disturbed by its newly marred form, it had definitely tilted. At this rate, it might eventually sink too. It seemed to Inglis like she could no longer just enjoy a fight with the enemies who were after Wilma.

“We can’t let this happen! We need to evacuate the civilians! If the island sinks, they’ll be in danger!” Wilma yelled.

“But where can we evacuate them to?! The arsenal was destroyed, and so was the ship we were on!” Rafinha said.

“As long as that’s still there, we’ll be fine!” Inglis pointed to a flying battleship floating high above Illuminas. It was the Aethelstan Trading ship that Maxwell and the others had arrived in, holding position safely out of danger in the opposite direction from the arsenal. They could take it for their own and use it to evacuate the people of Illuminas.

“Do you really think I’d let you? I’m not here just to hand out ships!” Maxwell said.

“Ah!” Rafinha gasped. “It’s climbing away!”

Pinning the ship down, capturing it, and loading the people of Illuminas on



board was a tall ask. Just shooting it down would be easy, but that wouldn't accomplish what they wanted. And if they took too much time, the land they were on might sink.

"The mechanical dragons! Load the people on them! At least they won't have to sink along with Illuminas!" Inglis said.

"Great idea!" Rafinha nodded.

The mechanical dragons which had been engaged in firefighting were lacking a task now that the city itself had mostly sunk. It made sense to use them in the evacuation. They were huge; each one could carry a large number of people. And fortunately, it seemed like they could use the hole the faceless giant had opened when it appeared in order to go underground. Well, "fortunate" wasn't quite the right word given that this rescue wouldn't have been necessary if not for the hole tearing Illuminas apart.

"Mechanical dragon squadron! Enter that hole, and proceed to the emergency shelters!" Light rose from Wilma's black armor, and the dragons, following their orders, flew near at once.

As they tried to enter the hole, the giant jumped up, trying to grab one. "Stop them, giant!" Maxwell ordered.

"I won't let you get in the way!" Inglis yelled. *Aether Shell!* Wrapped in the pale blue light of aether, she leaped forth, but she was clearly a step behind and could only insert herself between the giant and the mechanical dragon. *Smash the giant away, and protect the dragon!* "Haaah!"

But her tiny fist did not reach the giant. The haft of a golden halberd stopped it.

*Clong!*





It was Charlotte. She had kept up with Inglis even with Aether Shell active.

“Ugh! Such a heavy fist for such a little girl!”

“Good job! I knew you could do it!”

Inglis was overjoyed by Charlotte’s capabilities. They were clearly a cut above those of the hial menaces she’d known before. If she really was Liselotte’s mother, did that mean their aptitude was hereditary? Wilkin had said that Liselotte had extremely high aptitude. If Charlotte did as well, maybe their relationship was the reason for her extraordinary ability. And if that was the case, then if Liselotte ever became a hial menace herself, she could be just as strong.

Inglis and Charlotte’s momentum canceled each other out, and they both landed. That was enough of an opening for the faceless giant to weave by Inglis. It grabbed the tail of one of the mechanical dragons and slammed it into the ground.

*Ba-thump!*

The shock of the massive beast’s impact shook the earth.

“Ah! The mechanical dragon!” Rafinha gasped.

“Hyaaaah!” But Leone’s dark blade had become gigantic and now swung down precisely toward where the giant had thrust its arm.

“Leone! Nice!” Rafinha said.

“Excellent work!” Liselotte said.

“But...! I can’t cut through it!”

The blade carved into the giant’s arm but couldn’t cut all the way through. The dragon, still caught, thrashed back and forth on the ground trying to break free.

“Ah! I know! Then—!” Rafinha drew back Shiny Flow as far as she could.

“Leone! Don’t let up! Keep pressing!” As she spoke, she let loose an arrow of

aqua-colored light, one imbued with its healing Gift. It struck Leone's greatsword, and the blade of the sword began to glow with the healing light. As it did, it bit more deeply into the giant's arm.

"Tch! A healing Gift?!" Maxwell spat in disgust.

"Healing power hurts the undying, right? Wasn't that how it worked?!"

"Good job, Rani! You remembered well!" Inglis called out as she exchanged punches for halberd thrusts and cuts with Charlotte. Rafinha was steadily growing too.

"Now I can cut it!" Leone said.

"I'll lend you my help too! Yaaaaaah!" Pale wings sprouted from Liselotte's back, and she took flight before suddenly diving, her halberd swinging down. That pushed Leone's sword the rest of the way, completely severing the giant's arm.

"All right!" Rafinha and the others cheered.

The mechanical dragon, freed, spread its wings to take flight again. But in the next moment, a golden gleam flew toward its neck.

*Fwoosh!*

The dragon's head was severed from its body forcefully enough to seem like it had popped off. Left headless, its body crumpled to the ground and lay still.

"Eeeeeeeek!" the group of girls shrieked at the mechanical dragon, beheaded in a flash.

Tiffanyer giggled. "Awww, now isn't that so sad? After you got yourselves all worked up too." She smiled from behind her golden armor.

Tiffanyer's transformed form was not a sword or a spear, but armor. Arles, formerly of Venefic's army and now an instructor at the knights' academy, was a shield hiral menace as well; sometimes these beings took on defensive forms rather than offensive ones.

Encased in her armor, Tiffanyer was safer from a beating, but she was faster



and stronger too. It had an effect—like Inglis’s own Aether Shell or dragon ice armor—of raising its wearer’s physical capabilities. And using those enhanced capabilities and the armor’s own hardness, she’d taken the mechanical dragon’s head off with one kick.

While trading attacks at a dizzyingly fast pace with Charlotte’s halberd, Inglis watched Tiffanyer out of the corner of her eye so that in an emergency, she’d be ready to intervene. As long as Rafinha lived as a knight, the girl could not completely avoid fighting. Inglis understood that, but it was still bad for her heart to watch Rafinha fight a knight with a special-class Rune or a hial menace. Inglis couldn’t keep herself from worrying.

To make matters worse, when the faceless giant brought the stumps of its arms close to its fallen hands, they reattached as if nothing had happened. “Even though we took its arm off...” Inglis murmured.

Rafinha gasped. “It’s back as good as new?!”

“Even though we managed to bring it down earlier...” Leone said.

“Were our attempts for naught?!” Liselotte asked.

Maxwell controlled the giant, but it was made from a liquid called mana extract. Slicing or stabbing at it would not be enough to destroy it. The only way to deal with it was to unleash a torrent of power, like Aether Strike or Fufailbane’s dragon breath, and completely annihilate it. And Rafinha’s healing arrows that combined her Artifact’s Gifts would have a hard time beating it in one shot, but maybe dozens or hundreds would eventually do the trick.

“No!” Wilma shouted. “You bought us time! And that was only one of them!”

While the battle continued, the remaining mechanical dragons had flown one by one into the hole the faceless giant had created. Six of them were still safe. And the last was flying into the hole now.

“You take care of things up here! I’ll go help evacuate the residents!” Wilma said, jumping from the rim of the hole to the shoulder of the last dragon.

“Rani, Leone, Liselotte, you go too! I’ll hold them off here!” Inglis instructed.

“Okay! Leave it to us, Chris!” Rafinha said.

“Both of you, hold on to me!” Liselotte said.

“Will do!” Leone said.

Liselotte, bearing Rafinha and Leone, took off after Wilma. This left Inglis with the opportunity to enjoy a good fight without having to worry. She wanted to take on Charlotte, Tiffanyer, Maxwell, and the faceless giant, and she wanted to avoid having Rafinha fight dangerous opponents if possible. This was a best-case scenario.

“Tiffanyer, go after them,” Charlotte ordered.

The armored hial menace was clearly uncomfortable at being ordered around. Inglis could tell that she didn’t like taking orders from her at all. “Now, now, Tiffanyer,” Inglis said with a smile. “Why don’t we all just play nicely *together?*”

It seemed to have had some calming effect on Tiffanyer. “Hmph. Are you trying to say I shall not pass, or something?”

“I’m glad you get the picture.”

Tiffanyer stared at her unenthusiastically. “I’ve changed my mind. I’ll take being ordered over having to listen to this brat!” Tiffanyer, ignoring Inglis’s exhortations, leaped toward the hole and after Rafinha and the others.

“I won’t let you!” Inglis barked.

*Shiiinnnk!*

A clear sound announced the arrival of a massive block of ice in midair. Appearing in the center of the hole, it expanded in an instant.

Inglis’s friends were completely shocked. “What?!”

Growing beyond the size of the hole, the ice formed a lid over it to block it off.

“Whew...” Inglis sighed. It was a block of ice even larger than the one Inglis had used to seal away Cyrene when she became a magicite beast. In order to create it with magic, it had been necessary to convert considerable amounts of aether to mana, but Inglis was now capable of using aether techniques, magic



formed from mana, and dragon lore all at the same time. She could even fuse mana and dragon lore into dragon magic.

Inglis had just been fighting Charlotte using Aether Shell while accumulating mana in preparation for that spell. In the battle with Cyrene, she had needed to stop and focus, to use all her strength. However, now she had plenty of leeway. The mass of ice she just created spoke of her obvious improvements in both control of her powers and endurance. It was good to be able to see her improvement—improvement that was the result of her many battles since leaving her hometown of Ymir to enroll at the knights' academy. A real fight was better than any practice.

And while she had expected Highland to be completely untouched by war when she departed for it, it had followed her there.

This was, perhaps, a turning point in history. Times like these tended to produce vast, sprawling conflicts. Illuminas was engulfed in flames. Maybe, just maybe, the goddess Alistia had chosen for her to be reborn in this era because it was the most suitable for her desire to push her powers to their absolute limits.

If so, it was a wonderful thing for which Inglis was grateful.

She laughed. "Now we can fight with no distractions. Illuminas may be sinking, but we still have some time, don't we?"

Inglis smiled adorably, only to be met with a *tsk* of disgust from Maxwell. "You bloodthirsty freak! Did coming in close contact with the Prismers eat away at your humanity?!"

Inglis hadn't been expecting that response. Standing up tall, she argued back, "Well, that's not very nice! You're quite mistaken. I've always been like this!"

"That's even worse!"

"Not that I really mind, but if you keep blocking the tunnel...I won't be able to chase who I'm supposed to chase, right?" Tiffanyer shot a sarcastic smile at Charlotte.

"I am ashamed," Charlotte replied. "But truly, for her to have gathered enough mana to create such a huge block of ice, all while she was attacking like

that...”

“Whatever! Just break the ice!”

Following Maxwell’s will, the faceless giant turned toward the ice block and raised its fist.

Inglis noticed this immediately. “Stop right there!” She wouldn’t stand by and let that happen after all the trouble she’d taken to set everything up. She had no intention of letting powerful foes get away without a fight. Leaping up, she put herself in the path of the giant’s fist and met it head-on with her own.

*Bammmmm!*

The giant’s fist shattered as if it had exploded. The mana extract from which it was made scattered into droplets. The aftershock of Inglis’s blow sent the giant to the ground, on its rear.

She had protected the ice lid from its punch. However, the battle was not over.

“Tailwind! Lightning Spear!” Charlotte swooped in on Inglis from the side and was soon upon her. Impressively, she could keep up with Inglis even at her best. Not only that, but the head of her halberd was crackling with lightning.

Up until now, Charlotte had fought with a powerful effect she called a tailwind to speed herself up and another kind of magic much like Inglis’s own enhanced gravity. The combination of enhancing herself and slowing her foe down was a fearsome one, yet those shackles of enhanced gravity on Inglis fell away once she activated Aether Shell.

Aether Shell was a powerful defensive barrier and repelled Charlotte’s gravity magic. Thus, against Inglis enhanced with Aether Shell, Charlotte’s combo was not much of a combo at all, just the effect of the tailwind on herself.

Charlotte realized that immediately and abandoned her ineffective technique and instead enhanced the power of her attacks by wreathing her halberd in lightning.

The clear implication, Inglis thought, was that if she abandoned the enhanced gravity for another effect, she could use exactly two at once. It was an astute decision—an appropriate choice of which Inglis approved. Charlotte's competence was wonderful.

Charlotte pointed the tip of her halberd at the gap opened in Inglis's stance as the squire swung her fist and knocked the giant away. As it was, the halberd would strike her before she could adjust.

"Got you!" Charlotte was as convinced of this as Inglis was.

But Inglis still had another move to make.

"Dragon Lore!" From Inglis's tiny back, a misty dragon's tail appeared. This was dragon lore, which she had access to thanks to Fufailbane. Now that she had become practiced at using it, a stronger focus would have given it the form of part of her own body, granting her more destructive power. But for now, she left it in the shape of a long dragon's tail. Her currently rather short arms and legs weren't long enough to reach Charlotte, and the task for it which she had planned did not require raw power.

The dragon lore tail flexed itself and pushed away the haft of Charlotte's halberd. Inglis was tiny enough that even a small change in trajectory was enough. The halberd passed just in front of her, followed closely by Charlotte herself.

Inglis had expected Charlotte to be waiting for her to leave an opening. That's why she'd had dragon lore ready to deflect it, rather than using it offensively. One-on-one fights were good, but chaotic melees like this were as well. It really let her enjoy the tactical complexity.

And Charlotte didn't just flit by Inglis. Tiffanyer had swooped in from the other direction, and now they crashed into each other.

"Ugh...! That clever little—!" Charlotte snapped.

"Why, Charlotte, I didn't know you were interested in other women!" Tiffanyer smirked.

The collision itself was not a huge blow to either of them, but they were both left wide-open as they stiffened in response.



“Haaaaaaaaah!”

*Bam!*

Inglis struck them both with one kick. The two, still wrapped in their unintentional embrace, shot off like a bullet directly toward the faceless giant, which was just rising. They crashed into its chest, and were left as easy targets.

*Just as I expected!* “How nice of you to all line up together! Aether Strike!”

*Blammmmmm!*

A huge blast of aether roared toward Charlotte and Tiffanyer.

“Guhhhh! So powerful!” Tiffanyer said.

“We need to deflect it somehow!” Charlotte, as expected, brought her halberd up to use as a shield, refusing to back down. Tiffanyer, too, joined in rather than continuing her diving swoops. They both braced themselves against the faceless giant.

If it were just the giant itself, it could probably change its form to survive a massive hole being blasted through its chest, but then Charlotte and Tiffanyer would be in danger of Inglis’s attack blowing them far away. The giant was barely able to hold its ground now—a direct hit from Aether Strike could obliterate it.

But Inglis had a feeling this fight wasn’t over. Maxwell, who controlled the giant with his Artifact, continued to watch stonily. She suspected he had some further plan. She could sense something in him saying that it would take more than this. And she had high hopes for him as a foe.

“So, what’s your move?” Inglis asked him with a prim smile.

Inglis’s supposedly cute smile sent chills down his spine. The only truly cute thing about her was her appearance—her deeds were anything but. That expression was nothing more than the relaxed grin of a predator facing down its

prey. She was just a young—purportedly sixteen, but still—and adorable girl. Why did she have such power?

He cursed to himself, *What is this, what is this, whaaaaaat is thiiiiiiiis?! Argh! They said she was the heroine who took down a Prismar, but that's not the half of it! She's a monster! The only monsters that were supposed to be here were the hial menaces the Altar has for dealing with Karelia! They didn't tell me—they didn't tell me a damn thing! No one human should have all that power! They can't! They just can't! What will become of my beloved Venefic?! She could destroy it single-handedly, no doubt!*

“I won't let that happen!” To Maxwell, she was a foe who must be destroyed, even if it cost his own life. The hairs standing on the back of his neck were screaming that at him. He had to kill her with his own hands.

There was more to a book than the cover, and her sins would not disappear no matter how many ages passed.

“Huh? What seems to be the problem?” Inglis asked, genuinely confused. Maxwell swore he saw the shade of a dignified elderly man rise behind her. He felt a deep grudge against her, as if he'd impossibly held this grudge against her for a long, long time. That didn't make sense—they'd first met only when he'd come to Illuminas. Shaking his head, Maxwell looked at the girl again, but the elderly man had vanished.

*Nay! Nevertheless! She remaineth that which I must bring low! This was only whispered of even in legend, is something that never have I ventured, but—!*

This was the path of a knight who fought fiercely for his beloved homeland. And Maxwell would follow it until the end.

“This is the last time you'll make that face! Behold! Unlike that Roche-fool, I comport myself as a true knight of Venefic!”

*By Roche-fool, he means Rochefort, right?* Inglis wondered. She remembered how Rochefort had spoken poorly of Maxwell as well, so she assumed they were not on good terms. And Inglis was quite fond of Rochefort. Sarcastic complainer though he was, he always ended up going along with her training.

On the other hand, she didn't mind Maxwell either. Anyone who viewed her

as an enemy they'd try to defeat was welcome.

"Do your best!" she said.

"Be quiet, you brat!" Maxwell replied. Her encouragement only prodded him into full-on rage. She frowned.

In any case, he ran up to the giant's feet, leaped up onto its knee, and hopped again, flying backward into the giant's chest, which he plunged into.

"He sank in?!"

At the same time, the giant wrapped its hand around Charlotte and Tiffanyer.

A dazzling golden light rose up, enveloping the giant's body. Inglis recognized its shine. "The light of a hial menace transforming?!"

Maxwell had a special-class Rune. Just like Rochefort, he was a general in Venefic's army. Inglis wasn't surprised that he could wield a transformed hial menace.

However, the size of the gleam was surprisingly large. It formed a tremendous pillar that wrapped around the giant completely. Then, within the light, she saw a tremendous halberd materialize in its hand.

"Oooh! The giant's wielding a hial menace!"

How unexpected. She hadn't realized Maxwell could do something like this. *How powerful will it be?* she wondered. *In terms of foes wielding hial menaces, I've fought against Rochefort as he's wielded Arles—can I expect something similar?* Inglis couldn't help but look forward to it.

Then, in the moment the gleam faded, the giant struck Inglis's Aether Strike with the halberd in its hand. The Aether Strike changed direction and shot back toward Inglis.

*Blammmmmm!*

"That's good! That's exactly what I was looking for!"

"Ha ha ha ha! Die, die, die, dieeeeeeeee!" Maxwell, embedded in the giant's



chest, laughed loudly. Only his torso, not even his arms, protruded; the rest was completely buried in the giant. It seemed as if, by becoming one, he could use his special-class Rune in the body of a giant. Inglis had to applaud Maxwell's creative application of the group's abilities.

"I will not bend and break so easily!" Inglis couldn't fall yet—there was still so much fun to be had.

She reactivated Aether Shell and punched the Aether Strike as it approached her. She had adjusted the wavelength of her aether so that it would bounce off. By doing so, she could once again change its direction.

*Blammmmmmm!*

"Too easy!" The faceless giant swung the halberd which Charlotte had transformed into, and the Aether Strike was again reflected back.

"I can do that too!" *It's just a test of endurance now!*

*Bam! Bam! Bammm!*

The Aether Strike shot back and forth between Inglis and the faceless giant over and over. She didn't find this on its own very entertaining, so each time she stepped forward to close the distance. Her foe seemed to have the same idea and was closing in as well. As such, the distance of the Aether Strike's trips became shorter and shorter.

*Blammmmmmm!*

"Haaaaaah!"

"I will have revenge!"

In the end, Inglis's fist and the giant's halberd hit the Aether Strike at the same time. Unable to move either forward or back, it rocketed upward and

popped.

“Good job! That was wonderful!” There was one thing Inglis was worried about, though. The cost of wielding a hial menace. Hial menaces sapped away their wielder’s life force and dispersed it, eroding their vitality. If Maxwell fought wielding one for a long time, his life would drain away.

But there were exceptions. When Rochefort wielded Arles, he himself was suffering from a terminal disease and was already half-dead and likely to perish at any moment. If that happened, the hial menace would find no life force to drain, and Rochefort could wield Arles as he wished. He couldn’t give what he didn’t have.

That was proof that the life force was not required for the hial menace’s transformation in itself: it still functioned even if the wielder had none. The drain was just a measure to discourage hial menaces and knights with special-class Runes from ever turning on Highland. From Highland’s point of view, this was only natural. It would be meaningless to bestow weapons that would then be used to defeat them.

However, if the weapons weren’t strong enough to counter a Prism—the greatest threat to be encountered on the surface—then Prisms would ravage the surface. If that happened, Highland’s survival would be threatened as it would be left unable to procure food and supplies from the surface. In other words, this neatly threaded the needle.

However, the suffering of hial menaces like Eris and Ripple, who felt guilt for taking the life of the holy knights who wielded them, was ignored.

In any case, though, Maxwell was impressive; he was putting up quite the fight. If Inglis wanted a rematch, she couldn’t push him too hard. She was aware that while she was having a good time, his life was draining away by the second.

“Hm? No, wait... Is that not the case?!” Watching him closely, Inglis could sense no sign of his life being sapped away. Instead, she could see steam apparently evaporating from where he connected to the giant.

*This is—*

“I see! It’s mana extract! So you can do that with it!” Instead of Maxwell’s

own life, the mana extract of which the giant was made was consumed and evaporated away.

Mana extract was a forbidden fluid made of people. Their life force still remained within it. Charlotte, as a weapon, had consumed it, leaving Maxwell himself unaffected. So as long as there was still mana extract, Maxwell could fight without the normal effect of wielding a hial menace.

So far, Inglis could see steam rising, but there was no other change in the giant's form. With how massive it was, there was probably enough mana extract to last for a long time. That meant she could fight on without hesitation.

Because mana extract was made from human corpses that had lost their form and will, it could be manipulated by those with a Gift that could control the undying, and since the life force alone remained, it was possible to use it to provide the sacrifice hial menaces demanded. Maxwell had understood those properties of mana extract and joined himself with the faceless giant.

Unlike Inglis or the black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front's use of divine aether to block the effect, this was an example of humans overcoming the cost of wielding a hial menace through their own means and ingenuity. Leaving aside the fact that the production of mana extract required human sacrifice en masse, it was a brilliant move which made the most of both Maxwell's abilities and the materials at hand.

"Given all the implications of mana extract, I can't give it unreserved praise, but you're impressive nonetheless!"

"I don't want your praise! Give me your life!" The head of the gigantic halberd swung toward Inglis.

"Here you go! If you can take it!" Dropping down into a crouch, she clenched her fists, and focused dragon lore and mana together as she mimed drawing a sword.

*"Gwohhhh!"*

The sword which appeared in her hands, shaped like a dragon's fang or claw,



let loose a dragon's roar. This was her dragon icebrand. It was the strongest weapon she could create unaided right now; she wanted to try directly blocking the halberd with it. When she'd fought Dux Jildegrieva, she'd managed to wound Eris in weapon form by doing so, but this way she wouldn't cause anyone trouble, so she had nothing to worry about.

"Disappear! Vanish! Be snuffed out!"

"Haaaah!"

The halberd that was Charlotte clashed with the dragon icebrand.

*Clink!*

And the dragon icebrand shattered, crumbling without surviving a single blow. Inglis's breath caught, and she spun her body, avoiding by a hair's breadth the fall of the halberd's head. But the shock wave the attack produced as it hit the ground was something she couldn't avoid.

Blown away, Inglis flew into the air. She chuckled. "That's some impressive power! That's what I wanted to see!" She'd expected her dragon icebrand wouldn't last long, but had brought it out to see exactly how many clashes it could endure—only for the answer to be *none at all*.

*I wonder how the dragonscale sword I made from Fufailbane's scales would have held up.* The dragon iceblade didn't quite measure up to the dragonscale sword, but Inglis estimated that it was about sixty or seventy percent as powerful. Perhaps even the dragonscale sword would have been destroyed in a continued battle.

When Rochefort had wielded Arles in the battle with Inglis, her dragonscale sword had exhibited no signs of strain at all. Meaning, Charlotte was more powerful than Arles as a weapon. Charlotte was a cut above any other hialal menace that Inglis had encountered. And it seemed that that carried over to the power of her weapon form.

Inglis laughed happily, even as her body rocketed toward the wall of the central laboratory. If she continued on her current trajectory, she would crash

into it. Not only that, but the giant was charging after her. “Haah!” She twisted her body in midair and jumped back off the wall.

“Raaaaagh!”

Inglis barely slipped by the halberd’s head as the giant’s swing struck the wall of the central laboratory. It bit into the wall and continued down, cutting down the entire building. The upper half, cut loose, crumbled with a tremendous roar, kicking up a cloud of dust.

“Amazing...!” That had been a tremendous attack, due to its massive size. Even Inglis would have a hard time collapsing the central laboratory with one attack.

“You can keep scampering around, but I won’t let you get away!”

“It’s not like I’m trying to!” As Inglis spoke, she traced her fingertips down herself, painting her body with dragon lore. To overlap it with mana, she needed to match it with her own movements. As her fingertips brushed by, azure armor with a draconic design began to materialize.

*“Gwohhhh!”*

When the process was completed, the armor emitted a dragon’s roar—dragon ice armor. The dragon icebrand had shattered in a single blow; being the same hardness, the armor probably would have as well. However, like Aether Shell, it also had the effect of raising her physical abilities—not by anywhere near as much, but most importantly, she could use them both at the same time. On her own, without a hial menace, she was most powerful when she layered the two atop one another.

“Now! Let’s try that again!”

“Raaagh!” Once again, the halberd swung down toward Inglis.

“Haaaah!”

*Thwap!*

Inglis grasped the halberd's head between her palms.





“Ngh!” From his position on the giant’s chest, Maxwell’s eyes popped open wide.

Inglis chuckled. “This feels good!” If she relaxed for even a second, she’d be crushed. That was how forceful the attack was.

She wondered if it measured up to Dux Jildegrieva. She was sure he’d be jealous if he knew she was fighting such a strong enemy. The faceless giant was a perfect partner for her preparations for their rematch. She couldn’t lose and acquiesce to becoming his wife. She needed to strengthen herself through battles like this, so that the next time they met she would conclusively win.

“Ggghg...!” The halberd she struggled against was pushed back, little by little.

A clash between their weapons was a complete loss for Inglis, but a raw test of strength was another story. “Come on! Put more strength into it! Do your best!”

“Grrrahhhgghhh!”

*Pffsshhh!*

A cloud of smoke suddenly billowed forth from around Maxwell. It was proof that the mana extract was being consumed instead of his life force.

“Mph—!”

Had the giant gotten a little shorter? The rate of consumption of the mana extract was intense.

“Are you okay?” Inglis asked.

But Maxwell answered with a grin. “Ha! You don’t need to worry about me!” The golden halberd form of Charlotte gleamed brightly.

Inglis winced as she squinted at the swelling glow.

## Chapter II: Inglis, Age 16—Far-Off Highland (7)

Wilma's voice got the attention of all the Highlander civilians. "Get the children in the lifeboats! Adults, you're going to have to cling to the dragons yourselves!"

Torn open by the faceless giant, the tremendous shaft reached near the underground shelters where Illuminas's residents had evacuated. Wilma had brought the mechanical dragons alongside it, opened the bulkhead, and issued orders to evacuate the city. The children boarded the large, basketlike lifeboats being carried between pairs of dragons, while the adults clung onto the dragons directly.

The boats themselves seemed to have been built into the dragons, and they deployed from a point around their hips when they came alongside the shelter. Unlike Flygears, which could fly or maneuver independently, these were just containers, but they would still be helpful.

"Captain, once we escape, where will we go?!"

"One of the neighboring islands will rescue us—or maybe the dux or the quaestor will!" Wilma replied. "Anyway, we need to get out of here! Hurry!"

"O-Okay!"

Wilma's intensity was apparently enough to cow both the children and the adults into obedience. They were nervous, but not panicking. Was it because she was a well-respected leader to begin with, or was it because the Highlanders were straightforward and understanding?

Rafinha didn't know for sure, but she presumed both were true. She would've expected pure chaos if similar were to happen in Chiral or Ymir. The Highlanders struck her as mostly kind and gentle like Myce, probably because they were ignorant of the darker dealings surrounding Highland, such as the use of mana extract or the situation on the surface. They truly believed peaceful coexistence was possible.

No sooner did she think of Myce than he appeared, spotting the three and moving toward them. “Rafinha! Leone! Liselotte!”

“Myce! Are you okay?!”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Hey, what’s going on?!” Myce, always a curious boy, was looking around, but he did so anxiously.

“Well...” Many answers came to mind—Chief Academician Wilkin’s betrayal of Illuminas, an attack by the Papal League, the matter of mana extract—but she didn’t know what to say. She wanted to spare him of any additional pain. “Enemies! Enemies are attacking, and Illuminas is in danger! So we need to evacuate!” There was no other way to put it simply.

“Whaaa?! E-Enemies?! Are they magicite beasts from the Prism Flow?!” That seemed to be Myce’s picture of what might be an enemy.

“No...but I’ll protect you, so don’t worry! Just evacuate with everyone!”

“Over there, Myce!” Leone instructed.

“You must hurry!” Liselotte said. The two gave him a gentle push along.

“O-Okay! Thanks! You’re helping save us even though you’re from the surface?”

“That doesn’t matter! We’re friends, right?” Rafinha asked.

“Yeah! Okay, I’ll get going!” Myce ran off toward the mechanical dragons.

Rafinha couldn’t stand the idea of such a kind, carefree child getting caught up in this—she couldn’t let him die here. “Wilma, the hole above! I think Chris sealed it off, so what do we do?!” She saw the gigantic block of ice that had formed a covering over the hole. “We can break it open again if you need us to!”

“No, we need it for defense! It’s protecting us from enemy attacks!”

“But then how do we get out of here? The only way out is up, right?”

“I have an idea!” Wilma’s armor emitted a thin beam of light that struck the wall on the other side of the hole. It opened wide, revealing a passage that stretched on and on.



It would be a little cramped for the dragons, but not unreasonably so if they formed a line.

“A new path!” Rafinha marveled.

“So it connected to here too!” Leone said.

“We may just be able to make it to the outside through here!” Liselotte said.

“I’ll get everyone aboard the mechanical dragons! Sorry, but could I ask you to go ahead and see whether the evacuation route is clear?”

With Illuminas collapsing, it was quite likely that either a cave-in had sealed the passage off or that it was dangerously flooded. They needed to verify that it was safe before any civilians went through.

“Got it, Wilma!” Rafinha said.

“Hold on tight, you two!” Liselotte said.

“Thanks, Liselotte!” Leone responded.

Using the wings from Liselotte’s Gift, the three of them crossed over the hole and entered the passage on the other side. Cracks stretched along the walls here and there, but there didn’t seem to be danger of imminent collapse. From the cold droplets splattering on their cheeks, they could tell water was dripping from the ceiling.

“I think it still should be okay—probably?!” Rafinha said, not sounding completely confident.

“We should still be careful, but hopefully, yes!” Leone said.

“Ah! I see it! There’s the exit!” Liselotte said.

The glimmering stars of the night sky came into view at the passage’s end—well, “end” so to speak. It resembled less an engineered exit and more like the evacuation route had collapsed. They could see water splashing up as if waves were lapping at the passage’s mouth. Whatever lay beyond had been caught in the collapse and sunk into the ocean. But with what remained of the land now, the passage was simply shorter. However, if it sank even a little bit farther, seawater would suddenly pour in. They needed to escape now, while they still could.

“It looks like it’s still okay!” Rafinha said.

“But the water is so close!” Leone warned.

“Let’s head back, we can still evacuate through here if we do it quickly!”

Liselotte executed a turn and began to head back along the path they’d followed, when—

*Smasssshhh!*

A nearby wall exploded with a roaring sound, and Rafinha grunted in response.

Leone gasped. “What?!”

“Has it begun collapsing?!” Liselotte’s voice went tight with worry.

That wasn’t the case, though. A gap in the wall had opened—and beyond it was a person, who made their entrance through it.

“Oh my, so there you were.” A self-satisfied chuckle announced the entrance of a beautiful hial menace clad in golden armor.

Inglis may have pinned down Charlotte and Maxwell, but Tiffanyer had made her way here.

“You’re—” Rafinha began.

“Ah, our selfish guest’s selfish girl. You’re trying to help the civilians escape, aren’t you?” Tiffanyer looked along the passage, directly toward where Wilma was.

Rafinha couldn’t let her continue on. If she captured Wilma, they wouldn’t be able to evacuate Myce and the other people of Illuminas. And if Tiffanyer took Myce and the others hostage, Wilma would be unable to continue her resistance. Either way, she had to be stopped here. “Leone!”

“Rafinha...! Got it!” The two girls’ eyes met. They both let go of Liselotte’s hands and landed in front of Tiffanyer.

“Rafinha! Leone!” Liselotte cried out to her friends.

“Go, Liselotte! Warn Wilma!” Rafinha said.

“We’ll hold her off here!” Leone added.

“Understood! I’ll be right back!” Liselotte turned and headed back toward Wilma.

“We won’t let you stop us!” Rafinha yelled. “You can’t have Wilma!”

“Rafinha and I won’t allow it!” The two raised their Artifacts and faced Tiffanyer.

“You don’t understand your position, do you? You’re nothing more than a sideshow to that kid.” Tiffanyer sneered at them condescendingly. “Even if rabble like you can stop me...” She trailed off, her face suddenly tensing up as she saw Leone’s right hand. “A special-class Rune? Oh my.”

“That’s right!” Rafinha shot back. “Look down on us, and you’ll be sorry!”

“R-Rafinha... Um...” Leone tried to quell Rafinha’s provocation. She had heard that the combat power of a holy knight with a special-class Rune and a hial menace in human form were around equal, but she wasn’t particularly confident yet that she could go toe to toe with Tiffanyer.

She certainly didn’t think she had caught up with Leon or Rafael yet. Even if she also had a special-class Rune, there were differences in their abilities. She didn’t believe she was automatically their equal by having a special-class Rune.

“It’s fine. Even if all we do is argue, we’re buying time. You try saying something too,” Rafinha whispered to her, surprisingly calm. This was all calculated.

“I see. That makes sense.”

Rafinha smiled mischievously. “But I bet you can take her. I’m a little jealous of that special-class Rune.”

“Ah...!”

She was right, though. Even though the end result of a holy knight—which one could become only with the required special-class Rune—wielding a hial menace was not all fun and games, it was something to which all knights aspired.

Leone was no exception to that aspiration. Inglis lacked that particular desire, just as she lacked a Rune, but Rafinha and Liselotte still admired the work of a holy knight. Now that Leone had been granted the honor of a special-class Rune, and at least until Rafinha and Liselotte earned the same, she couldn't let them down. She mustn't forget her willingness to serve as someone worthy of such a Rune. This was no time to let her lack of confidence cow her.

"Yes, understood, Rafinha!" Leone stepped forth. "We may not be on a level with Inglis, but we've grown as well! Tiffanyer, we won't let you do as you please!"

"That's right!" Rafinha agreed. "But she's such a meanie, I bet she hasn't grown at all!"

Tiffanyer giggled. "So that means your position's changed as well, no?"

"Huh?" Rafinha tilted her head.

Tiffanyer pointed at Leone. "She's the sideshow"—she then pointed at Rafinha—"and you're all the way down to being the sideshow's warm-up act. You poor thing."

"That's not true! Just try me!"

"I always planned on challenging you. I don't have much time to play around, after all!" Tiffanyer leaped toward the two, in a straight line. Whether that was from impatience or condescension, Rafinha didn't know.

"Rafinha! On your mark!"

"I'm on it! Shiny Flow!"

Phantasms shot forth from the blade of Leone's dark greatsword. Meanwhile, countless arrows of light shot forth from Rafinha's Shiny Flow. The barrage met the oncoming Tiffanyer head-on, but she did not waver an inch. She simply crossed her arms in front of her face defensively without slowing at all. Even when the phantasms and arrows of lights scored direct hits, they bounced off her golden armor.

"You're wasting your time with those!" Crashing through the oncoming fire, Tiffanyer closed in to attack.

Rafinha gasped. “Ah! Nothing happened?!”

“You need to hit me harder!” After all, Tiffanyer was an armor hial menace; her stout defenses were her strongest weapon.

“Rafinha! Stay back, focus your strength, and shoot her! I’ll hold her back!”

“Okay! Got it!” Rafinha agreed.

Leone took the front line, while Rafinha stayed behind her to prepare her own attack.

“Yaaaah!” Leone swung her dark greatsword at Tiffanyer, who was almost upon her. She didn’t extend the blade. Her Gift let her attack at a distance, but it left her wide-open if it was dodged. What was important now was to not be broken past.

“That’s a big swing!” Tiffanyer lowered her body and twisted to avoid the top-down slash.

*Thunk!*

The greatsword slammed down into the ground, its tip digging into the floor and leaving a crack.

“You’re wide-open!” Flowing forward, Tiffanyer got up close with Leone and aimed a punch at her side.

“Leone!” Rafinha gasped.

*So this is the power of a hial menace, Leone thought. She’s so fast! But I can still see her. It’s like when I practiced with Arles. I can still tell what she’s trying to do to me. I can see it. So...*

Just before Tiffanyer’s punch connected, the supposedly defenseless Leone was flung backward.

To Tiffanyer, it seemed impossible, but it was as if the floor itself had shifted. “Huh?!” But even without a target, she still had to follow through.

“That was so *sweet*!” Rafinha exclaimed. From her more distant perspective,



she could see that just before Tiffanyer's blow had struck, Leone had extended her greatsword, pushing herself backward.

This was why Leone hadn't first used her Gift. She'd deliberately missed, pretending to leave an opening to bait Tiffanyer into attacking, and then evaded it with her Gift. And that had, in turn, left Tiffanyer vulnerable to a counterattack.

*All right! I can do this!* Leone told herself.

The practice she'd done every night since arriving on Illuminas had paid off. It may have just been the use of her Gift, but she never would have been able to accomplish it before getting a special-class Rune.

Previously, her Gift had only been capable of enlarging or shrinking the blade, not changing its shape outright. Now, the tip of the sword had curved itself into something like a spade, digging into the surface and securely supporting her weight. She could only do this to a small extent, but that she could do it at all was impressive. The Gift itself was probably capable of it the whole time, just not combined with an upper-class Rune. With a special-class Rune, though, she could use it to full effect. After all, special-class Runes were versatile. They could handle any Artifact.

Apart from that, there was the matter of the speed and precision with which she could extend the blade. Up until now, if she had been forced to extend her blade to counter Tiffanyer's speed, it would have extended much longer. Fundamentally, the changes she had produced were faster the farther she extended, slower the shorter. However, with her new Rune, any change seemed to take about the same amount of time. If she had been the same as before, even if she could have avoided Tiffanyer, she would have ended up too far away for a counterattack. But now, as Tiffanyer whiffed her punch, she passed straight in front of Leone. Nearly touching her. This was proof that she could now manipulate the blade as short—and as quickly—as she wanted.

"Ugh...!" As Tiffanyer stumbled forward, trying to bring herself to a stop and reorient herself, Leone found a chance.

"There!" The tip of Leone's greatsword thrust forth with all the might she could muster, catching Tiffanyer squarely. She felt the hardness of the hial

menace's armor as she struck the side. And in that moment, Leone extended the blade as hard and fast as she could. "I've got you!"

"Aaaaaah!" Tiffanyer, carried by the tip of the sword, was thrown backward rapidly. The force of the blow was not enough to pierce her armor, but it was enough to buy a good amount of distance.

*That's fine. We don't have to defeat Tiffanyer; we just have to defend our position.* "I can do it... I can do it! Just keep pushing her back!" Leone raced forward on her own two feet. Her Gift could extend the blade, but not infinitely. Using her own legs would help keep Tiffanyer as far away as possible. "Let's keep this up!"



Suddenly, her advance stalled. Leone came to a stop as something powerful held her back. Tiffanyer had regained her footing and wrapped herself around the blade, halting it. What Leone felt coming back through her sword's long blade was completely extraordinary. "Ngh! Y-You're so powerful!"

*Even though she looks prim and delicate, like she wouldn't hurt a fly—*

"Could you *kindly* not get ahead of yourself?!"

This time, it was Leone's turn to be lifted into the air. "Eeek!" She found herself thrown sideways, almost slammed into the wall of the evacuation route. If she let go, she might be freed, but she wasn't sure that her Artifact, once its Gift dissipated, wouldn't fall toward Tiffanyer's side. If Tiffanyer picked it up, she would be without a weapon, unable to stop Tiffanyer. For a moment, she hesitated, unsure what to do.

Meanwhile, Rafinha made her move. "Leave Leone alone!" A single thick arrow of light was ready on Shiny Flow, which she'd held drawn forcefully and charged for a long time. Rafinha normally fired entire barrages of arrows of light, but she could also focus them into one which grew more and more massive the longer it took. Let loose, the extremely dense arrow of light struck Tiffanyer's torso. It also lacked the power to punch through her armor, but it was able to knock her off her footing and send her flying backward.

"Ugh! You brat!" Tiffanyer jumped back up after being knocked back by the arrow of light, but she'd released her grip on the tip of Leone's sword.

Leone managed to come to a stop before slamming into the wall, staying safe. "Rafinha! Thank you!"

"It's all because you were able to hold her off for me! That was great!"

"I... I tried! I think we can do this! Let's keep holding her back!"

"Yeah!"

This time, it was them who closed in on Tiffanyer.

"I suppose that special-class Rune does mean something, after all. Not taking it seriously has cost me time and effort."

"I told you—look down on us, and you'd be sorry!" Rafinha replied.

“Don’t underestimate us!” Leone said.

Tiffanyer leaped up, high above them. Her jumping power was extraordinary, and she soon reached near the roof of the passage, shocking both of the girls.

“Wh—?!”

“Haah!” Spinning in midair, she kicked the roof and rocketed off in a different direction—to the right of Rafinha and Leone. Added to the force of her original jump, the force of the kick propelled her even faster. Then she kicked off the right wall to the left.

Then from the left to the ceiling, the floor, the right again, the left—

“Ah!”

“She’s so fast!”

Tiffanyer moved seemingly in all directions at once, harder and harder for the eye to follow. This might have been advantageous terrain for her. In the passage, the ceilings and walls allowed her perfect footholds, letting her make complex movements in three dimensions.

“I can’t keep up with her!” Rafinha cried, her head spinning.

“W-We must manage somehow!” Leone could only see a twisted image of Tiffanyer moving at high speed, but maybe she could catch her when she landed. If Tiffanyer accelerated any further, she would certainly win. She needed to be stopped, or at least slowed, right now.

“Yaaaah!” Leone’s greatsword was aimed straight for Tiffanyer’s shoulder at the moment she landed.

But again, the hial menace seemed to twist and dissolve away. The blade passed her by and struck the ground.

“She disappeared?!” Leone gasped. That meant she hadn’t been able to catch her after all. Tiffanyer’s movements were so fast that Leone could only see afterimages. And when Leone missed, she’d be risking opening herself up to a counterattack. Leone reflexively extended her sword that had hit the ground, trying to carry herself backward and evade.

A voice came whispering in her ear. “And is that the one trick they’ve been



able to teach you? It's so simple." Tiffanyer had gotten around Leone without her knowing.

*I've been read like a book!* "Gah?!" Leone cried as the world spun around her. Tiffanyer, who had caught her by the arm, had lifted her up and slammed her to the floor. She felt the impact hard on her back. Her breath hitched; her ribs hurt. "*Koff... Agh...*" As she looked up, she saw Tiffanyer's bewitching smile.

The hial menace giggled as she raised a foot, such that Leone could see the soles of her golden armored boots. In a flash, she brought it stomping down onto Leone's right wrist as she lay sprawled on the floor.

Leone felt her bones creak—no, they definitely broke. A burning pain shot through her body. "Aaaaahhh!" She couldn't help but shriek.

"Wonderful. What an adorable voice." Tiffanyer smirked. "A bit early for you to get that special-class Rune, hmm?"

"Ugh..." As much as Leone hated to admit it, she agreed. She'd thought she'd managed to put up a little bit of a fight, but when the battle became serious, she hadn't been able to keep up with Tiffanyer at all. She was sure Leon or Rafael wouldn't have embarrassed themselves like this.

"Leone!"

Before Rafinha could come to help, Tiffanyer leaped again and began moving at high speed.

"Ah?! Again?!"

Her flying kick struck the side of Rafinha, who couldn't follow her movement.

"Eeeeeek!" Rafinha crashed into a wall. "Argh... I won't give up..." She tried to get back up, but maybe because of the shock, her feet were too unsteady.

"I wonder—maybe I should let one of you go. It's so pleasant watching a friendship be destroyed."

"Don't give me that! Who would—?!" Rafinha again nocked an arrow of light.

"Then I suppose I'll crush the one I like the least." With her fist clenched, Tiffanyer turned to Rafinha and giggled. "I wonder what face that girl would make if you were to die. Isn't that a fascinating thing to think about?"

“That’s so scary, I don’t even want to think about it. There’s no telling what Chris would do then.”

“Rafinha!”

Immediately, Rafinha disappeared from Tiffanyer’s sight. Leone had picked her up from the side and extended the blade of her greatsword to carry her first to Rafinha and then to safety. Somehow, her broken right hand was still able to direct her weapon.

“Leone!” Rafinha gasped.

“We need to keep our distance for now!”

“Okay! Then, I’ll heal you right away!” Rafinha brushed her fingers over Leone’s right hand, and activated her healing Gift.

“Thanks! It’s feeling better already!”

“But if she’s that fast, we can’t even hit her! If I shot a volley of arrows, it would hit, but they wouldn’t do anything!”

“Yeah, but there’s something I want to try!”

“Is there some trick you know?”

“I don’t know. But from talking with Inglis...there’s something she said that I just remembered. That dragon lore and mana become stronger when mixed together!”

“Yeah, that’s the dragon magic stuff she’s been into lately, right? The dragon lore is the dragons’ power, and the mana is the power of our Artifacts!”

“Yes, I’d tried doing something like that before we came here and nothing happened, but now...!” Leone didn’t really have much to base it on, but it’s not like she had many other options. It was her only choice. “I’ll stop her!” Leone stopped trying to keep her distance with rapid-fire extensions of her greatsword to intercept Tiffanyer, who was already on the move again, coming for them.

“Rafinha! Even if it’s just a distraction, give it everything you’ve got!”

“Got it!” The arrow Rafinha fired split into countless trails of light and shot toward Tiffanyer. By sheer force of numbers, even without aiming precisely

some would inevitably strike home. However, they merely struck her armor, not doing anything to Tiffanyer herself. At best, they slowed her down a little.

“And I’ve got something for you too!” Phantasms shot forth from the blade of Leone’s dark greatsword—as many, and as forcefully, as she could manage. The path they took had to be as tightly bunched as possible.

Within her greatsword rested dragon lore, which produced the phantasms. Inglis had said that dragonslayers had gained dragon powers before, but in Leone’s case, this power came from butchering the gigantic tails the sword had severed. It wasn’t necessarily the most impressive way to obtain a dragon’s power, but in any case, it was inside Leone’s weapon rather than within herself that the power had come to lay, and thus she could not control it freely. All she could do was control the number of phantasms and their trajectory a little bit. To move them, she needed to move herself in concert with her plan.

“Blend into one!” Just after releasing the phantasms, she rushed forward as if chasing after the dragon lore, extending her greatsword forward as well. The blade shot forth, catching up with the phantasms before they struck Tiffanyer. When she’d tried earlier, the blade had merely struck the phantasms and scattered them, but now they took on the color of its steel, and they fused into one.

“The sword and the phantasms are fusing together?!” Rafinha exclaimed in disbelief.

The phantasms took on a draconic form in black iron. No longer just phantasms, these were darksteel dragons—a fusion of dragon lore and mana.

Before, Leone had been unable to accomplish this, but now that she had a special-class Rune, the mana infusing her greatsword’s blade had become stronger. It had reached the level where it could fuse with the phantasms and transform. The power of her previous Rune had simply not been enough to keep up with that of dragon lore. “All right! Keep going!”

*“Gwoooooohhhhn!”*

The darksteel dragons each let forth a tremendous shrieking roar as they

rocketed toward Tiffanyer.

“Wh—?!” Tiffanyer’s movements suddenly changed. She began to twist and try to evade the oncoming darksteel dragons. The hial menace had paid no heed to Rafinha’s arrows of light or Leone’s phantasms, but these darksteel dragons were obviously a different story. Even with her stout armor, they were not a thing she could take carelessly. It was obvious that their might was far beyond that of the phantasms. *So if I can hit her, we have a chance!* Leone thought.

Despite Leone’s onslaught, Tiffanyer’s movements were still swift. When she dodged, the dragons were unable to catch her and passed harmlessly by.

“Ugh...! Stop playing games and get hit!” Rafinha groaned.

“That’s one thing I won’t do!” Tiffanyer continued to evade the black iron fangs with nimble movements.

“I still have more for you!” Leone wasn’t beaten yet.

Even if Tiffanyer dodged some darksteel dragons, they would change their directions, cut back, and attack her again. Their movements followed Leone’s will. She was able to control them far, far better than the phantasms. It was a test of whose endurance would give out first—whether a darksteel dragon would catch Tiffanyer, or whether Leone would become exhausted and the darksteel dragons would stop.

*This is our only chance!*

“I see, so that’s how they work.” Tiffanyer dodged the dragons over and over but didn’t seem troubled. In fact, she turned to Leone and smiled. “Ready for what happens next?”

If they could see each other, that meant there was nothing between them. As the cycle of dodging and attacking continued, the straight line between Leone and Tiffanyer had emptied completely. Maybe she had calculated her evasion to create that positioning.

“Now!”

Leaping forth, the hial menace made straight for Leone. She wanted to

attack the darksteel dragons' controller directly.

"Leone!" Rafinha fired arrows of light, trying to stop Tiffanyer. But without time to focus and build their strength, it came out as a barrage of the Artifact's standard arrows.

"You're wasting your time!" The arrows of light did nothing to Tiffanyer's armor. She ignored them, racing straight forward.

"You don't know that for sure!" Rafinha yelled. As she did, the arrows changed their target all at once. Just before hitting Tiffanyer, they snapped downward and crashed into the ground.

What had seemed meaningless at first clearly affected Tiffanyer.

"Ah?!" Losing her balance, the hial menace tripped and fell. This normally never would have happened, but Rafinha carving a hole in the floor in front of the hial menace with her arrows had swept her off her feet.

"All right!" That was the point of firing such a weak barrage, without letting it build in power. Rafinha had wanted Tiffanyer to think the attack was insignificant and keep charging ahead. Even if her attacks couldn't hurt the hial menace, if they slowed her down even for a moment, it was worth it.

"You're so tiresome! But it's still just a last resort—a weak, scrappy attack!"

"That's what you get for calling someone a sideshow's sideshow!" Rafinha stuck out her tongue as forcefully as she could.

The darksteel dragons caught up with Tiffanyer thanks to Rafinha wasting Tiffanyer's time. That Tiffanyer had stumbled was a fatal error, and she was livid at it happening. She didn't have much time to allow herself to be angry, though. The first darksteel dragon bit into the golden armor on Tiffanyer's shoulder, clear from the squeals of strained metal. A single strike couldn't destroy the armor, but it was enough to drive her to her knees. "Aghhh!"

*"Gwoooohhhhhhhh!"*

The roar of a swarm of darksteel dragons drowned out Tiffanyer's shriek.



Tiffanyer disappeared beneath them. The shock waves from their strikes ate away at the ground, digging a hole deeper and deeper.

“It’s working! You’re awesome, Leone!” Rafinha cheered.

“Y-Yes! They’ve gotten so much stronger...” Leone couldn’t believe it. Her previous phantasms and slashes with her greatsword didn’t even compare. These were on a whole different level—one fitting of a special-class Rune.

She found herself overjoyed, though. She had grown. She was glad she had received the special-class Rune. It made her more able to protect her dear friend Rafinha right here—and Liselotte, Wilma, Myce, the Highlander civilians, everyone.

The darksteel dragons broke off their encirclement of the hial menace and returned to her greatsword Artifact. Left behind was Tiffanyer after taking the full brunt of their attack, crumpled on the floor and motionless.

Leone counted her own breaths—one, two—but even watching closely, there was no sign that the hial menace would get to her feet.

Leone and Rafinha nodded to each other and walked toward their fallen opponent.

As they did, more became obvious. Tiffanyer’s armor was damaged in places, but not completely destroyed. But below it, they could see her arms, her legs, and her face were a bloody mess. She was gravely injured, and she was completely still.

“Did... Did that finish her off?” Rafinha anxiously moved closer to Tiffanyer to check whether she was breathing.

Tiffanyer was a vanquished foe, and definitely wasn’t a good person—quite the opposite given her depredations in Leclair, the city in Karelia’s northern neighbor Alcard. Still, Rafinha didn’t want her to die.

Even when Rafinha crouched close to her, she did not respond. Rafinha put her ear to Tiffanyer’s shapely armor-bound chest. A hial menace was stronger—specifically more *durable*—than any normal human. Rafinha didn’t know if checking a hial menace’s heart rate made sense, and in any case the armor prevented her from hearing a heartbeat, but it didn’t stop her.

“Hmm?”

“What’s wrong, Rafinha?” Leone approached Tiffanyer from her other side.

“I don’t know for sure. She’s definitely unconscious, though.”

“Wrong!” Tiffanyer’s eyes suddenly snapped open as she answered.

“Ack! You were playing dead?!” Rafinha squealed.

Tiffanyer’s hand wrapped around Leone’s ankle, and Leone let out a high-pitched shriek of surprise.

“Let’s see whether you really deserve a special-class Rune!”

“Leone!”

“Too slow!” A bright explosion overtook Tiffanyer’s words, enveloping both Rafinha and Leone.

“Eeeeeek!” Leone cried.

Rafinha had seen this before. “She’s transforming!”

When the blinding light dissipated, Leone, now clad in golden armor, stood before Rafinha. “Leone! Th-That’s a-amazing!” It was positively sublime. By transforming, the damage to the armor from before had completely disappeared. It shone brightly and beautifully. Rafinha almost found herself transfixed—but this was not a happy sight at all. She knew this well. “Leone, you can’t! Bring her back to normal! Hial menaces, they—!”

They stole away the life force of their wielders. She could barely say it out loud.

Rafinha grabbed Leone’s shoulder and shook her.

Leone’s face went pale as she shook her head. “No, wait! I didn’t do this intentionally! I-I can’t change her back!”

“What?!” Rafinha gasped. This was like the time Tiffanyer had fought Inglis in Alcard. This time she had forcefully equipped herself to Leone, regardless of the latter’s opinions on the matter. Her plan was to drain Leone’s life away as the cost of wielding a hial menace.

It was evil, and it was Tiffanyer’s last-ditch option.

“G-Got it! Calm down! I’ll get her off of you!” Rafinha gripped an edge of the golden armor and strained to pull it off her. “Hnnngghhhhh!” Even with all her strength, though, the armor’s plates did not move. She got the feeling so long as Tiffanyer refused, it wouldn’t budge.

As Rafinha struggled, a figure flitted over her head. “I’m back! What in the world is going on?!” It was Liselotte, with perfect timing.

“Liselotte! Sorry, help me out! Tiffanyer clamped onto Leone and won’t let go! If we don’t do something...! We need to get the armor off of her *now*!”

“What in the world?! U-Understood! Let’s hurry!”

The pair worked together, grabbing the straps of the armor and straining to make it shift at all. However, it still didn’t budge.

“It won’t come off!”

“If I put the handle in here and use it as a lever...!” Liselotte thrust the butt end of her halberd through a gap in the armor.

But her attempt went nowhere. Leone blocked it and then swung a fist at Liselotte.

“Augh! L-Leone?! What are you doing?!”

“No, it’s not me!”

“Tiffanyer’s doing this too!” Rafinha yelped. Tiffanyer had no concept of honor. Rafinha didn’t like her at all. In fact, she regretted having been worried for her.

“She was right—I shouldn’t have gotten this Rune this early! That’s why I can’t control a hial menace!” Leone’s face was filled with sorrow even as she brandished her greatsword and swung it toward Rafinha.

“Leone!” Even Rafinha had no choice but to keep her distance and dodge, even though it seemed like Leone was holding Tiffanyer back and blunting her attacks.

“R-Run away, both of you! Staying here is dangerous!”

“We can’t! We can’t just leave you!”

“Indeed!”

“Then attack me! Stop me! I don’t know what I’ll do if this keeps going!”

Rafinha and Liselotte looked at each other and nodded.

“G-Got it!”

“It may hurt a little, do try to bear with us!”

Rafinha drew back her Artifact, and Liselotte aimed her dragon’s-jaw halberd squarely at Leone. Their shouts of exertion overlapped and compelled them forward.

Arrows of light and a dragon lore blizzard blended together as they converged on the golden-clad Leone. There was no holding back; the two girls had attacked at full force. Yet, a single swipe of Leone’s arm, controlled by Tiffanyer, brushed aside both the arrows of light and the blizzard.

“Aaaah!” Caught up in it, both Rafinha and Liselotte were swept back and slammed into the wall.

“I-It’s not working at all!” Rafinha said.

“This is what it’s like when a hial menace transforms...” Liselotte said.

“Rafinha! Liselotte! Are you okay?” Leone looked at them worriedly.

Meanwhile, Tiffanyer laughed. *“You’re worthy of a special-class Rune, but you received it too soon... I’ll put your life and your body both to good use.”*

Rafinha and Liselotte could only assume Tiffanyer’s voice was somehow emanating from her armor. “We won’t—!” Rafinha began.

“—Allow you to do that!” Liselotte finished.

They stumbled to their feet, but Leone ignored them, rushing back up the passage to the shelter where Wilma was. Tiffanyer no longer saw them as a threat. Thanks to the hial menace equipped to her, Leone was far faster than her limits before, faster even than Tiffanyer’s high-speed maneuvering when they had just fought.

“Sh-She’s so quick! We can’t keep up with her!”

“Yes, we can! Hold on tight!” Liselotte held Rafinha tight as they gave chase.

She made sure to allow Rafinha access to her Artifact as she said, “Now, while you can! Build up an arrow!”

“Okay...!” But no matter how much power she built up, Rafinha didn’t think it would work on Leone as she was now. Even when Tiffanyer had been fighting alone, she had barely been able to make the hial menace stumble. Now that she had transformed for a wielder with a special-class Rune, whether or not the wielder wanted it...

Rafinha thought that she might not be able to stop Leone. The gap between upper-class and special-class Runes was too great. Maybe Liselotte could do it. With her aptitude for becoming a hial menace, she still had potential.

But where, Rafinha asked herself, was her own? After receiving Shiny Flow from Ambassador Theodore with a healing Gift attached, she felt like she’d made no notable progress at all. She was trying her hardest, but those efforts didn’t make up for what she lacked.

A moment of sudden realization struck, and she shook her head, brushing away her insecurities. Now was not the time for such thoughts. She had to do what she could. When Leone had unleashed the black iron dragons on Tiffanyer, she had been able to think on her feet and help out.

As she thought, Leone disappeared from her sight. The passage connected to the hole the faceless giant had torn open. Leone must have made it there. Only a little bit later, Rafinha, carried by Liselotte, flew into the hole as well.

“Wait! Stop!” Rafinha heard Wilma say.

“R-Run away! Please!” Leone called out in what was nearly a shriek.

Rafinha saw the dark greatsword Artifact swing down toward a mechanical dragon that had leaped from the shelters into the hole.

“Oh no!”

If the dragon were cut down, the evacuees it carried would plummet to the bottom of the hole. There was no way they’d all be okay from that. From the dragon’s arm, Myce looked toward her.

*No! Not like this!* If Leone were not stopped, not only would Myce and the

others lose their lives, but no matter if it was under Tiffanyer's control, and not by her own will, Leone would blame herself for it happening. Her heart wouldn't be able to take it. She was the young lady who, even though she had been attacked on vacation to Ahlemin by locals turned into undying, had been in tears over the idea that she had killed her guests. Even before entering the knights' academy, her older brother Leon had abandoned being a holy knight to join the Steelblood Front, and she had been harassed for her family's traitorous connections.

Leone's life had been harder than Rafinha could even begin to comprehend, yet still—no, maybe *because* of that—Leone was so kind. And Rafinha didn't want to let such a dear friend or such a kind soul suffer any more. Only she and her arrow could prevent it.

*No matter what, I absolutely need to stop her!*

"I'm here, Leone!" Rafinha's focus, sharpened to its limits, brought forth a strange feeling in her hands. Energy she didn't understand welled up from within her, like it was forcefully reassuring her, giving her a push forward. She'd never felt this pumped up before; even onlookers could tell from a glance how ready she felt.





*Fwoosh!*

The arrow Rafinha shot glowed a pale blue, just like Inglis's Aether Strike.

"Huh... What?!" Rafinha didn't know what had just happened, but the arrow bore down on Leone, faster than Rafinha could comprehend. And just before Leone's sword struck the mechanical dragon, Rafinha's arrow found its target.

"Eeeeeek?!"

*"Ahhhhhhh?!"*

An overpowering force crashed into Leone's golden-armored form, striking her down toward the depths.

"Th-That was incredible, Rafinha! It was completely different from before! I-I'm amazed!" Liselotte said.

"Huh?" Rafinha asked. "Well..." She was in total agreement that it was completely different—and also just as flabbergasted. She had no idea what she had just done, or if she had even been the one who'd done it.

Wilma's face lit up. "Well done! That was too close for comfort—for us, and for her!"

"Rafinha! Thank you!" That voice was unmistakably Myce's, as he called from the lifeboat that the dragon cradled.

It wasn't just him. Other Highlander evacuees were singing their praises for their savior. "Thank you!"

"You saved us! What an incredible young lady!"

"Oh, u-uh... Ah ha ha ha, you're welcome!" It had been a power even she didn't realize she had, so it was a bit embarrassing being thanked like that.

*And anyway—Leone! How is she doing? I hope it was only Tiffanyer who took the hit, but...*

"Liselotte, take us down! We've gotta check on Leone!"

"Yes, descending now!"

“Wilma, evacuate while you can!”

“Understood! Mechanical dragons, escape through the passage!”

But just as Wilma hopped onto a mechanical dragon and gave the order, above their heads, a red gleam swelled in the tremendous block of ice that Inglis had made into a lid.

“Wh—?!”

*Kaboom!*

By the time they heard the boom, shards of ice were already raining down the hole. Along with them came a hail of debris from the ground. It seemed a large explosion had occurred on the surface where Inglis was.

“Oh no! Mechanical dragons, fall back!” Wilma ordered. The mechanical dragons returned to the front of the shelter and managed to take cover from the hail of rubble.

“But what about Leone?!” Rafinha gasped.

Leone, who had fallen to the bottom of the hole, still wasn’t moving. At this rate, the falling debris might crush her. Liselotte descended at full speed straight to her. “I’ll fly you in close!”

“Right! I’ll get her!”

It was a swift moment—Rafinha extended her arms and grabbed hold of Leone, still in the golden armor, and Liselotte abruptly did an about-face to slip into a hollow adjoining the hole. A moment later, a gigantic boulder fell where Leone had been.

“Phew... We did it.” It had been just in the nick of time. If they hadn’t picked her up, the boulder probably would have crushed Leone.

“Yes, but this is...” Liselotte looked around. It was a calm, tranquil grotto, with outcroppings of the natural bedrock. And close to Rafinha and Liselotte loomed a gigantic stone box.

“The Greyfriar sarcophagus?!”

“Yes, Wilma did say it was just below.”

“Eris and that princess from Venefic are inside...”

Rafinha would’ve loved to have Eris around right now—if they could get Eris out. And they needed to secure Princess Meltina’s safety as soon as possible.

*Rrrrrrrumble!*

More loud noises from above. On the other side of the hole, the evacuation passage collapsed, digging the hole even wider. And along with countless chunks of rubble, a gigantic figure descended.

“Ha ha HA HA HA ha ha ha! Did you see that, you rotten little brat?!”

That was Maxwell’s laughter. Rafinha could see a faceless giant getting closer. And it was wielding a golden halberd scaled up to an appropriate size. Was that Charlotte? She noticed Maxwell embedded in its chest.

“Wh-What the heck is that?” Rafinha sputtered.

“I don’t know! But it’s ominous!”

Liselotte was right. She and Rafinha didn’t know what had happened, but it was definitely a breathtaking—if terrifying—sight in a lot of ways.

A much more relieving sight appeared in front of their eyes: a small girl landed with all the controlled grace of a dancer before the ominous giant.

“Chris!” Just seeing her was an incredible relief for Rafinha. Her own face lit up as she called her name.

“Rani! Sorry, are you okay?!” Inglis dashed to Rafinha’s side in worry.

From what Inglis had seen, the giant’s golden halberd had created a massive explosion, destroying the chunk of ice which had blocked access to below. Not only that, the surface around the hole had been blown away, widening it even more. The force of the explosion had been able to pierce both her Aether Shell and dragon ice armor-enhanced defenses and strong enough to punch through her physical armor. Her arms were covered with scrapes.

But even more importantly than that, just before the giant had created the explosion, she had sensed a burst of aether from below. She'd initially worried that the black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front had joined in, so she was relieved to find only Rafinha, Liselotte, and Leone when she descended.

"What just happened? Is the black-masked man here?"

"Huh?" Rafinha said. "I don't think so. Tiffanyer had possessed Leone, so I shot an arrow of light from Shiny Flow trying to stop her...and something about it felt different."

"It was bluish and glowed brightly, like the light you shoot, Inglis," Liselotte added.

"Oh! So that was you, Rani?"

"Well, it was...me, but *not* me? It was so powerful."

Inglis fell silent for a moment. *What happened? How did Rafinha use aether?*

Perhaps it had something to do with Rafinha more quickly recovering from the Artifact accident which had turned them into little children.

Normally, one would think that if Inglis and Rafinha were exposed to the same effect at the same time, there would be no way that a divine knight—a practical demigod swathed in aether—would be the one more strongly affected. Even if Inglis had been unlucky, it wasn't plausible.

But what if Rafinha had some degree of latent aether and had acquired magical resistances that were approaching, and not matching, Inglis's? Then it could just be a question of who had borne the brunt, and it was possible that Rafinha could recover first.

*But how could Rafinha have become like that?* Inglis asked herself, only to come to a single possible answer.

It was thanks to herself. That was her own influence.

Just as Inglis had acquired dragon lore from the ancient dragon Fufailbane by eating large quantities of his meat, Rafinha, who had grown up with Inglis, had been exposed to Inglis's aether all her life. It could have permeated her and come to rest inside her. Inglis wasn't sure that aether could undergo the same

process as dragon lore, but looking back on her past life, there was no other person with whom she had spent as much time as Rafinha. She'd had comrades in arms who shared sorrow and joy, vassals who served from the founding of the Silvare Kingdom, and many more, but none had been constant companions, present even when she slept.

"I see... Rafinha, I think we've spent so long together that some of my power might have rubbed off."

The depth and intensity of their bond had given Rafinha some of Inglis's power. And that's why Inglis hadn't noticed what was changing in her. Even if her own aether was near her, it was her own aether—something which didn't merit a thought.

And the burst of aether Inglis had just felt was very familiar. The black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front was an expert at manipulating aether and could control aether which was much like her own, hence her suspicion of his presence.

"Some of your power rubbed off? Can that even happen?"

"It looks like it. I didn't know it was possible, but...I guess it's like with Fufailbane? With how we got dragon lore."

"Like with Mr. Dragon? But I haven't eaten any of *you*."

Inglis laughed. "If you want to, you're more than welcome." Inglis's knowledge, her experience, her time, her aether... If those would be absorbed, she welcomed being consumed. If it would be helpful, she was more than fine with it—she would be pleased. She'd do anything for this girl. Such was her parental—well, grandparental—love.

*Rrruuuumble!*

Suddenly, she heard the sound of rushing water from far away. It approached rapidly, and flowed into the bottom of the hole, rapidly building up around their feet.

"Oh no! That must have tilted the island and plunged the end of the passage



into the sea!” Rafinha said.

“Hurry and get Leone!” Inglis said.

Liselotte soared to Leone and picked her up. She was still wearing the armor that was Tiffanyer’s transformation, but she didn’t seem to be resisting.

“Chris!” Rafinha said. “If this keeps up, the Greyfrier sarcophagus will sink! And Eris and Meltina are still in there!”

“Okay, I need to lift it up!” If she could do that, it would be relatively safe above.

“Well, isn’t that interesting! How about this, then!” Maxwell yelled from the faceless giant. “Try and dodge this!” It thrust its halberd toward the Greyfrier sarcophagus, knowing that Inglis would be forced to place herself in the way.

Inglis was fully aware of his plan, but she had no choice but to intervene. “Haaaa!” She got ahead of the halberd’s gigantic point, and reached out a hand, stopping it. “I’d rather meet you head-on!”

“Grrr! You’re so damn strong!”

“Chris!”

“I’ll be fine! Rani, go with Liselotte!”

“O-Okay!” Rafinha ran after Liselotte.

Then, suddenly, the rock below Inglis’s feet crumbled as something pushed Rafinha away.

“Ngh!” Unable to keep her footing, Inglis leaned heavily to the side.

Now back in the form of a young woman, Tiffanyer had been the one to push Rafinha. She had caught Inglis by surprise, leaving no openings.

“You’re the most inconvenient one here, so don’t blame me for this!” Tiffanyer slammed her foot into Inglis.

With both Aether Shell and the dragon ice armor active, it wasn’t a significant blow. Tiffanyer must have known that. But as Inglis was already unsteady on her feet, the strike sent her flying.

Inglis’s breath caught in her chest as she saw the outline of the Greyfrier

sarcophagus rushing closer—or rather, she was flying toward it.

*It's a bit rude to such a divine relic, but I can find my footing on it and regroup!* Thinking so, Inglis twisted in midair, aiming her tiny feet toward the wall of the sarcophagus—

“Academician Wilkin!”

“Now!” Charlotte had transformed back from her halberd form, and joined in the call.

“Do it!” Maxwell’s gaze turned to Chief Academician Wilkin, who had suddenly appeared on the faceless giant’s shoulder.

“Sure, sure! All right, open sesame! ♪”

With the snap of Wilkin’s fingers, the stone wall Inglis had planned to land on disappeared, and a gap to the interior opened.

“Ah?!” Inglis couldn’t stop her momentum. Her tiny form went flying into the Greyfrier sarcophagus. And before she could fly out again, the entrance to the sarcophagus silently closed. Inglis was trapped inside.

“Chris?! Chris!” Rafinha yelled.

“It can clearly be opened—there must be a way to do so from the inside!” Liselotte said, panicked.

Chief Academician Wilkin had indicated as much, and Inglis might come jumping out regardless, or so they hoped... But still, they could not remain silent.

“Open it! Let Chris out, Academician Wilkin!” Rafinha yelled, only to be answered with a kick from Tiffanyer.

“Aaaah!”

“Do be quiet. We don’t have time to play with you.”

“U-Ugh! Get out of my way! I’m not talking to you! Chris is—!”

To make matters worse, the cracks in the rock that had opened below Inglis’s feet began to spread throughout the grotto where the Greyfrier sarcophagus was enshrined. Seawater began flooding in from the walls. In only a moment, it

was past Rafinha's knees.

"Ha ha ha ha ha! All right, finish her off!" Maxwell commanded.

*Blammmmmm!*

The faceless giant smashed the rock at the foot of the Greyfrier sarcophagus. This was the decisive blow, and the bedrock collapsed completely. The Greyfrier sarcophagus tilted and sank into the sea.

"Begone into the depths!" Maxwell laughed in self-satisfaction.

"No way! No, no, no! This can't be happening! Hold on, Chris! I'll help you!" Rafinha prepared to dive into the sea, following Inglis.

"No! Rafinha!" Liselotte stopped her, plucking her from her dive and pulling up with the power of her Gift's pale wings.

"L-Liselotte?! Why did you stop me?! Chris is—! We need to hurry or Chris will sink!"

"C-Calm down! If you just jump in without preparing, you'll endanger yourself as well!"

It hurt Liselotte to hold back Rafinha, who was in tears. She felt like she was doing something very wrong, but if she let Rafinha go, she didn't know what would happen to her—no, she had all too good of an idea.

Inglis defied common sense. She might just turn up again with a smile on her face. But if Rafinha drowned chasing after her, there would be no joy in that reunion.

The Greyfrier sarcophagus sank headlong into the depths. As it disappeared, they could see it pass by complex glowing glyphs. Were those pieces of the Floating Circle that held up pieces of Highland? Those were holding their position, so it seemed this land could still stay afloat. But the Greyfrier sarcophagus quickly sank to a hopeless depth. The beautiful, clear water made it easy to see what was happening.

"Ah! Chris! Chriiiiiiiiiiiiis!" Tears streamed from Rafinha's eyes as Liselotte

hardened her heart and held her back. Meanwhile, Leone, held in her other arm, was still unconscious.

“Ga ha ha ha ha! This! Is! Patriotism! Those who fight for a cause win in the end! That’s how the world works!” Maxwell gloated.

“Good grief... I can’t agree with that. You’re being a bit too boisterous for anyone to take you seriously anyway,” Tiffanyer spat in disgust. “But dear cousin Eris was in there... And it’s better if she can finally rest. Besides, that child will make a good sacrifice to accompany her to the afterlife.” Tiffanyer looked off into the distance, her eyes just a little sad.

Charlotte remained silent.

“Ugh...!” With such powerful enemies, and the condition her side was in, what could be done? Liselotte felt herself fall into despair.

“I recommend you surrender. If Chief Academician Wilkin’s daughter comes with us, we promise to cease our attacks,” Charlotte said from the shoulder of the faceless giant.

“I will accept your offer—as long as those who wish to are allowed to accompany me,” replied Wilma, having stood by on the sidelines.

Liselotte lacked the power to object.

## Chapter III: Inglis, Age 16—Far-Off Highland (8)

“Oh no!”

Plunged into a dark void, Inglis leaped back up as soon as her feet touched the ground, trying to escape through the gap opened in the Greyfrier sarcophagus. Instead, she saw it silently close before her. She grunted, flying through space where the gap once had been. It was proof that she was completely cut off in a separate dimension.

“Well, this isn’t good.”

Opening the liminal sepulcher—the Greyfrier sarcophagus—required the intervention of a god or divine knight from the outside. It was a dimension cut off from outside time and space entirely, and no attempt to restore those connections from the inside could succeed. Only when its gates were opened from the outside was that possible. Therefore, no matter how much aether she used...

“Aether Strike!”

*Blammmmm!*

The blast of aether roared as it disappeared into the distance. It didn’t seem that destroying anything would help the situation.

“Hmm.” If she didn’t return soon, Rafinha would be worried. And as Rafinha’s guardian, the last thing she wanted to do was worry the poor girl. Beyond that, she was worried about what might happen to her, given that Tiffanyer, Maxwell, and Charlotte were still out there. Fortunately, the flow of time inside the Greyfrier sarcophagus was completely different, so even if it took Inglis some time to escape, it would only be a little while outside.

Disrupting Inglis’s contemplation was a person passing by. She was an elegant, beautiful girl whose pale hair had a slight aqua tinge. She seemed to be looking around nervously.

“Princess Meltina, from Venefic?!” Inglis called out, only for her hand to pass

straight through the princess. She didn't exist. She was only an illusion.

"Is this the sepulcher's own memory?"

She had seen similar things in her past life while training within one. Of course, not Princess Meltina, but those who had entered it to train before her. The visions were a welcome distraction during her monotonous days of training. Put simply, they were scenes from the past that were recorded within the space.

And then, near Princess Meltina, another person appeared. "Eris..."

Chronologically, Eris had entered just before Meltina. She betrayed no sign of anxiety, looking forward and striding steadily, with dignified beauty. This was in contrast to Meltina; it had not been Eris's first time here, and her determination was clear.

Inglis decided to follow the path that the visions of them awoken from the space's memory laid out. For some time, she passed through empty darkness. Then she came upon the faint glow of pillars—no, some kind of cylindrical device.

There were two, arrayed side by side. Their central parts were made of some sort of transparent, glasslike material, and inside she could see human women. "A hial menace? But—!"

The device itself was no surprise, nor that people were inside. She knew hial menaces were created within the Greyfrier sarcophagus. Her surprise came from who these people were.

To one side, there was a determined-looking woman with long scarlet hair.

"Sistia..."

The Steelbloods' hial menace—but that wasn't particularly surprising. Sistia was a hial menace after all. She must have been made somewhere. It must have happened here in Illuminas's Greyfrier sarcophagus. It was no shock for the space to recall her.

Inglis's shock was from the person in the other device. Inglis never expected to see her...



“Yua?!”

It was definitely Yua. But what was she doing here? Was Yua a hial menace? She had said and done nothing that would make Inglis suspect it. After all the time Inglis had spent around her, she had never sensed anything that would indicate Yua was a hial menace.

*At least, nothing other than her power,* Inglis corrected herself.

If Yua had become a hial menace, why would she be Inglis’s senior classmate at the knights’ academy? Sistia raised similar questions. Why would a hial menace created in Illuminas now be with the Steelblood Front, an anti-Highland organization? Could it have something to do with her devotion to the black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front?

Inglis pondered all of this until the ceiling above her suddenly collapsed, and rubble came raining down.

“Wh—!” Was this a connection to the outside? She didn’t know what had happened, but it seemed like a good chance to escape. “No, this is an illusion too!”

As she brought up a hand to shield herself, it slid straight through the rubble. This, too, was a memory from within this space’s past. At some point—Inglis couldn’t know for sure—before Eris and Princess Meltina had entered the Greyfrier sarcophagus, Yua and Sistia must have been inside. And at that time, it must have been broken into from the outside.

She could see someone rise from the rubble. Likely whoever had broken in. She could only see their back, but it seemed to be a young man. Either a god or a divine knight, if he was capable of this. She couldn’t be sure, due to not being able to see his face, but she had a strong suspicion that he was the Steelblood Front’s black-masked leader. Perhaps this was how he and Sistia had met.

That didn’t answer how Yua had ended up at the knights’ academy, though.

But then, as if to answer Inglis, the vision continued. The man who she assumed was the black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front had broken into the Greyfrier sarcophagus from the top—so forcefully that he smashed the floor as well. The Greyfrier sarcophagus could not be destroyed from the inside, but

when a gap to the outside opened, it became physically connected and could be destroyed by the force of impact. A hole opened in the floor near the device containing Yua. The device began to tilt forward, just to...

“It fell?!” Inglis watched as Yua in the device dropped downward.

The young man also gasped, looking at the hole. Inglis was staring through it as well—down to the sky, and then land far, far below. The Greyfrier sarcophagus must have been in a quite different place then. And on that faraway land, she could see a faint rainbow-colored glimmer.

“Is that...a Prismer on the surface?”

This memory suggested Yua was caught up in the destruction of the Greyfrier sarcophagus and had fallen right before a Prismer. How had she gotten to the knights’ academy from there? She had seemed to have no memory of hial menaces, or of what had happened to her before the process to become one began. If that was just an act, she would make a great actress—but Inglis didn’t think that was the case.

“And then what of her memories?”

Charlotte hadn’t seemed to recognize Liselotte either. Did becoming a hial menace mean losing one’s memories? Inglis couldn’t tell if it was deliberate or accidental. In any case, if Yua—her memories gone—had fallen from Illuminas, and due to the shock, she awakened before she had fully become a hial menace and eventually wandered her way to the knights’ academy...

From Yua’s aura, and from her ability to absorb the Prismer’s powers, it seemed she might still be becoming one. Although, she had her suspicions over whether Yua herself would remember clearly. Inglis would have to talk with her about it after returning to Chiral.

“No, that should be *if* I return.”

At some point, the memories of the space disappeared—Eris and Princess Meltina, Yua and Sistia and the young man she thought was the black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front all faded into oblivion.

“Let’s get started, then!”

Efforts and experiments in order to return—alone in the darkness, Inglis stood ready.



“That was delicious!” Rafinha returned a piscine skeleton, carefully picked clean, to her plate.

“Is that all, Rafinha?” Leone asked.

“Only a single portion, again?” Liselotte chimed in.

Both looked at her in worry. That was an unnaturally small amount of food compared to her usual appetite.

It had been five days since the battle. Wilma had accepted Charlotte’s terms and departed Illuminas for the Papal League’s lands with Wilkin. In exchange, Wilma had demanded that the Highlanders who wished to accompany her could. Myce and the other refugees had made their decisions, and around seventy percent of the group went with her while everyone else stayed in the ruins of Illuminas—Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte among them.

Currently, only a small amount of land remained around the central laboratory, and most of the underground passages were flooded. More than half of the laboratory itself had been toppled, but somehow, the remnants held up through the wind and rain. The food supplies they all relied on now came from the fish in the surrounding seas. They endured while waiting for aid from the rest of the Triumvirate. If they could make contact with Theodore, a rescue effort by Karelia would also be welcome.

“I’m getting a bit tired of eating fish, so that’s enough for today. I think I’m going to go take a walk.” Rafinha set off from the central laboratory.

“Okay. We’ll see you later,” Leone said.

“Be careful!” Liselotte reminded her.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine,” Rafinha answered.

Her smile lacked any of her usual energy, both Leone and Liselotte noticed. It didn’t seem like she was just tired of the number of fish they’d been eating.

“It’s not just that she isn’t eating, she doesn’t seem to have been sleeping

well either,” Leone noted. This was unusual for Rafinha, who was noted for enjoying good meals and good rests.

“It makes sense, though,” Liselotte noted.

“Yes, it does...”

The two could understand how Rafinha felt—truly. They were suffering much the same. Their initial reactions of “Well, Inglis is always fine” had faded over the days, and their faith that she had survived was faltering. They would never shed tears over it in front of Rafinha because of it, of course, but when they had found themselves alone, their eyes had become teary more than once or twice.

Inglis was a bit of an odd one, just wanting to fight no matter the situation or the vibe, but her laser focus on getting stronger ended up making her words and deeds reliable. No matter how grim the situation, as long as she was there, one way or another she’d get the job done in the end. And even though she was so extraordinarily strong from Leone and Liselotte’s perspective, she wasn’t arrogant at all—her kindness extended not just to Rafinha, but also to Leone and Liselotte and the people around them as well.

Inglis often insisted that she was only interested in fighting, but sometimes the implications of what she said forced one to wonder where she had come up with such ideas. She almost struck them as someone far older, with the depth of personality that being an adult gave. How that could be possible, they didn’t understand, but regardless she was a reassuring presence in their lives.

And to lose that... If it was so difficult for them, they couldn’t even imagine how hard it was for Rafinha, who had been around Inglis all her life. If Rafinha wanted to be alone, they wouldn’t dare stop her. They could only watch over her. They were sure she wanted to cry when she was alone. She must have been reluctant to show that side of herself.

“We didn’t really manage to accomplish anything, did we?” Liselotte pondered. “We lost Inglis and Lady Eris, and Illuminas has been reduced to shambles...”

“Wilma did save us, though. We should be thankful to her for that,” Leone reminded her.

They were forced to admit defeat. If Wilma hadn't accepted surrender in exchange for the safety of others, who knew what would have happened to them and the surviving Highlanders?

It was worth noting that it was all due to Charlotte's kindness in extending negotiations for surrender. They could have just dragged Wilma away and wiped out the remaining Highlanders. If left to the discretion of Maxwell or Tiffanyer, that surely would have happened. Maxwell was a general from Venefic, currently at odds with Karelia, and Tiffanyer was a foe they had defeated in Alcard. Venefic would want to reduce Karelia's warfighting capabilities by even a little bit, and Tiffanyer nursed her own grudge. It was due to Charlotte holding the two back that they were still alive.

Chief Academician Wilkin had not stopped Charlotte either. It seemed Wilma had been his chief concern, and he had only been relieved that she had obeyed.

And before Charlotte had left Illuminas, she had asked Liselotte, "So, what will you do?"

Leone had still been unconscious at the time, and Rafinha beside herself, so Liselotte thought neither would remember—but it had felt like an invitation to join her, one Liselotte had rejected because she could not abandon her friends or her home in Karelia. Hence her refusal—but looking at Charlotte's reaction, she felt some sort of close connection. Her name, her appearance—her willingness to demand Wilma's surrender rather than simply killing them, and her appeal to return with her. Something almost like a mother's love—that was the impression Charlotte's behavior gave Liselotte; at least, that was the impression she had wanted to take from it.

When they returned, she would have to speak with her father, Duke Arcia. If Charlotte really was her mother, she wanted the two to meet. Perhaps someday they could be reunited as a happy family.

"Anyway, if we don't make it back... No one will be able to tell the story of what happened," Leone said.

Liselotte agreed. "Indeed... However, I do regret that we managed to accomplish so little."

Neither she nor Leone could even contact the rest of the Triumvirate or

Karelia. Over the past few days, Myce and the other remaining Highlanders had been attempting to restore the central laboratory's communication facilities. All the two could do was wait. The *Star Princess*, which had come with them from Karelia, was intact and operational, but they couldn't bring themselves to abandon Myce and the others to their fates. Illuminas was, in any case, an island cast adrift in a vast ocean. They couldn't believe that a Flygear could reach Karelia from here.

Thus, they took on the responsibility of protecting the remaining Highlanders from the Prism Flow and magicite beasts while scouring the nearby waters for fish for everyone to eat. While Myce and the other Highlander civilians could not wield Artifacts, they could use magic—but they were peaceful people, unused to combat. When confronted by magicite beasts, they seized up in fear. It fell to Leone, Liselotte, and Rafinha to guard them, a job for which they were much appreciated. The city had exclusively relied for its defense on the mechanical dragons, commanded by Wilma and the other knights. Wilma was gone along with Wilkin, and while the mechanical dragons had been left behind, the emergency overrides allowing those other than knights to control them had not been restored, and they were mere decorative sculptures for the central laboratory.

“Anyway, we need to eat enough to make up for Rafinha! We'll be busy fishing tomorrow, so we need to keep up our strength!” Leone announced as she hefted a freshly grilled fish skewer. That was the only thing left to be said.

“Indeed. We must do what we can.” Liselotte smiled back, and also lifted a skewer.

And thus, the two set to their task of devouring fish.

“We tend to eat the same things repeatedly when on deployment,” Liselotte said. She wasn't as tired of the food as Rafinha was, but even she had grown bored of three meals of fish a day. In Alcard, it had been dragon meat, and even that had grown stale after a while. First meat, then fish.

“Well, at least this is less fattening than dragon meat, I hope,” Leone responded. They had found themselves growing a little bit chubbier while subsisting off dragon meat. The snugness of their clothes had induced shrieks of

dismay from each. Why was it that Inglis and Rafinha had eaten far more than they had without gaining weight at all? It was simply unfair.

“I suppose we’re still fine for now, though?” Liselotte responded with unease.

“P-Perhaps. These certainly aren’t our normal clothes.”

While they had arrived clad in knights’ academy uniforms, while staying in Illuminas they had worn ceremonial garb. The robes they wore were loose and flowing, so they hadn’t been able to judge whether they’d gained weight.

There was mutual silence, which faded into ill ease. They both decided to double-check, just in case...

“Leone, could you look the other way for a moment?”

“Could you do the same?”

Turning not to face each other, they slipped off their robes. Below was their underwear, the same as always, which they inspected to see how tight it was and whether any extra flesh had appeared under that tightness.

“How are you, Leone?”

“Fine for now, I think. Phew...”

“And myself as well. That’s a solace.”

Just as the two patted themselves in relief...

Rafinha came rushing back. “Leone! Liselotte!”

“Eeek!” the two cried, clutching for each other in shock—unfortunately.





“Huh?! Um, uhh, errr! Ohhh, okay, yeah, I’m not really surprised! I think it’s beautiful how close you two are, yeah!” Rafinha nodded as if latching on, all by herself, to a very deep understanding. “Sorry to interrupt you just when it got good! Go ahead, you don’t have to stop for my sake!”

“It’s not like that!” the two replied in unison.

“Come on! You don’t have to hide it! ♪” Rafinha waved her hands self-effacingly.

She was acting, to put it bluntly, like an old maid. An improvement, to be sure, over the somber mood that had prevailed, but still.

“Really, it’s not like that!” Leone protested.

“We just wanted to be sure of something!” Liselotte agreed.

“That’s fine. Whether you’re right for each other, right?”

“Not at all!” the two replied as insistently as they could.

“We were just each checking ourselves to make sure we weren’t overeating and gaining weight!” Liselotte finally managed.

“Ehh? Really? And here I was all excited,” Rafinha said disappointedly.

“You have entirely the wrong idea! I mean, it’s good that you’re feeling better than before...” Leone began.

Rafinha’s eyes were glittering with enthusiasm. Perhaps this misunderstanding was not purely a bad thing. “Huh?” she asked. “I wasn’t myself?”

“Huh? Er, yes... You’re not eating as exuberantly as you normally do.”

“Don’t worry, I really am just tired of fish. Tomorrow I’ll eat a lot, though.”

“We thought you were going off to cry alone rather than worry us...” Liselotte said.

“Oh? Ah ha ha ha, I mean, right after Chris sank, of course I was so shocked that I cried and cried, but I’m fine now. Tears won’t change anything. Sorry for making you worry.” Rafinha smiled in embarrassment.

“So it really was just a walk?” Leone asked.

“Well, not really. I thought I’d get a little diving practice in.”

“Diving?” Leone and Liselotte replied as one.

“Y-You’re really thinking of free diving to look for the Greyfrier sarcophagus?!” Liselotte sputtered.

“Th-That’s kind of unreasonable,” Leone agreed.

“I knew you’d say that, so I’ve been sneaking off to practice,” Rafinha said.

Leone and Liselotte were silent. It was certainly true. Both of them would have found it too reckless and tried to stop Rafinha.

“But if Chris said she was going to do it... Well, you’d let her because you think she just might be able to, right?”

“I suppose. I’d think that, yes,” Leone said.

“Yes. If it were Inglis, well, just it being Inglis would be enough,” Liselotte agreed.

“Right? Right? And just before she sank, she said to me, she said that we’ve spent all our lives together and she thought some of her power rubbed off on me—like how Mr. Dragon’s dragon lore got into her and your Artifacts.”

“Is that even possible? I admit I’m not well read on that sort of subject...” Liselotte said.

“But the dragon’s power really did do that, so we can’t say it’s impossible,” Leone noted.

“If I can use some of her power, then maybe I really can do that dive! That’s why I’m practicing! It beats sitting here crying, right?” Rafinha remarked impishly.

Seeing her smile, Leone and Liselotte felt their hearts clear up and their spirits rise. Rafinha was strong. Although it must have been more painful for her than for either of them, Rafinha had no doubts Inglis was alive and had already started to think about what she could do. It was that strength of mind that let her keep smiling through Inglis’s constant antics, and let her stand straight

rather than be twisted by feelings of inferiority or resentment. And that strength, that brilliance of her heart charmed those who observed her.

Honestly, the two thought they had a lot to learn from her. Despite her appearance, Rafinha seemed like someone with the qualities of a leader who could guide them. Her smile made them want to support her, and it gave them strength.

“Got it! I’ll help out!” Leone announced.

“And myself as well,” Liselotte chimed in.

Shortly after Leone and Liselotte’s declarations of assistance, someone else came running in...

“Rafinha! Leone! Liselotte!” It was Myce, who immediately noticed that Leone and Liselotte were still in their underwear. “Oh, whoops! S-Sorry! I was in a hurry!” He blushed and looked away.

“No, we’re sorry!” Leone said.

“We’ll be dressed right away!” Liselotte agreed.

“What is it, Myce?” Rafinha asked, ignoring Leone and Liselotte who were still dressing.

“I saw something coming from far away! I need to let everyone know!”

Rafinha clapped her hands. “Oh, that’s right! I saw something from the shore too! That’s why I came to get them!”

“Something...like magicite beasts?” Leone asked.

“If that’s the case, then we need to intercept them!” Liselotte said.

“Yeah, let’s go!” Rafinha agreed.

“Me too!” Myce said.

“Okay, but if anything happens, you have to leave, Myce!”

“Okay! Thanks, Rafinha!”

They nodded to each other, and flew out from the ruins of the central laboratory. After the recent attack, Illuminas, which was once a huge and

advanced city, was left with nothing but a small piece of land around the central laboratory. Less than a tenth of what had existed before. It was a small island at this point, so the shore was just nearby. After mounting the *Star Princess*, parked in front of the ruins, it took them a mere thirty seconds to reach the water.

“I see something, but...what is it?” Rafinha asked.

“I can’t tell—just that there’s something there,” Leone agreed.

“It’s hard to see things in the sea at night,” Liselotte said.

Looking down at the waves from the *Star Princess*, they saw large shadows passing by the shore, but it was so dark, they couldn’t tell what they were.

“But if they were magicite beasts, they’d have probably already attacked,” Rafinha continued. “Maybe they’re just big fish?”

The three had fought fishlike magicite beasts several times since arriving on Illuminas, but all of those had been ferocious, going on the attack as soon as they sensed the trio’s presence.

“Hold on a second!” Myce said, as he raised his hand toward a mechanical dragon perched farther down the beach. On his palm, one of his stigmata began to glow. The girls assumed this was how Highlanders used magic directly. The chest of the dragon began to glow as well, and the armor on its shoulders shifted and began to emit a light that illuminated Rafinha and the others.

“Wow!” Rafinha gasped. “It lights up?”

“Yeah. Mechanical dragons have spotlights.”

“So you found a way to control the dragons even though you’re not Wilma!” Leone remarked.

“That’s incredible,” Liselotte said. “If we can use the dragons, perhaps we can get everyone out of here!”

Rafinha summed it up. “Yeah! That’s great, Myce!” She hugged him and patted his head.

Myce was not only a smart boy, but he was also a curious one. That much was clear from how he went about his everyday life. And it wasn’t just childish whim

—he was the son of Illuminas’s Vice Chief Academician, outshone only by Wilkin himself. The Second Academician, his mother, had chosen to stay on Illuminas and organize the remaining Highlanders. Rafinha and friends had met with her several times. She had taught him well; he was well prepared to become a researcher himself.

“Well, this is the only thing I can do so far,” Myce said. “I can’t make them fly or fight yet. We haven’t been able to recover the data and recreate the process yet... I’m sorry for getting your hopes up.”

“Oh, I see. Well, that’s fine. This is helpful too!” Rafinha said.

“It’s definitely a step forward,” Leone agreed.

“Indeed,” Liselotte said. “Having a better view of our surroundings is important too.”

As they looked toward the waters illuminated by the mechanical dragon, the fish they had seen earlier popped their faces up. It seems they were attracted by the light. Rather than scales, they had smooth skins, and their faces were round, gentle, and almost adorable.

“Oh, wow! Those are really cute fish!” Rafinha exclaimed.

“They’re chirping at us? How lovely!” Leone remarked.

“I didn’t know things like this lived in the surface seas!” Myce said. “They’re amazing!”

The eyes of the landlubbers Rafinha and Leone shone just as brightly as those of Highland-raised Myce.

“Oh, those are dolphins!” Liselotte, who grew up by the sea, immediately recognized what they were.

“Oh, dolphins!” Rafinha said.

“This is the first time I’ve seen them for myself!” Leone said.

“Sometimes they come to the sea near Charot,” Liselotte explained. “They’re very clever, and get along swimmingly with people! We used to have them at our family’s private beach! This really brings back memories.”

“Of course a ducal family would have pets like these,” Rafinha commented. “Not like Chris who wanted to adopt a magicite beast.”

Leone laughed at that, and Liselotte said, “Well, I suppose for Inglis that’s possible...”

“Liselotte, is it okay if I touch them?” Myce was clearly fascinated by the dolphins.

“Yes,” Liselotte said. “It won’t make them swim away, and I’m sure they’re as curious about us as we are about them.”

“Then, time for a water landing!” Rafinha announced.

The *Star Princess* approached the surface of the water before its propulsion cut out and it began to float on the surface. It was built to float on water. They had been taught at the knights’ academy to avoid such situations in case of malfunctions, but this was a special case. The dolphins were quite unafraid of the *Star Princess*; in fact, they crowded within arm’s reach.

“Go ahead, Myce, you can touch them,” Liselotte said.

“Okay... Sorry, dolphin, but can I pet you?” Myce tentatively extended his hand toward a dolphin.

“Wow, it’s so smooth! It feels like a wet eggplant! They’re so cute! ♪” Rafinha, on the other side of the *Star Princess*, was petting another dolphin as hard as she could. The dolphin didn’t seem to mind; if anything, it seemed to welcome the pampering with a smile.

“Ooh, then I’m gonna pet one now!” Myce said. “Wow, they’re super slippery!”

Leone smiled as she stroked a dolphin. “You’re right! They must be friendly, considering they’re letting us touch them so much!”

“When they get more used to people, sometimes they even let you ride on their backs as they swim,” Liselotte explained. “I did once when I was a child, and it felt wonderful... I truly enjoyed it.”

“You can do that?! I wanna try! I hope they stay here until they get to know us that well!” Myce also smiled as he continued petting the dolphin’s snout.



“But why are there so many here all of a sudden? Did something happen?” Leone tilted her head in confusion.

“They normally travel in pods. They move between places where they feel comfortable. The flooded passages below are a perfect place for small fish to hide, so I’d imagine it’s like a feast for them,” Liselotte said.

“Ah ha ha ha! It’s so fast!” Rafinha had already straddled a dolphin and was circling around the *Star Princess*.

“Huh?! Already?!” Myce exclaimed.

Leone was in disbelief. “H-How are they so used to you in no time at all?!”

“That’s incredible! It took days for me...” Liselotte muttered.

All three were stunned.

“Just look them in the eye and let your hearts communicate! If you do that, they’ll understand what you want to say... Wheeee! ♪” As Rafinha was explaining the finer points of human-dolphin communication, the dolphin carrying her suddenly sped up and made a great leap, sending them flying through the air. “Woooooow! They can do that? This is amazing!” Rafinha grinned from ear to ear from the back of the dolphin, which leaped again and again.

“I want to try too!” Myce said. “Umm... Look them in the eye and let our hearts...”

“Communicate, I think she said?” Leone prompted.

“How is this supposed to go?”

The advice had been extremely abstract and completely centered on the psychological aspect. Perhaps Rafinha had some special charm that the dolphin had recognized, or maybe it was a very friendly dolphin, or maybe it had befriended a human before.

“Can you dive to the bottom of the sea?” Rafinha asked. “My best friend is down there! I want to go see her, but I can’t make it by myself!” she said to the dolphin.

*Splash!*

As if to say *leave it to me*, the dolphin dived straight down.

“Wow!” Myce said. “It really listened to her! You’re lucky, Rafinha!”

“But she can’t breathe underwater!” Leone gasped.

“It’s dangerous! She’ll drown!” Liselotte said.

The dolphin, and the girl on its back, dived deeper and deeper, until finally the girl split away. Rafinha took a deep breath as she came back to the surface.

“Phewwww! Haaah... Haaah... I can’t hold my breath that long.”

“Are you okay, Rafinha?!” Myce asked.

“Yeah, Myce... I just won’t be able to keep up with Mr. Dolphin if I can’t hold my breath longer.”

Rafinha’s body suddenly popped up out of the water. The dolphin had returned and was lifting her with its back. It chirped, seemingly worried about her.

“Ah ha ha, sorry. I need to practice that.” Rafinha’s smile was shining brightly.

“Phew... I was worried. I’m glad you’re okay,” Leone said.

“But that was a huge pick-me-up! I feel so much better!”

Rafinha had a strong heart. She was moving forward far faster than Leone or Liselotte had expected. However, that didn’t mean that she wasn’t sad, that she wasn’t hurting. Perhaps the contact with unexpected visitors had lessened that pain a little bit. For that, they were grateful to the dolphins.

*Whirrr... Whirrr...*

Suddenly, from the sky behind them, on the opposite beach, the group heard what sounded like faraway machines.

“Ah! That’s—!” Rafinha said.

“It sounds like a flying battleship!”

“But where could it be? I can’t see it.”

“Hold on, I’ll light it up!” At Myce’s command, the mechanical dragon’s light turned to the sky near where the sound was coming from. But it was cloudy and dark, so they couldn’t see it yet.

“Did someone notice that something had happened to Illuminas, and come to rescue us? Maybe Dux Jil or Ambassador Theodore!” Rafinha suggested, ever the optimist.

“Either way, we’re saved!” Leone said.

“Yes! And not a moment too soon. We don’t know when this land will sink!” Liselotte said.

“It’s probably one of Illuminas’s satellite islands, I think,” Myce said. “No, wait, if the Floating Circle and the machinator aren’t functioning, I don’t think they can move either?” Myce’s frown as he puzzled over the options reminded the trio of a budding engineer.

“We should go find out!” Rafinha said. “Let’s go, everyone!” She hopped into the *Star Princess* from the dolphin’s back and grasped the Flygear’s control stick. “Wait for us! We’ll be back to play with you later!” She remembered to smile at the dolphin she had rode on first.

The *Star Princess* lifted off and climbed toward the sound.

“Ah, I see it!” Rafinha announced. The approaching flying battleship entered their vision through a gap in the clouds.

“Wh—?!”

The moment they saw it, they were filled with tension. If it were just a ship, to whom it belonged might be in question, but a single glance at its rider made it obvious: the faceless giant was straddling its hull.

There was no mistaking it. They were under attack!

## Chapter IV: Inglis, Age 16—Far-Off Highland (9)

“It’s him again?!” Rafinha gasped.

“He came back?!” Leone asked.

“I can’t believe it!” Liselotte said. “Wasn’t he going to a Papal League-controlled part of Highland?!”

“Haaaa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!” A laugh that was unmistakable as General Maxwell of Venefic’s rang out across the night sky. He must have seen the *Star Princess*, as he called out to them from the giant’s shoulder. “It’s been a while, knights of Karelia! Lady Charlotte has returned to her part of Highland, and my orders from the Altar are completed... From here on, I’m acting purely in the interests of Venefic!”

“Now that she doesn’t have an eye on him, he won’t let us escape!” Liselotte said.

As a general of Venefic, hostile to Karelia, his plan was to reduce Karelia’s strength in any way possible. And as knights’ academy cadets and visitors to Illuminas under Ambassador Theodore’s orders, they could not say they were acting as individuals independently of Karelia.

“Then, if we get out of here...!” Leone began. If Maxwell was focused on her, Rafinha, and Liselotte, once they got Myce to safety, they could fly away in the *Star Princess* and bait Maxwell to chase after them. That way, they’d keep the people of Illuminas out of the fight.

Rafinha silently looked down at the sea where Inglis had sunk. She didn’t want to leave her. If they escaped from here, could they return? In the worst case, the rest of Illuminas could sink while they were gone, and they might never be able to find it or Inglis again. This was a wide ocean, in an overwhelmingly vast world. Without a landmark, their exact position would be lost forever.

“Rafinha...” Leone began.

“Rafinha...” Liselotte repeated. They knew how she felt without any of them

having to speak.

Myce was the only one with anything more to say. “Don’t worry about it! Fight on Illuminas! It will be easier here!”

Rafinha shook her head forcefully, as if she was trying to chase away her doubts and weakness. “We should let Myce get off! If we get out of here, the enemy will be drawn away from Illuminas!”

“Rafinha... Yes, understood!” Leone said.

“I cannot object!” Liselotte said.

Maxwell grinned from the shoulder of the giant, mocking Rafinha’s determination. “You’re not the only ones who have a reason to be here!” Maxwell aimed his gaze toward Myce and Illuminas floating in the sea below.

If his target wasn’t just Rafinha and friends, then things had changed. Them leaving Illuminas would be meaningless.

“So you haven’t done enough damage?! Myce and the other Highlanders have lost their home, where they’ve made so many memories! They can never go back! Enough is enough! Stop!”

Despite Rafinha’s objections, Maxwell shrugged and shook his head. “No! Those were half-measures. I can hear it—this giant’s grief, his bitter grudge... No, more precisely, those of the people turned into the mana extract of which he is made.”

“Mana extract? Bitter grudge? What’s that supposed to mean?” Myce asked.

The trio of girls flinched.

Myce may have been the son of Illuminas’s Second Academician, but he was still a child and did not know the truth. Even Wilma, the city’s knight-captain responsible for its defense, had only had a vague idea. The method of manufacturing mana extract seemed to be kept secret among a strictly limited group of people. Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte all agreed that there was no need to allow Myce to find out like this.

“Leone!” Rafinha looked back at her, her hands still on the controls. She was entrusting Myce to Leone, who was behind him.

“Of course!” Leone understood what Rafinha meant and promptly clamped her hands over Myce’s ears, but the boy squirmed away. “Myce!” she cried.

“Don’t listen to him!” Liselotte said.

Maxwell’s mouth curled into a smile as he held the edges of his monocle, which began to glow. “Ha ha ha ha! So the brat doesn’t even know! Mana extract is made from people! Illuminas, which you all are so proud of, buys people from the surface and turns them into a goo they use to do anything they want! All the mana in there was mana that came from human bodies!”

“N-No! So what they said about Illuminas not using slaves and trying to live in peace with the surface...”

“Was all a lie! All because your people don’t want to see suffering. Instead, you take their very forms and consciousness away and use them as raw mana, you brat! You’re all devils! I’ll never forgive you!”

Myce’s shoulders slumped, and his voice trembled. “You’re... You’re right... Even the line about the mana coat soldiers being kind to people from the surface... We must be monsters!”

“Stop! How can you enjoy torturing a child like this?! You have no room to talk, anyway! You knew they’d be turned into mana extract, so you handed over dissidents from Venefic!”

“If that’s how you want to look at it. I knew them, and I was simply hoping they could live a happy life in Highland without being turned into mana extract. If they’d stayed in Venefic, they’d have had their heads put on pikes as traitors. In order to survive, they had no choice but to seek a new home. This was simply the result.” Maxwell tapped on the giant’s head softly. “If you didn’t even know why you were dying, how could we expect these devils to? And, there’s an idea I find fascinating. Highlanders, as a race, have stronger mana than surface dwellers, and above all they can control it on their own. What would happen if *they* were made into mana extract?! I’m sure it’d be incredibly powerful! So I’m going to try it out with this giant! And then use that power for our Venefic!”

“No! He wants to feed Myce and the others to the giant...”

“And make it stronger!” Leone added. “He’s terrible!”

“He returned only to cause more pain!” Liselotte glared.

“And not just the Highlanders! You too!” Maxwell continued. “Once we swallow you all, this giant and I will be the strongest things in the world! The foundation of Venefic’s power! Everything we lost when Roche-fool turned traitor, I have to work to make up for!”

“‘Roche-fool’? You mean Mr. Rochefort? I know the impression that he gives, but he’s a good person! At least, a better one than you!” Rafinha yelled.

Leone and Liselotte nodded in agreement.

“Ha! A traitor, good? He’s the worst kind of scum! Now, Tiffanyer! We’ve spoken enough!” Maxwell called out.

Rafinha startled. “Tiffanyer’s with him?!”

“Didn’t she go back to Highland?!” Leone asked.

“Be careful, everyone!” Liselotte said.

The three were guarded as they watched the space around the giant riding the flying battleship. However, they saw no sign of Tiffanyer.

A voice suddenly rang out from directly above them. “Very well!”

Rafinha gasped.

“From up there?!” Leone said.

“She’s dropping toward us!” Liselotte said.

The hial menace was already closing in with a superspeed kick. It was like the clouds themselves had split to let her through. She was trying to use her momentum to bring the *Star Princess* down.

“I can’t—!” Rafinha couldn’t get the Flygear out of the way in time.

“I’ll get her!” Leone barely managed to slide the dark blade of her greatsword Artifact into the path of Tiffanyer’s kick.

*Clang!*



The blade clashed against Tiffanyer's armored boots. That said, Leone was bracing herself not against the ground but against the *Star Princess*. The shock of the impact sent the Flygear swaying.

"Ugh! It's going to flip over! Myce, hold on to me tight!" Rafinha said.

"O-Okay!"

"I'll support us!" Liselotte danced off the Flygear, and activated her Gift. Wrapping around to below the *Star Princess* as it was pressed down, she flapped her wings mightily to hold it up. "I can keep it upright somehow!"

"Those were some quick reactions, but...you'll need more than that!" Tiffanyer kicked the blade of the dark greatsword and launched herself high into the sky. At first, it seemed like she had withdrawn from the fight.

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Goooooooooooo!" Maxwell shouted in glee. As if taking its turn after Tiffanyer, the faceless giant leaped down from the flying battleship, swinging its tremendous palm forward as if to swat the *Star Princess*.

*I can't turn in time! And I can't hold up that much!* Liselotte thought. "Abandon the ship!" she called out.

Without a moment's hesitation, Rafinha and the others leaped from the *Star Princess*.

*Smash!*

Like it was swatting a fly, the faceless giant's palm struck the *Star Princess*. The Flygear plunged headlong toward Illuminas's central laboratory. Rafinha and the others had managed to avoid the attack and leap out, only to be enveloped by the indescribable sense of falling.

"Whoaaaaa!"

"It's okay, Myce!" Rafinha said. "Liselotte will—!"

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!" Leone interrupted with an even louder shriek.

"It'll be okay, Leone!"

Leone had always seemed to be a bit afraid of heights. She'd had plenty of Flygear time at the knights' academy, and with her serious and earnest personality managed to master both flying them and fighting aboard them, but apparently jumping from one was just a little too much.

"Leone! Hold on tight!" Liselotte said.

As Liselotte held out a hand, Leone wrapped her arms around Liselotte's waist and held on tight. "Th-Thank you!"

"Rafinha!" Liselotte said.

"Yeah! Thanks!"

With everyone holding on to Liselotte, they were safe. Below them, the giant plummeted toward what little remained of Illuminas. The giant crushing on impact would solve a lot of problems, but unfortunately its body was formed from liquid mana extract. It squished as it fell to the ground, softening the impact to Maxwell and Tiffanyer on its shoulders. But its weight was still considerable, and the small island lurched for a moment. Shocked by the apparent earthquake, the Highlander survivors came outside.

The giant before them was overwhelming.

"This is the thing that attacked us before, isn't it?!"

"It's back?! Is it going to sink Illuminas this time?!"

"We still can't use the mechanical dragons for combat! Are we done for?!"

"That's right, you devils who created mana extract!" Maxwell roared. "Now it's your turn to become part of the giant and have your mana work at the surface's purposes! Then maybe we'll be even!"

The giant reached forth its hand and grabbed the Highlanders.

"Aaaaaahh!"

"Oh no! I'm on my way!" Liselotte dived at full speed, but it was too late. The faceless giant opened where it should have had a maw and swallowed the Highlanders.

"Ahh!" As Rafinha and friends gasped, the giant shined brightly for a moment.

“Hmm! Aren’t those Highlanders tasty? Ha ha ha ha!”

Judging from Maxwell’s words, the glow from the giant was proof that those Highlanders were now dead, their mana becoming part of the mana extract. There was no saving them now.

Another Highlander, a woman, appeared outside, and held her breath at the sight of the giant. “I-Is the mana extract giant going to eat us?!” She wore a white coat, which made her seem to be a researcher. Rafinha and the others recognized her.

“That’s riiiiight!”

The faceless giant plucked up the woman.

“Agh!”

“Mom!” Myce cried out.

Myce’s mother was Illuminas’s Second Academician. A gash again opened like a mouth, and the giant lifted her toward it.

“Stop!” Liselotte had nearly reached the ground. Holding Rafinha tightly, she got her in a position where she could use her bow Artifact with both hands.

And Rafinha was already drawing Shiny Flow. “Leave Myce’s mom alone!” she yelled.

*Fwoosh!*

The arrow of light, tinged with the pale blue glow of aether, shot through the giant’s arm, tearing it off.

“All right! I did it!” She still couldn’t fully control the arrow as she willed—in fact, her only previous success had been stopping Leone when she had been controlled by Tiffanyer—but for now, thankfully, Myce’s mother had been saved.

“That was incredible, Rafinha!” Liselotte said.

“A-Amazing!” Leone agreed. “So this is how you stopped me... It really is like

what Inglis does.”

“Yeah! I’m not very good at it yet, but I sure picked a good time to figure it out!”

“Mom! Thank goodness!” Myce rushed toward his mother.

“Myce! Everyone, thank you! You saved me!” Myce’s mother bowed deeply to Rafinha and the others.

“I’m just happy you’re okay!” Rafinha said.

“But...” Leone began.

“Indeed! Remain alert!” Liselotte said.

While they had been landing by Myce’s mother, the giant had picked up its severed right forearm and reattached it.

“Ooh! Giant, it doesn’t hurt you! It doesn’t hurt at all! You can just stick it back on!” Maxwell said. “And *you*, just blowing off my giant’s arm! You’re different now... You’re not just Inglis Eucus’s hangers-on...”

“Sh-Shut up! I don’t need to hear it!” As Rafinha protested, she saw Tiffanyer come to Maxwell’s side.

“There’s no need to get so worked up. I’m here for you,” she said to him.

“Lady Tiffanyer... Lend me your strength!”

“I shall!”

“Go, giant! Haaaah!”

Tiffanyer began to glow brightly as Maxwell was swallowed into the giant’s chest.

The trio of girls all felt their breath catch.

An overwhelming brightness lit up all of Illuminas and the nearby seas. And when it subsided, the giant was clearly wearing Tiffanyer’s golden armor, which had expanded to cover the large creature.

“Again?! It doesn’t have a halberd this time, but—!” Rafinha said.

“It’s still got a hial menace!” Leone said.

“Yes, though of a different sort!” Liselotte concluded.

If it had just been Maxwell and the giant, they might have been able to fight them, but the addition of Tiffanyer spelled danger. When armed with Charlotte, the giant had been a powerful foe that not even Inglis could best. Perhaps she could have if the fight had gone on longer, but it certainly didn’t seem like she would have defeated it anytime soon. Even though the type of hial menace it wielded now was different, the strength was the same, and now they were forced to face it without Inglis.

“It fought Chris without losing, and now she’s not here!” Rafinha said.

“But we have to beat it!” Leone said. “No one else can!”

“Indeed, we do!” Liselotte agreed.

Ignoring the three as they prepared, the golden-armored giant swung its fists toward the central laboratory. “Haaah!” Its swings caught only air.

*Fwooom!*

But the blast waves that it stirred up struck the already-crumbling structure directly. It creaked even louder before collapsing completely. A number of Highlanders still taking shelter inside rushed outside in a panic.

“Aaaah!”

“Run away!”

“It’s collapsing! Hurry!”

Watching them, Maxwell, now embedded in the giant’s throat, burst out laughing. “Ha ha ha ha ha! It’s ready, it’s ready, it’s ready! Time for a tasty treat, giant!”

“No! We told you, we won’t let that happen!” Rafinha yelled.

*Fwoosh!*

The arrow was once again wrapped in aether, as powerful as Rafinha's fervent wish to put an end to this.

However, the giant's hand in a golden gauntlet blocked it with a grunt.

"It caught it?!"

As they'd feared, the giant was on a completely different level now with the strength of a hial menace behind it.

Maxwell's maniacal laughter rang out. "Mwa ha ha ha ha!"

The giant brought both hands around the arrow of light and crushed it. The pale blue arrow dissolved and disappeared.

"Ahh?!"

"Too bad, but it'll take more than that to take this guy down! This! Perfect! Body! This warrior of justice was born for Venefic! This warrior of justice will *die* for Venefic!" Overjoyed, Maxwell burst into laughter. It seemed like he had flung off his usual calm demeanor and revealed his true personality.

"You call this justice?! *This?!!*" Rafinha focused again as she drew the bowstring of Shiny Flow. She didn't know whether she could produce another arrow like the ones before, but surely it would respond to her.

*Krrrrrk!*

But her bow, upon which she placed her hopes, cracked into pieces and crumbled away.

"Huh?! Shiny Flow?!"

"Is this like when Inglis used my sword?!" Leone asked.

Leone's dark greatsword had broken when Inglis had used it, and it was fixed only thanks to Ambassador Theodore remaking it. Leone's current Artifact was her second. And Inglis said that she didn't usually use Artifacts because they'd break if she did. If Inglis's power had rubbed off on Rafinha, and then Rafinha wielded an Artifact, maybe it would break as it would if Inglis did.

“Of all the times!” Liselotte exclaimed.

“This is bad! Without Shiny Flow, I can’t... I can’t protect everyone!”

“No, we still have a chance!” Leone patted Rafinha’s back.

“What do you mean, Leone?”

“Look at that!” Leone pointed to the area around Maxwell on the giant’s body, where something like smoke was pouring forth.

“What is that?!”

“It wasn’t like that up until now. It has to be from wielding a hial menace.”

Hial menaces sapped away their wielder’s life force and dispersed it. In other words, if one was wielded in a fight as intense as that against a Prism, her wielder’s life would then be forfeit. It was seemingly inevitable.

“That means he can’t use a hial menace’s power forever!” Liselotte commented.

“I believe so! So we don’t have to take it down ourselves!” Leone said.

“If we buy time, our enemy will destroy itself, and we’ll have protected Myce and the others!” Rafinha concluded.

“Yes!” Leone said.

“I see! Then let us do what we can!” Liselotte agreed.

They nodded to each other, only to be met with a scornful laugh from Maxwell.

“Ha ha ha ha ha! That won’t help you! That’s nothing but fruitless struggling!”

“You say that, but we can see the smoke coming from the giant’s body! Who’s really trying to look tougher than they are?! We can tell when there’s no coming back from wielding a hial menace!” Rafinha yelled.

“I’ll admit that! The price of wielding a hial menace is being paid in the giant’s own being! Such beautiful patriotism! But even that will not last forever!”

“So you’re trying to beat us fast! We can tell that too!”

“We won’t back down so easily!” Leone agreed.

“Everyone! Please stay away from the giant! It can only function for a limited time! If you can flee from it until then—!” Liselotte announced to the Highlanders.

“You’re too naive! Even if it kills both the giant and I... Behooooooooold!”

As Maxwell spoke, the giant pointed behind Rafinha and the others, to the opposite shore.

Even though it was a nighttime seascape, it was lit up with a beautiful rainbow-colored glow. And there they could see the silhouette of a fish as large—if not larger—than the giant, its rainbow-colored dorsal fin breaking the water.

“N-No way! That’s...” Rafinha couldn’t bear to finish her sentence.

“At a time like this?!” Leone said.

“A Prismer?! Th-The sea serpent?!” Liselotte gasped.

In Charot on Karelia's west coast, where Liselotte was from, it had long been whispered that a sea serpent lurked the open waters of the Shaquell Sea and sank ships which left the protection of the sound. According to the annals of House Arcia, it was a gigantic fish with rainbow scales. Judging by the path they had taken from Karelia, they thought they were somewhere in the Shaquell Sea. And what appeared before them now was just as the annals described.

“Well, young lady... Where exactly do you suggest we run to now?” a Highlander asked, giving her a pained laugh.

Liselotte had no answer. Maybe the pod of dolphins which had appeared before had been fleeing the Prismers. They had come from the same direction as it did.

“How about that! It isn’t just us! The heavens, the earth, the sea, the magicite beasts! All of them are telling you to diiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!” Maxwell yelled.

“Wh-What do we do?! If they get too close to a Prismer, Myce and the Highlanders will be in danger!” Rafinha said.

Highlanders' resistance to the Prism Flow was weaker than that of people



from the surface. If they were exposed to it, they would become magicite beasts—the Steelblood Front used prism powder to accomplish much the same. And a Prismer was, in a way, one big ball of prism flow. At the battle with the birdlike Prismer which had been frozen in Ahlemin, they had seen it manage to transform, not Highlanders, but normal people into magicite beasts. Individual Prismers could, of course, be different, but as Highlanders had far lower resistance than normal people, they could not expect them to be safe anywhere near it. That it was so close already meant it might turn them all into magicite beasts at once.

“Wh—?!” Leone and Liselotte had no words to ease Rafinha’s tension. Both were desperately trying to think of a solution, but none came to mind.

*Plip, plop...*

And to make matters even worse, rainbow-colored raindrops suddenly fell on their foreheads.

“The Prism Flow?!” Rafinha gasped. Perhaps the approaching Prismer had called it forth.

“What do we do?! Of all the times—!”

Myce suddenly called out to them. “Rafinha, Leone, Liselotte! You’ve done enough! You three run away! There’s only three of you, you might be able to find a small island where you can hide!”

“Myce!” Rafinha said. Leone and Liselotte had their own protests as well.

“W-We couldn’t!”

“Not at all!”

“It’s fine,” Myce insisted. “We’re done for—either the Prism Flow or the Prismer will turn us into magicite beasts! I don’t want you to get hurt because of us! So hurry and go! Rafinha, Leone, Liselotte, run away!”

But then someone pushed him forward.

It was his mother. “Please, for his sake! Take this boy with you and flee! He’s

right, but I want at least him to live on for the rest of us!”

“Mom! What are you saying?! I want to stay here with everyone!”

As Myce argued, Rafinha wrapped him in a hug. “I’ll keep him safe!”

Leone and Liselotte could not object even if they’d wanted to. Rafinha’s eyes were full of tears, and they knew painfully well how she felt. She had taken on the responsibility of making that decision.

“R-Rafinha! I’m fine! I want to stay with mom and everyone!”

“It’ll be okay! You’re coming with us, Myce!” Rafinha insisted to him as she pulled him along.

“Liselotte!” Leone called out to her as she helped Rafinha.

“Yes, understood!” Liselotte activated her Gift and spread her wings.

“Easier said than dooone!” Maxwell roared. The faceless giant swung its fist, and the shock wave caught Rafinha and friends just as they were about to take off.

“Ahhhh!” They were scattered, their backs slammed into the ground.

“Ugh...” But they would not submit meekly. They were determined to save at least Myce. No matter what it took. As Rafinha struggled to her feet, a dark shadow filled her vision.

“Here it coooooomes!” Maxwell’s voice continued to boom forth.

“It’s the Prismer! It...it’s jumping?!” In the blink of an eye, the Prismer brought itself up to the shore of Illuminas, then leaped from the water, so high that they had to look up to see it. It flew up toward the land, as if it were trying to gobble Rafinha, her friends, and the Highlanders up. The sight of a gigantic rainbow-colored fish was, in a sense, beautiful.

Myce gasped. “It’s scary, but it...it’s kind of pretty.”

Just as his words entered Rafinha’s ears, though—

*Splashhhhhhhh!*

A fearsome blast of water suddenly arose from below the surface of the water and crashed into the Prismer's belly.

*Grrrrnnnn!*

The Prismer let out a loud grunt as it was sent flying far over Illuminas and off into the yonder. It squirmed and flopped as it flew overhead like a freshly caught fish.

"Huh?!" Rafinha gasped.

"Wh-What?!" Leone said.

"That's—" Liselotte began.

"The Greyfrier sarcophagus?!" the three exclaimed in unison.

The gigantic stone box that had suddenly rocketed from the sea without warning crashed into the Prismer and sent it flying away. Then, as if it had a mind of its own, the Greyfrier sarcophagus plunged toward the faceless giant in golden armor.

"Gwraaah!" In response, the giant crossed its arms in front of itself defensively. But as if to mock the giant, the shape of the Greyfrier sarcophagus twisted and disappeared.

"What?!" Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte all watched in shock as it immediately reappeared behind the faceless giant.

"How?!" Maxwell gasped.

It rocketed toward the giant's defenseless side with unnatural force.

*Slammmmmm!*

"Gwahhhhhhhh!" The giant skipped over the surface of the sea, kicking up tremendous waterspouts, as it blasted away in the same direction as the Prismer.

Rafinha and the others were at a loss for words. The Greyfrier sarcophagus had suddenly leaped from the sea and, as if it had a will of its own, had sent both the fishlike Prismer and the giant flying in the blink of an eye. But the Greyfrier sarcophagus was, in the end, just a block of stone. It had no will of its own, nor could it move by itself. There must have been someone or something making it move, hidden from their eyes by its imposing scale.

“Phew. I’m glad I made it in time. There’s not only a giant, but a Prismer too? Seems like fun.” Hoisting the Greyfrier sarcophagus in one hand, with a smile across her face, was, and could be no one else...

“Chris!!!”

“Inglis!” Leone and Liselotte both exclaimed.

Not only that, but she was back to her normal body of a sixteen-year-old rather than the child she’d been stuck as before being sealed inside. She had grown too large to wear children’s clothes and had wrapped them around her chest and waist for modesty.

“Chris! Chriis!” Rafinha immediately came running to hug her.

It was almost a tackle—nearly hard enough to knock the Greyfrier sarcophagus from her hands.



“Sorry, Rani. Are you okay?”

Hugging Inglis from behind, Rafinha shook her head. She couldn’t find the words. Her shoulders were trembling, and Inglis could hear her quiet, ragged breaths as well as feel tears on the back of her own neck where Rafinha’s face was pressed. She must have been trying her hardest not to scream and cry. She must have been thinking that there wasn’t time for that now. Inglis remembered that when they were kids, every time she saw Rafinha after they had been apart for a while, Rafinha had cried and hugged her. She hadn’t done that in a long time; Rafinha had grown up.

“I’m so sorry. I would never forgive anyone who made you cry, but here I did it myself... I’m a failure of a squire.”

“I-I ab naw cwyng! (I am not crying!)” Rafinha couldn’t stop crying long enough to enunciate her words.

Inglis turned to Leone and Liselotte. “What’s the situation?”

“They took Wilma, the mechanical dragons are out of commission, and no one could leave Illuminas! Then Maxwell came back and attacked!” Leone said.

“The sea serpent—that is, the Prismer—appeared, and then the Prism Flow began to fall!” Liselotte continued.

It seemed like quite the complicated situation. Smashing the Greyfrier sarcophagus into it had been the right choice. “Sounds like some rollicking fun, then?”

“It was not *fun*!” Leone and Liselotte both scolded.

Then, a voice came echoing from far away. “Ha ha ha ha! It’ll take more than that to get rid of me! Let’s settle things here and now, Inglis Eucus!” The voice carried over the waves came from the faceless giant upon the Prismer.

“Wh—?! What’s going on?!” The sight was enough to pull even Rafinha’s attention.

“It’s riding the Prismer?!” Leone gasped.

“A-Absurd! How is it doing that?!” Liselotte said.

“An impressive feat.” Inglis gave the faceless giant a graceful smile. “But I should warn you... Because of your actions, I made Rani cry.” She dropped the Greyfrier sarcophagus, and it landed with a heavy thud. “You’ll have to pay the price for that.” Her voice dropped dangerously low, and her piercing glare was suddenly filled with murder.

“Ngh!” Maxwell grunted, and the giant suddenly trembled and froze for a moment. Even the Prismer stopped, as if it sensed Maxwell’s hesitation.

Under Inglis’s feet, Illuminas began to shudder and shake as the coastline sank deeper into the sea.

“Wh-What’s happening?!” Rafinha asked, panicked.

“Another one? That’s not good,” Inglis said.

“Huh?!”

“It’s sinking. Probably all of Illuminas this time. Is it because I brought this?” Inglis tapped a palm on the Greyfrier sarcophagus. It was tall enough that she had to bend her neck backward to see the top. She had no idea how heavy it could be. With Illuminas already damaged, the sudden weight was too much for it to stay afloat.

“Say what?! That’s no good! Throw it away, now!”

“No, wait, Rafinha! Eris is inside!”

“And the princess from Venefic!” Liselotte added.

“Ah! R-Right! So what do we do? What do we do?!” Rafinha searched desperately for an answer.

Leone was panicking too. “What *do* we do?! We can’t stop the Prism Flow, and we can’t stop Illuminas from sinking!”

“M-Maybe we should take Myce and flee?!” Liselotte suggested.

“Is that all we can do?! C’mon, Chris!” Rafinha turned to Inglis, hoping for her to save the day.

And Inglis couldn’t refuse that look from her adored Rafinha. Fortunately, now, she had the power to do something about it. For that she was grateful.

She patted Rafinha on the shoulder and smiled. “It’s okay, Rani. Leave it to me.”

“Really?! You can fix this?!”

“Yeah. Okay, everyone. Liselotte, don’t use your Gift. Keep your feet on the ground. Everyone else too! Stay on Illuminas! Please!”

After calling out, Inglis knelt down, and touched the ground with her hand.

The Greyfrier sarcophagus could be opened from the outside, but it was impossible to destroy or open it from the inside. And that much still held true—Inglis had not destroyed it, nor had she opened an exit. That was why it was still looming here above them as if nothing had happened.

As for how Inglis had gotten out without doing either of those things—that involved practice and more practice, so much that her body had returned to being sixteen during the process. No, maybe it hadn’t returned. Maybe her transformation to a child had never reverted, and she had simply grown up again. And now was the time to show what she had learned during that long, long time of training!

*Vwiiiiiiiiiiin!*

From where her hand touched, a halo of light spread forth, covering the ground. It was like a ripple spreading over the surface. As it covered the entirety of the much-diminished Illuminas, the island itself was wreathed in a bright glow.

“Oh? N-No way!” Rafinha gasped in recognition. She had seen it many times before, but not—until now—on anything but Inglis herself.

“You’re just showing off! Reevenge!” The Prismmer, carrying the giant, leaped high from the water, cutting a beautiful arc.

“I’m sorry, and I truly regret leaving, but good day.” Just as Inglis smiled up at the Prismmer and the faceless giant serenely, the world around her twisted and transformed.



*Splashhhhhhh!*

Huge waves kicked up around what was left of the island, similar to something massive plopping into the water. The waves washed over the shore, flooding the roads and shaking floating ships. This definitely wouldn't be good for the houses, but none seemed to be in danger of collapse, so Inglis hoped no one would be too upset.

"Whoa!" Rafinha's mouth was hanging open.

"What just happened?!"

"Ah, this is—!"

And it was not only Inglis and friends who had the world around them suddenly replaced. It was everyone on Illuminas. Their surroundings had totally changed.

"Oh my gosh! This is Lake Bolt! We're just outside Chiral! On the lake!"

"W-We really are!" Leone said. "I can see the Flygear dock and the knights' academy!"

"Th-Then, we were taken straight from the Shaquell Sea to Chiral?!" Liselotte asked.

"Yep, that's right," Inglis said.

Without stirring, a goddess could look down upon the world, and if the desire took them, be in any place in an instant. Not by making a quicker or stronger effect within the physical world, but by changing the world itself to make their step infinitely faster or stronger. This was how the gods moved infinite distances in a single step. This was divine feat.

With this, even bringing the whole of Illuminas from the far-off ocean to Lake Bolt off of Karelia's capital was no great ordeal. Distance and weight were meaningless. The laws of nature were simply rewritten. Inglis only needed to know where she was going.

When she had wielded Eris and Ripple in their weapon forms, their power had enhanced and amplified her aether, sublimating it to the hi-aether which made

divine feat possible. And the purpose of her training within the Greyfrier sarcophagus had been to become capable of doing so on her own. The sarcophagus could not be opened from the inside, could not be broken out of, but could not prevent a goddess from moving as she willed. It was an overwhelming process of training in which she strove to, precisely and perfectly, weave her own aether into a masterpiece through fearsome amounts of time and effort.

And the reward of such mastery was to be able to create her own hi-aether. This was, of course, nowhere near as convenient as it instantly springing to her command as she gripped Eris and Ripple. But she at least had the option of creating and storing hi-aether in advance to then unleash as needed. But between breaking out of the Greyfrier sarcophagus and bringing Illuminas to Lake Bolt, she had used up almost all of her stores. Using divine feat again would require some time working to refine her aether.

*Smack!*

A slap landed on her back, left unprotected as the fabric had been more sorely needed in front. Rafinha, who was beaming, had obviously meant no ill will by it, but it hurt a little anyway.

“Thanks, Chris! That was great! Now the Prism Flow isn’t falling, Illuminas isn’t sinking, and we saved Myce and the others!”

Illuminas staying afloat was, of course, not through Inglis’s own power, but simply because the lake’s waters were much shallower. The island had come to a rest on the lake’s floor.

Through all this, Rafinha was giving Inglis an enthusiastic hug. A little pain in her back was nothing to pay any attention to.

“Well... Really, I should thank you.”

“Huh?”

A few days had passed for Rafinha in the others, but inside the Greyfrier sarcophagus, it had been years for Inglis. It had been good training, of course,

and thanks to Eris and Ripple she had had the clear goals of hi-aether and divine feat in mind the whole time, but it had also been unimaginably difficult and she'd be a liar if she said that the long hours striving alone weren't painful.

It was the longest she'd been away from Rafinha since she had been reborn as Inglis Eucus, and honestly, she had been lonely. It was thanks to her desire to see Rafinha again that she'd been able to keep going. It had spurred her on to complete the training that King Inglis never had, and it had made it possible for her to escape the Greyfrier sarcophagus on her own.

"It's been so long, Rani. Please, let me get a better look at your face."

"Hm? Here you go." Rafinha again grinned ear-to-ear.

It was adorable. Inglis felt like her heart was being cleansed. She returned a satisfied smile. *This is good. This is how things should be.*

But one thing did make Inglis sigh. "I'm glad everyone's safe, but it's a shame that I left the Prismer and the giant behind... I wanted to fight them..."

She didn't know if it had just been a coincidence, but the sight of it riding a Prismer as if it were a horse had been incredible. Maxwell and the faceless giant had a versatility and embrace of growth in their abilities that amazed even Inglis. Think of the countless possibilities there! Maybe it could even combine with the Prismer into something entirely different. If it could, she wanted to see that happen. And then fight it.

Rafinha whipped her head side to side. "No way! I don't ever want to see that thing's lack of a face again!"

"I don't want to see it again anytime soon either. Especially that armor..."

Leone had, from what Inglis could tell, ended up wearing Tiffanyer whether she wanted to or not, and fallen under her control. Inglis knew that attack from her own fight with Tiffanyer in the past. Thankfully, forcing Inglis into the Greyfrier sarcophagus had required Tiffanyer to return to her human form, and even more thankfully, Leone was okay.

"It would have been better to kill the sea serpent...that Prismer...but I suppose we didn't have that option," Liselotte mused.

That Prismer must have sunk many ships in the waters off her hometown of Charot. Its defeat would make navigation of the Shaquell Sea much safer. It was only natural that, as the heir to the Arcia duchy, she would regret its escape.

Inglis, too, would have loved to jump right back to where she'd been and mix it up with the Prismer, Maxwell, Tiffanyer, and the faceless giant, but unfortunately, using divine feat again would require her to spend some time recreating hi-aether. If she had a hial menace at hand, it would be a different story, but Eris was within the Greyfrier sarcophagus and could not be stirred, and Arles was, as far as Inglis knew, on her way to Alcard with the Rangers. But then, there was Ripple. If she were in the capital, Inglis might be able to return to the Shaquell Sea.

But first, there was something she needed to say. "Leone, Liselotte, I'm sorry for making you two worry."

"It's all right. I'm just glad you're okay!"

"Welcome back, Inglis!"

The two of them came in for a hug as well.

*Rafinha's family—my cousin—and she's essentially a granddaughter to me. I'll take any opportunity to dote on her. Leone and Liselotte are a different story, though. I feel a bit uncomfortable—guilty, really—about any sort of touching with them. There's still a little bit of me that remembers my past life as a man. I guess in a way, I'll always be me, for what that's worth.*

A call came from far away. "Heeeeeey! Inglis! Everyone!"

Looking up, Inglis saw Flygears approaching from the direction of the palace. At the head of their formation was Ripple, and she had been the one calling out.

"Oh, nice! Ripple!"

With her here, Inglis could, as she'd just been thinking, return to the Shaquell Sea. This was her chance for another round with those tough-seeming foes.

"Ripple! Over here!" She waved with a smile.

"Wh-What in the world happened here?! Inglis, did you do this?! And what's with that grin on your face? It's kinda fishy."

As soon as Ripple landed nearby, Inglis immediately caught her by the arm.  
“Never mind that! Hurry up, let’s go!”

“Go? Go where?”

“To a fight, of course! There’s a general from Venefic with a special-class Rune, and he’s combined himself with an undying giant that his Artifact created, and then he turned the enemy hialal menace Tiffanyer into a weapon, and then there’s a shark Prismer and he’s riding it!”

“What...? You sound like a madwoman.”

“Yeah, isn’t it so cool?! If I go back there right now, I can fight them! So let’s go! C’mon, c’mon, c’mon!”

“Hold it!” Rafinha grabbed Inglis by the ear.

“Oww! Rani, that hurts!”

“We don’t have time for that right now! You’re going to have to wait! Myce and everyone just got dropped here, think about the trouble they’re having!” Rafinha looked over at Myce and the other Highlanders who had come along with Illuminas.

“S-So this is a surface city! It’s amazing! It’s beautiful!”

“You saved us!”

“I wondered what was going to happen to us!”

“Thank goodness...” Myce’s eyes gleamed as he looked out over the nightscape of Chiral, and the other Highlanders patted their chests in relief. Thankfully, none had been turned into magicite beasts by the Prism Flow.

“By the way...” Rafinha smiled at Inglis. “Aren’t you hungry?”

“I am. Very.”

*Grrrrg!!*

Inglis and Rafinha’s stomachs rumbled in unison.

“I think I want to have something other than fish for once,” Leone said.

“Yes, I’ve lost the taste for it from this trip,” Liselotte concurred.

Rafinha nodded in agreement with them, and then spoke up. “All right! Myce! Everyone from Highland! To celebrate your being safe, let’s go have some surface food! It’s our treat!”

“Wow! Thanks, Rafinha!” Myce said.

The Highlanders responded joyfully. “Wow! That’ll be a great help!”

“I’m exhausted, I could use a break.”

“It’ll take a lot of money to feed this many people...” Inglis began.

“So, let’s go to the cafeteria!” Rafinha said.

“Yeah, we can talk the principal into letting them eat after the fact.” They couldn’t exactly let Myce and the others starve, and there weren’t many other choices.

“Then I’ll come along too! I want to hear all about your adventure!” Ripple said.

“Okay!” Inglis and Rafinha agreed.

But still, packing all the Highlanders into the Flygears that had come with Ripple would be a tall order.

“How to get everyone there... Maybe this?” Inglis looked over at a mechanical dragon nearby. “Everyone, can you hold on to the mechanical dragon? I’ll get you there with that.”

“But, uh, Inglis,” Myce stammered, still getting used to Inglis’s teenage appearance, “the mechanical dragons still aren’t working.”

“Don’t worry, Myce. It’ll move. Climb on,” she replied.

“O-Okay? Sure.” Myce acted a bit sheepish at her smile. He’d only seen her as a little girl before. Inglis could understand his awkward behavior.

“Rani, everyone, you climb on too.”

In the end, nearly a hundred Highlanders, plus Rafinha and friends, were holding on to a mechanical dragon.

“We’re all aboard, Chris!”

“Got it. Okay, then!” Inglis traced her fingers along herself, and combined mana and dragon lore.

*“Gwohhhh!”*

With a roar, her dragon ice armor, azure in color with a draconic design, materialized around her. She’d managed to deal with the important parts with the cloth from her children’s clothing, but the armor provided much more secure coverage.

Inglis hoisted the mechanical dragon aloft and ran across the surface of Lake Bolt.

She almost expected the weight of the mechanical dragon would make her sink, but the power of the dragon ice armor made every footfall create a foothold of ice. The ice couldn’t continually support the dragon’s weight, but as a temporary measure, it was good enough. Before her foot sank, she was on to her next step, and her sprint across the surface of Lake Bolt toward the knights’ academy continued.

The Highlanders holding on to the dragon shouted in surprise. “Wow!”

“This is amazing!”

“What’s going on?!”

“That’s incredible, Inglis!” Myce gasped.

“Well, I mean, for her this is just another normal day!” Rafinha replied, cheerful.

“Ha ha ha... No matter where you are or what you’re doing, you’re still you, Inglis.” Ripple chuckled from her Flygear, which flew along keeping pace with her.

That night was a lively dinner party with the Highlanders, who could finally feel relief and enjoy the novelty of being on the surface. Inglis and Rafinha also relished in the familiar flavors of the knights’ academy that they’d missed.

Perhaps they even enjoyed the food a bit too much.

Later, when they reported to Principal Miriela, she congratulated them on their good work—though the tears in her eyes suggested the cafeteria budget was about to be stretched again.



## Chapter V: Inglis, Age 16—Far-Off Highland (10)

After the Rangers returned from Alcard, Inglis reentered the Greyfrier sarcophagus, with company this time. The memories of the space were reflected in front of them. A pair of the cylindrical devices which created hial menaces stood side by side; inside them were Sistia and Yua. And before them stood the young man who had broken into the sarcophagus from outside.

“Wow, it really is Yua!” Ripple raised her voice in surprise.

“A look-alike?” Yua crooked her head, her expression still listless.

“No, I suspect that person is actually you,” Inglis said. Yua’s usual lackadaisical attitude was grating on her now.

“Do you remember anything like this, Yua?” Rafinha asked.

“Hmm... Nope.” Yua softly shook her head. Morris, now a tiny magicite beast perched atop her head, shook his own along with her.

“I—I see.”

“But...”

“Yes?”

“I’ve met this lady.” Yua pointed to Sistia. “She helped make Beanpole tiny.”

“So, at the battle of Ahlemin...” Inglis began.

At the battle with the birdlike Prismer that had taken place in Ahlemin, Morris had been turned into a magicite beast. She had heard that he seemed to be connected to the Steelblood Front, and that the prism powder he had been carrying reacted to the Prismer at the start of the fight, turning him into a magicite beast. Sistia had lent her aid during the battle. Still, Inglis thought Yua and Sistia must have met before then.

“Yeah. She seemed like she looked up to me,” Yua said.

“H-Huh? Sistia said something like that?”

“No... She just seemed kind of like she was trying to flatter me.”

“Flatter you?”

“Yeah. With how she talked.”

“Politely, with a lot of respect?”

“Yeah, like that.” Yua nodded insistently.

Inglis fell silent for a moment. Everything she’d observed of Sistia portrayed her as an exceptionally proud woman. She seemed to have absolute loyalty to the black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front, but Inglis couldn’t picture her bowing and scraping for anyone without a very good reason. “So...she thinks of you as an old acquaintance that she has a lot of respect for, then.”

“I didn’t really get it, but I guess so, yeah. Anyway, that has to just be a look-alike.” Yua was pushing her theory hard.

“No, I can’t see her as anyone but you. If anything, it seems more likely that you lost your prior memories due to this device that makes hial menaces.”

Inglis had evidence to back her own theory: Charlotte, who she’d met in Illuminas, clearly resembled Liselotte, and even had her mother’s name, but didn’t appear to remember anything. A loss of memories might have been a side effect of the process of becoming a hial menace. On the other hand, Eris, Ripple, and Arles all remembered parts of their lives from before becoming hial menaces, so perhaps amnesia didn’t always occur.

“Ah, she fell!” Principal Miriela gasped, watching the scene unfold within the Greyfrier sarcophagus.

“I see a rainbow glow from below! Is that a Prismer?!” Ambassador Theodore raised his voice in shock.

He had joined Inglis, Rafinha, Yua, Ripple, and Principal Miriela inside the sarcophagus with the intention that he would check on Eris and Imperial Princess Meltina of Venefic before deciding whether to immediately destroy the devices and rescue them. Yua was not the main topic, but Inglis was curious about her as well, so she had invited her along.

“Judging by the circumstances, that young man may be the leader of the

Steelblood Front. We may be witnessing the moment where he and Sistia met,” Inglis said. Him rescuing Sistia from Illuminas and her repaying that debt with absolute loyalty made sense.

“Perhaps.” Miriela nodded to Inglis.

Inglis didn’t wish for Yua to fall under suspicion of being one of their informants, so Inglis felt the need to speak up. “At the very least, we can establish that Yua herself is uninvolved with the Steelblood Front. After all, their paths just diverged.”

“Yes, that makes sense.” Theodore nodded in agreement.

“I don’t really think acting as their informant while using her time at school is something she could do,” Ripple said.

“Theodore, how was this accident—this incident—addressed in Illuminas?” Miriela asked.

“Each Greyfrier sarcophagus seems pretty important to Highland,” Inglis added, also eager to hear how they’d lost Sistia and Yua.

At a loss, Theodore shook his head. “Matters related to the Greyfrier sarcophagus were kept strictly between Academician Wilkin and my father—that is, the machinator. It’s the first I’ve heard of it as well.”

“It’s possible that even though Yua knew nothing, Morris kept her under close observation because he was a Steelblood Front member,” Miriela suggested.

“That is a possibility,” Inglis said. “I’d really wanted to add Yua as a hial menace to my team, but if she doesn’t remember anything, I suppose that’s impossible...”

“Yua, can you think of—” Ripple turned to the girl, only to find that she wasn’t there. She had crept around in front of the man they thought was the black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front, and was staring at his face.

“Ooh, he’s pretty good-looking,” Yua said.

“Wow, you’re right! ♪” Rafinha had as well.

“But I still think your brother’s hotter, Little Demon.”

“Huh?” Rafinha asked. “Rafael?”

“Yeah. Huncules.”

“Ha ha ha... If I’m a demigod’s little sister, that makes me a demigod too! Yay!”

“And eventually, my little sister.” Yua clapped Rafinha on the shoulder.

“Whaaat?! B-But Rafael has to marry Chris! Right, Chris?”

“I have no intentions of getting married! Anyway, Rani, Yua, could you stop and listen?”

“Really, Chris, you should come see this.”

“It’s a sight for sore eyes, Boobies.”

Yua and Rafinha both waved Inglis over.

“Sheesh...” The conversation was going nowhere, so she decided to play along. Now that she thought of it, when she had been here alone, she hadn’t bothered to look at the face of the man she thought was the Steelblood Front’s leader. It wouldn’t hurt to do that now. Inglis circled around where the man was standing and nonchalantly looked at his face.

“Wh—?!” She felt her eyes spring open. “Wh-What the hell’s going on?! How?!” It was enough to make her forget her normal self, even her normal voice.

She knew that face well because it was her own. Not Inglis Eucus, but her previous incarnation, King Inglis.



King Inglis, but young again. It was absolutely not a case of mistaken identity. She was certain of it; that was a young King Inglis. She supposed it made sense that the black-masked man, if he had her body, was a divine knight. But she had absolutely no idea how he would completely resemble a younger version of her previous incarnation. Was this the work of Goddess Alistia, whose presence she could not feel in the current world?

“Chris? What’s up?” Rafinha reacted in surprise to Inglis’s obvious agitation.

“Huh? Well, uh, umm...” Inglis was so unsettled that she couldn’t even play it off easily.

“Wait, is he your type?”

“Huh? Er... Yeah, I guess? I’m definitely interested in him.” Inglis tried to be as vague in response as possible. Let the others keep talking.

“You are?! For real?! And you’re admitting it?!” Rafinha was flabbergasted. She covered Inglis’s eyes from behind. “Don’t look! You need to save yourself for Rafael!”

“I said I’m not getting married!”

Rafinha looked back at the scene. “Oh, Yua, Sistia, and that guy disappeared.”

“It’s because they were memories of this space...”

“There’s little Boobies,” Yua said.

The memories of the space were reflecting a recent image—of Inglis training within the Greyfrier sarcophagus. As time passed, she grew. It had felt like a long time to her, and now as everyone watched it back, it was clear that she had grown back up to her original age of sixteen.

As she did, her clothes clung tighter and tighter to her. Her sleeves shortened and her hemline rose, but most affected was her chest. As her breasts grew out again, the fabric over them tightened, then—

*Rrrrip!*

The shirt burst completely.

“Oh, it’s Boobies’s boobies.”

Yua’s description was not incorrect; Inglis’s chest was on full display.

“Stop it! Don’t look!” She stood in front of the vision of herself, blocking everyone else’s sight.

Watching her and the others, Miriela sighed. “We seem to have drifted off topic here.”

“Ha ha ha, you’re not wrong,” Theodore agreed. “It’s gotten quite lively.”

Inglis cleared her throat. “Ahem! In any case, since Yua doesn’t seem to remember anything about this, I’d like to talk to the leader of the Steelblood Front and Sistia.”

The last time they met was on the battlefield at Ahlemin, during the fight with the rime-bound Prismers. With their foe a Prismers, they had joined forces against a shared enemy, but Inglis wasn’t sure they could meet on friendly terms this time.

“Yes,” Theodore agreed. “Even beyond that, the refugees from Illuminas will be living in Karelia. We want them to live in peace, so it wouldn’t do for them to be attacked by the Steelblood Front as Cyrene was.”

He was right. Myce and the other Highlander refugees from Illuminas would be remaining on the surface. Illuminas itself remained immobile in the center of Lake Bolt after its crash landing, and it was only natural that those who had cast their lot with it to want to remain there.

With the machinator, the core of the island, still silent, his son and presumed successor, Ambassador Theodore, would act in his stead. This was a second reason for them to stay on the surface. As Illuminas rebuilt, and relied on Karelia for food and other supplies, it would in turn pay that debt back in Artifact and Flygear technology. It was a win-win situation.

Inglis wondered whether the two cultures coexisting on the surface would become a noteworthy precedent for others to follow, rather than one being above and the other below. Theodore, along with Myce and the other people of

Illuminas, had already been exceptionally accommodating among Highlanders, seeking favorable relations with surface countries. If they could not be coexisted with, how could other Highland factions? Instead, it was better to create a successful example for the other Highlanders by showing Myce and the others living peacefully on the surface—and for that, Theodore knew, interference from an anti-Highland organization like the Steelblood Front could not be allowed.

“Perhaps we negotiate with the Steelbloods?” Inglis suggested.

“If possible. They joined forces with us recently, at the battle with the Prismers. I believe they may be willing to listen. Though I do, personally, have my reservations,” Theodore said.

That made sense. His little sister, Cyrene, had been turned into a magicite beast by the Steelblood Front, and of course that still weighed on him.

“I think that’s a good idea! I’m in full agreement! That’s how we let Myce and everyone have a happy life in Karelia!” Rafinha smiled encouragingly at Theodore.

“Why, thank you, Rafinha! You saying so reassures me that I’ve made the correct choice.” Theodore returned a pleased smile.

“Ah, er...! I don’t, I mean... I just want to show Myce my hometown, and I want this to be a world where we can have fun together without worrying.”

“That’s a wonderful idea. I’d love to join in as well. I believe it would be a chance to broaden my horizons.”

“Of course...!”

Inglis nimbly inserted herself between Rafinha and Theodore. “But even if we’d prefer to negotiate, we have no idea where the Steelblood Front’s headquarters is, nor do we know of their situation.” She couldn’t let her guard down, couldn’t let Theodore and Rafinha grow closer than necessary. Just as Rafinha insisted that Inglis should marry Rafael, Inglis insisted that Rafinha was too young for romance. Far too young.

“Whoa?! Hey, what are you doing, Chris? I can’t see!”



“Don’t worry about it. And there’s nothing for you to see anyway.”

Theodore nodded in agreement with Inglis’s statement about the Steelblood Front. “Well, that’s certainly true... We may have to wait for our opportunity.”

“Until recently, the knightly orders and the knights’ academy were full of informants, but they were all turned into magicite beasts at the battle of Ahlemin...” Miriela noted, her brow furrowed.

The prism powder carried by Steelblood Front members had reacted violently, and Morris and the others scattered around the battlefield at Ahlemin had been transformed into magicite beasts almost immediately.

“It’s ironic. The Prismer flushed out the infiltrators, even eliminated them for us, but...” Ripple’s read on the situation was correct.

“It’s possible that there will be new infiltration attempts, but if we try to find them ourselves and make them cough up the location of their headquarters, that would probably just harden their hostility,” Inglis said.

Plus, they were an anti-Highland organization. Overlooking Myce and the other Highlanders would go against their core goals. Even if the black-masked man would agree, his subordinates might not. What exactly would develop from that situation would depend on the moves of its players, but it would quite possibly lead Inglis and friends toward moves to suppress the Steelblood Front.

“Yes, that’s right. Even though our goal is to negotiate peacefully, that wouldn’t be helpful,” Theodore said.

“So to sum it up, our best move might simply be to come down hard on any attempts of theirs to target the Highlanders of Illuminas,” Inglis suggested.

“That’s certainly not my preferred method, but...” Theodore began.

“Well, I’d prefer that they simply stay quiet...” Miriela said.

Both of them frowned worriedly.

“In any case, I’ll do my utmost to guard the Highlanders of Illuminas,” Inglis said.

“Excellent, thank you,” Theodore said.

“Well... After all, I would like to meet the leader of the Steelblood Front again.”

Rafinha gave Inglis a stare in response to that answer.

“Wh-What, Rani?”

“You just want to meet him because you think he’s your type, don’t you?! Not allowed!”

“No, wait, it’s not like that!”

“So it’s because you want to fight him again?”

“Y-Yeah! Of course!”

“Well, I guess if it’s just for *that*, it’s okay...”

*Honestly, even that was only a half-truth*, Inglis thought. He was, of course, one of the strongest people she knew. He was remarkable; she wanted the opportunity to spar with him anytime, all the time. But if he really did have the body of young King Inglis, there was so much she wanted to ask him. The fighting could come after the questions.

“Let’s go farther in. Eris and Princess Meltina are there,” she said.

As they advanced farther into the Greyfrier sarcophagus, they encountered a line of the devices—the ones that they had seen Yua and Sistia in earlier.

“Oh, these are the real ones.” Yua patted one of them.

“But it’s empty.” Rafinha patted another.

There were many—dozens, it seemed—but most were empty. Not all, though.

“There’s something in this one,” Yua said.

“Which one...? Eeeeeek! I-It’s a skeleton?!” Rafinha shrieked in shock.

“I guess if things hadn’t gone well with me, I’d have ended up like that.” A conflicted expression washed over Ripple’s face as she looked inside.

“These days, we can determine the success rates of hial menace candidates ahead of time so that we can avoid dangerous cases. However, in the past this

was done in a rather more haphazard manner,” Theodore said. “This was one of Chief Academician Wilkin’s achievements.”

“So...he wasn’t *all* bad,” Rafinha said. “He was worried about Wilma, and knowing the risks in advance means fewer people would lose their lives.”

“His face looking like Evel’s colored your view of him,” Inglis noted.

“I guess so... I need to think about that a bit.” Rafinha sighed.

“But that doesn’t mean he wasn’t bad at all. He let in adversaries to destroy Illuminas, and Theodore’s father, the machinator, fell silent.”

“Oh, right, that’s right! I’m sorry, I didn’t...” Rafinha hung her head at Theodore.

“No, it’s all right. Your sensibilities are as pure as they are correct—if you feel that way, that’s fine.” Theodore was genial to a fault.

“No, I just, uh... I’m still such a little kid, just saying whatever comes to mind.”

This was a disturbing atmosphere indeed for Inglis, who then stood in front of Theodore, blocking the pair’s sight of each other. Clearing her throat, she changed the topic. “In any case, shall we remove the skeletons from here and give them a proper burial? I didn’t have time to do so when I was here recently. I believe that would make both Ripple and Eris feel better.”

“Yes, of course. An excellent idea,” Theodore responded with a nod.

“Inglis! Thanks.” Ripple smiled happily, her ears and tail twitching in joy.

“With everything you, Eris, and Miss Arles have done for me, it’s the least I can do.”

As they spoke, a section of the devices containing people came into view. One held Eris; the other, Imperial Princess Meltina of Venefic.

“Eris! Thank goodness, you’re still okay!” Ripple rushed to the device containing Eris. Inside, she floated unconscious, her eyes closed, in some kind of liquid.

“And this must be Princess Meltina from Venefic,” Miriela said, looking at the neighboring device.

“I was at a loss for what to do, so... Please,” Inglis prompted Theodore. She had occasionally checked in on Eris and Meltina during her years of training in the Greyfrier sarcophagus. She’d never noticed anything unusual, so she had left them as they were. Her plan was to have Theodore assess the situation, while she watched and learned about Highland technology.

“Yes, understood.” Theodore nodded and reached his hand toward a control panel attached to one of the devices.



A lecture hall at the knights’ academy was to be the location of a joint lecture for both knight cadets and squire cadets, starting early in the morning. After their vacation, Inglis and friends had headed to Illuminas while the remaining students had gone to Alcard with the Rangers, so it was the first time in quite some time that they were all gathered in the same place for a lesson.

“Phew. It’s great to be able to relax in a class for once. We’ve been so busy lately,” Rafinha said. Despite fighting the urge to sleep, she leaned on Inglis, who sat next to her.

“Don’t just doze off, Rani, pay attention.”

“But I’m so tired today for some reason. I didn’t even eat much at breakfast.”

“It seemed to me like you ate quite a bit,” Leone interjected. Inglis and Rafinha had exceptional appetites, so she and Liselotte had a hard time telling what a small meal was for the pair.

“In any case, I’m glad everyone made it back here safely,” Liselotte said. “It’s the first time in a while that things have calmed down.”

“Yes, those who went to Alcard don’t seem to have encountered any major problems,” Inglis said.

“Aww, it’s been so long, I wish I could have gone and seen Lahti and Pullum,” Rafinha said.

They chatted idly, waiting for class to start.

“Good morning, everyone!” Miriela entered the lecture hall with a smile.

“Huh? What’s up, Principal Miriela? You’re not here for special lessons, are

you?”

It was unusual for Miriela to teach a class herself. Young though she was, she was firmly established in her role as principal and had many things to do beyond teaching class. It was only in special circumstances, like the enhanced-gravity orientation after the entrance ceremony, approval tests for special extracurricular activities, or commanding the defenses when Ripple had been summoning magicite beasts, that she taught directly.

“The principal being here does make me wonder if there’s some kind of situation,” Leone speculated, to which Inglis agreed.

“Again? Where might we be going this time?” Liselotte asked, a note of exhaustion in her voice.

“I want to go to the Papal League side of Highland next!” Inglis announced. “I want to fight Lord Evel, who took Fufailbane! And maybe spar with Highland’s pontifex himself. I bet he’s strong. He has to be strong, right? After all, he’s Highland’s top VIP!”

As Inglis’s eyes gleamed, Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte joined in strained laughter. Their faces made it clear that they knew that could not possibly turn out well.

“Hmm. It does give me a bad feeling when she shows up to teach unexpectedly,” Rafinha said, and Leone and Liselotte nodded in agreement. They apparently weren’t the only ones either, as the lecture hall was buzzing with moans and groans.

Hearing this, Miriela became frustrated. “And who might that be muttering? A volunteer for triple-gravity special training?”

“Of course! Yes! Me! Pick me!” Inglis’s hand shot up, and her eyes were gleaming. If there was a version of the enhanced gravity magic that placed an even weightier load upon the target, she wanted to study how the mana moved and was placed so that she could use it in her own training.

“You don’t need it, Inglis. After all, you were happy to see me,” Miriela said, grinning.

“Hmph... It didn’t work...” Inglis thought that she should have pretended to

dislike the idea too.

“Ahem,” Miriela continued. “Er, I understand that you all seem to believe I bring trouble, but today I’m going to show you that that is not the case!” After clearing her throat, she smiled at the students.

“Huh? What is it, then? An extended menu at the cafeteria?!” Inglis asked.

“That’d be nice,” Rafinha said, “but I don’t think the principal would be here just to tell us that.”

Their question, though, was soon answered. “Today I’d like to introduce a new transfer student!”

“A transfer student? Hmm, I wonder what they’re like,” Rafinha asked, interest clear in her eyes.

“Come on in!” Miriela called out, and a young lady with pale aqua hair and elegant features entered the lecture hall.

“Ah!” Inglis gasped.

“It’s—!” Rafinha began.

“The imperial princess of Venefic, Meltina!” Liselotte completed.

Indeed it was her, though wearing a knights’ academy uniform. When the group with Ambassador Theodore had recently been in the Greyfrier sarcophagus, he had examined the devices holding Eris and Princess Meltina and concluded that though Eris could be left until the process completed with no likely ill effects, Meltina should be removed from her device immediately. Inglis and friends had helped to remove her, but Meltina had remained unconscious, and been brought to the palace to recover. It was pleasant to learn that she was already back on her feet, but her enrollment in the knights’ academy was a surprise.

“This is Meltina! Everyone be nice to her, okay? Especially you four—Inglis, Rafinha, Leone, Liselotte. Take good care of her.” Miriela smiled.

“Wow! A princess, a princess, a real princess!” Rafinha exclaimed.

“Rani, it’s probably best not to say that too loudly,” Inglis reminded her.

“Huh? But why?”

“Well, the principal didn’t introduce her as such, right? If everyone knows too much, bad things might happen. Even Lahti was keeping his true identity under wraps, right?”

“Oh, right, that’s true.”

“And Lahti is from Alcard, so even that wouldn’t have been as bad.”

Alcard was traditionally friendly with Karelia. Although they had planned an attack on Karelia alongside Venefic, those plans had fallen through. A formal diplomatic apology had followed, along with immediate support for Prince Wayne’s plans of establishing the Rangers and acceptance of their presence within Alcard’s borders. With such close relations, even if Lahti’s true identity had become widely known, it probably would not have caused significant problems.

Meltina, on the other hand, was from Venefic. Unlike Alcard, Venefic had historically been Karelia’s enemy. People had a different perception of it than of Alcard, and Karelian forces had recently fought Venefic. Some even blamed the Prismers’ invasion on Venefic. If Meltina’s true identity was known, plots against her would surely follow. Rochefort and Arles, of course, were also from Venefic, but Arles was a hieiral menace, a guardian of the people, and Rochefort was an exceptionally talented bearer of a special-class Rune. Some might resent them, but their capabilities seemed to silence public dissent. Meltina, on the other hand, presumably had no such answers.

“But we already know,” Inglis continued. “That’s why the principal told us to take care of her.” Rochefort and Arles would surely help, but Miriela had wanted students who would watch over Meltina as well.

“I see... There definitely has been a lot of trouble with Venefic lately...”

The two had contended with General Maxwell of Venefic in Illuminas recently. If his capabilities and power were turned toward an assault on Karelia, they would likely produce as much damage as the rime-bound Prismers had.

“So in a way, maybe she did bring trouble with her.” Inglis chuckled. “Not that I mind.” It wasn’t just Meltina either. Myce and the other Highlanders of

Illuminas had been welcomed in the capital; recently, the number of potential flash points had increased significantly.

“That’s not good!” Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte insisted in unison.

“Now, Meltina, you can sit over there, right next to Rafinha.”

While they conversed, Meltina took Principal Miriela’s seat assignment and approached them. “I’d like to thank you all for your help recently. You saved my life... I’m truly grateful.” She bowed deeply and delivered polite thanks.

“N-No... I’m just sorry we couldn’t save the others!” Rafinha’s apologetic bow was just as deep.

*So she has been thinking about that. She’s such a kind girl.* Inglis couldn’t help but smile a little. To her, Rafinha really was a granddaughter to be proud of.

“Please, don’t trouble yourself over that. My own weakness is to blame. I will cherish this life of mine that they saved as well.”

Meltina smiled. “But I want to become stronger—in body and soul, such that I never see such a thing happen before me again... And to that end, I have much to learn here, I believe. Could you please aid me in that?”





“Of course! Right, Chris?” Rafinha asked.

“Yes. I’ll do my best to make sure you’re safe here,” Inglis said.

Meltina had been sold to Highland after political unrest in Venefic. Even though she had been saved, there was no place for her to return to, and hearing the circumstances, King Carlias and Prince Wayne had entrusted her to Miriela at the knights’ academy.

Depending on the state of future relations with Venefic, she might become important. Her safety was a priority for Karelia, as she might one day become integral to future relations with Venefic—say, if Karelia were to launch an attack on Venefic, in order to reduce resistance, Meltina could be placed in ceremonial command of not a Karelian invasion but of a war to overthrow the current regime and liberate the people of Venefic.

Meltina herself, having lost everything, surely couldn’t afford the not-insignificant tuition of the knights’ academy, but to the national treasury it was a value indeed. The expenses of a single individual were a cheap price. Inglis would have made the same decision, had she been in Carlias and Wayne’s shoes.

“We’ll do everything we can too! Just ask us anything,” Rafinha said.

“There may be a few surprises about this group, so keep an open mind...” Liselotte said.

“Well, that’s definitely the truth,” Leone agreed.

“Huh?” Inglis and Rafinha were nonplussed by Leone’s agreement.

Lunchtime would be the first of those shocking moments, Liselotte had assumed, and she had offered a friendly warning, but a few hours and a few classes later— “Mmmmm, it’s tasty today too! ♪ Meltina, this is set A!” Rafinha said.

“Yes, it’s delicious,” Meltina replied.

“This is set C! I really like this one.”

“Understood. It’s excellent as well.”

*Nom, nom, nom, nom!*

They churned through dishes at an astounding rate even as they conversed. It had begun to seem like a battle to see how much food they could consume during their limited lunch break.

“Ahhhh, there aren’t enough veggies!”

“Not enough meat either!”

“Or eggs, or bread! There’s not enough of anything!”

A battle fought most fiercely by the lunch ladies, rushing back and forth as they cooked, even though they were veterans of campaigns against Inglis and Rafinha’s bellies.

“One last push! Two each of A through E!” Rafinha said.

“Count me in,” Inglis said.

“And myself as well,” Meltina followed with a calm expression.

“Now there’s three of them!” Leone gasped.

“Birds of a feather, indeed...” Liselotte replied.

For in the end, it was they who were shocked by the events of the day’s lunch.

## Extra: Memories of the Sword Princess

As Inglis trained within the Greyfrier sarcophagus, she sat, focusing as mindfully as she could—but then something pulled at her, and she opened her eyes with a sigh.

“Phew. I should take a quick break.”

The task of precisely forming her aether was as delicate as the subtle brushstrokes in painting a masterpiece. If she pushed on and mastered it, someday, she would achieve hi-aether, and with that, the ability to use divine feat unaided. Even from within the Greyfrier sarcophagus—completely unopenable from the inside—she could escape if she could use divine feat on her own to effectively change her surroundings and place herself outside the sarcophagus.

She was glad that she had realized the existence of divine feat while wielding Eris, Ripple, and Arles. Thanks to that experience, she had a goal, a clear target. Without that, even she might have lost hope, succumbed to her doubts.

The only real risk was that if the training took too long, that she might grow old and exhaust herself. Enough time had passed that she had already grown back up from a little girl. Her clothes were getting too tight on her. Still, she was beginning to grasp hints of hi-aether. *Only a little bit more, only one more step...*

“If I don’t get back soon, Rani will be worried...and...”

More than anything, she herself was lonely. It was the first time in her life as Inglis Eucus that she had been separated from Rafinha for so long.

*Would any grandparent not feel lonely, not seeing their granddaughter’s face for so long? No, all would.*

It was a natural human emotion, nothing to feel ashamed of. And it pushed Inglis forth in her effort, motivating her to speed up her training.

“I can’t wait to see Rani’s face again.”

As Inglis murmured to herself, she moved toward the cylinders containing Eris and Venefic's Princess Meltina. When Inglis took breaks, she sometimes checked to see whether anything had happened to them. Usually, Eris and Meltina were both quietly resting inside the devices, their eyes closed, but Eris was different this time.

"Eris?"

It looked like she was shrunken back and trying to embrace herself, her expression pained as if she was about to cry. Perhaps she'd already shed tears and the fluid which filled the device obscured them. Inglis fell silent for a moment. Was Eris recalling something painful? She had been in a Greyfrier sarcophagus before. Was she remembering that time and crying over it? Inglis had heard that Eris became a hial menace more than four hundred years before. That had been during the Highland-Surface War; what happened then? Did it have some connection to the Silvare Kingdom, which Inglis had founded?

Inglis wanted to ask, but her voice would not reach. All she could do was softly rest her palm on the surface of the device. But as she did, a light shone from where she placed her hand and spread rapidly. "Huh?! Wh-What—"

The unknown light spread over the world around her as her consciousness faded.



"Eris! Hey, sis!"

Eris heard her name called as she stood in a miniature garden built within the palace. She saw herself reflected in the spring in a beautiful light-blue dress. But as gorgeous as her outfit was, her expression was troubled. This was not a time for pleasantries. "Oh, Tiffanyer?"

A beautiful young lady appeared, a bit younger than her. She was the princess of a country founded by members of the ruling dynasty of Eris's country, a sister country so to speak. She and Eris were distant relatives, and they had been close since they were young, so Tiffanyer thought of her as an older sister.

In the palace of her country, Eris awaited the return of her father and brother—the king and prince—from their campaign. Together with the forces of their

own country and their neighbors, they had formed an alliance and marched forth. Tiffanyer, not wanting to wait alone, had come to be with her.

“What’s wrong? Don’t hurry like that, you’ll fall.”

“B-But I have something important to tell you, si— Eeek!” Tiffanyer stumbled as she approached Eris, who managed to catch her.

She sighed in relief at having prevented a neighbor’s princess from injuring herself. “Don’t scare me like that... What happened?”

“W-Well! I think the coalition army is back!”

“Oh! Is that true?!”

“Yes! They say you can see an army outside the keep!”

“Let’s go look!” Tiffanyer in tow, Eris went to the roof of the keep, where she could see for a long distance.

And what entered her vision was entirely unlike the band which had marched off so gallantly. Eris’s breath caught in her throat. There were half those who had left—no, even fewer. Not a single one was without a wound. Their feet dragged, their shoulders slumped, and their steps were heavy.

Unease oozed from the other people on the roof. Some even lost their strength and collapsed to their knees.

“Wh-What happened?”

“They lost... The coalition army lost...”

“How did it go so wrong? They couldn’t spare even one messenger?!”

“What will become of us...?”

“N-No... What happened to my parents?!” Tiffanyer’s voice wavered as tears welled up in her eyes and she, too, nearly collapsed.

But Eris was there to support her with an embrace. “It’s okay. It’s okay, Tiffanyer. I’m here for you.” She cursed her own weakness, her own inability to offer anything more than those words. She didn’t even know what had happened to her own father or brother. Her father had led the alliance and commanded the coalition army. She had been powerless to stop him.

Their enemy had been Highland. Only mages and the magic they wielded could fight off the magicite beasts created by the Prism Flow, but the Highlanders offered strange new weapons called Artifacts that anyone could wield—in exchange for crops and other supplies from the surface. That could be an equal exchange in its own way, but as distant countries came to rely more and more on the Artifacts, Highland's terms changed. They no longer demanded just produce and materials but people and land as well, and Eris had heard of Highland executing mages of the surface lands and banning the education in magic there.

Based on those tidings, her country and Tiffanyer's had ignored Highland's overtures, defending their lands and people from the Prism Flow and magicite beasts by the strength of their own mages. Mages were rare in most lands, and their number shrank more and more, but Eris and Tiffanyer's countries had begun with many and trained them well.

There was nothing which could be done if the ultimate magicite beast appeared—a Prismer—but to evacuate as if before a disaster. That was well-known across the surface. Still, there was no other way to defend themselves from the Prism Flow.

However, not every country had made the same decision. Their neighbors, having never counted many mages among their populations—and plenty worried about the Prism Flow—had begun trade with Highland. And just as the rumors had suggested, Highland's demands increased until entire towns were taken away, their population included, to become part of Highland.

Beyond that, Highland had begun to demand the invasion of neighboring countries in exchange for Artifacts, and it was then that Eris and Tiffanyer's fathers had risen up. Instead of casting blame on the surface countries which had invaded their neighbors, they laid it at the feet of Highland and called for a unified effort to expel Highland from the region. The king of the regional power wielding his might not only for his own domain, but for those of his surface neighbors, was met with acclaim, and the list of allies in the coalition was strong. The departure of the coalition had been so valiant; Eris had believed in, even prayed for, their victory.

And now she could see not a speck of that gleam was left in the remnants.

“We’ve no time to waste! Warm food and bunks for them! They fought in our name—we must at least now labor in theirs!” Eris tried her best to project her voice to the devastated people in the castle, somehow managing to keep her own fear from coming through as a waver.

“Y-Yes, Princess Eris!”

“Understood!”

“L-Let’s go!”

“We’ll do what we can!”

The people sprung to action at her encouraging words, but then she felt something spatter on her cheeks and forehead.

*Plop, plop...*

They were raindrops—but not normal raindrops...

“Oh no! Eris, the Prism Flow is falling!” Tiffanyer exclaimed.

“Y-Yes... Of all the times! We need to bring people inside as quickly as possible!”

“Aaah! M-Magicite beasts!” Tiffanyer shuddered as she pointed to a large number of risen magicite beasts threatening the routed coalition troops.

“Lend them support! They’re in no position to fight! Call for the mage squads!”

“Princess Eris, we cannot! We haven’t the numbers to handle protecting the troops while fighting so many beasts!”

“But...! But we can’t simply abandon them!”

While not unskilled in the arts of war, Eris could not use magic. Mages were the only ones who could protect her country from magicite beasts. She had tried studying the magical arts over and over, but she was simply incapable. Her father and her brother were powerful mages, suited to the throne, but magic did not always run along family lines. Even in a battle for not only her own land, but the fate of the surface, she was left to the rear.

“The soldiers!” Tiffanyer pointed as the magicite beasts fell upon the



retreating forces and began to devour them.

The wounded soldiers were, for the most part, too weak to fight back, and they fell one by one. The few remaining mages attempted a counterattack, but they were overwhelmed, and so even those priceless survivors laid down their lives.

“We can’t just sit by! Mage or no, rescue those who can still move!”

“Princess Eris! That’s too reckless! Only mages can fight off a magicite beast!”

At that, the minister who had governed in Eris’s father’s absence felt the need to speak up. “This is difficult to say, but we should close the gates so that no magicite beasts can enter! If we don’t, the beasts chasing the soldiers will rush in like an avalanche!”

Some citizens hesitated. “But what of the soldiers outside?!”

“Will they not take up arms for our country and its people again?!”

Others yelled in favor of the minister’s proposal. “But look! All of the magicite beasts are confined to land! As long as the gates are sealed, they’ll be unable to break through. Eventually they’ll disperse!”

“Protect those already inside! That will lead to less damage in the end!”

The crowd was split. What the decision would be was unclear, but doing nothing was its own decision—one that meant neither option would succeed.

It fell to Eris to make that call. She was the only one with the authority to do so.

“No! I cannot abandon the wounded soldiers! Sally forth, and draw away the magicite beasts! While they’re distracted, bring the wounded into the castle! I will lead personally! Let’s go!” Eris declared.

“I’ll come as well! I want to be there too!” Tiffanyer insisted. She was not a mage either, but having seen Eris practice at arms, she had joined in her training. Without a clue of what had happened to her father or brother, Eris found her presence reassuring.

“Yes! Let’s go, Tiffanyer!”

“At your call, dear sister!”

That day, Eris and her forces succeeded in evacuating a thousand of the soldiers who had marched forth against Highland into the keep—at the sacrifice of three thousand civilians when magicite beasts breached the castle town’s walls.



It was a month after the coalition army had fallen to the Highlanders. Her father and brother had not returned; the surviving knights said they had fallen in battle. The two were powerful mages, but Highland’s Archlord Greyfrier had bested them. With Eris as the only surviving royal, she would succeed as queen.

That day had arrived. Crowds gathered at the palace—not, though, to celebrate the succession, or to swear to join hands for the country’s future.

“No! Why must we bow and scrape to those who endangered us?! To those who invited ruin!”

“The new queen can’t even use magic! Someone like that has no ability to protect the country!”

“That’s right! We reject a new queen! The royals are finished! She must abdicate!”

The shouts of rage were like the rumbling of the earth, echoing from the crowds surrounding the castle walls. After the defeat by Highland, the number of mages in the country was overwhelmingly insufficient; they could no longer defend against magicite beasts. Fear and resentment rose, turning to resentment of the king and royals who had struck against Highland. Citizens argued that the country had been doing perfectly well before they overstepped, destroying their mage corps and placing the people in danger.

That held its own truth, but what of their determination in refusing to ignore Highland’s depredations, to rise and protect not only themselves but others on the surface? Before the battle, they had been hailed, every hand raised in salute as they marched forth. But now, as if that had been completely forgotten, the people surrounded the walls.

At the forefront of the crowd was the very same minister who her father had

left in his stead—the one who had, when the retreating soldiers headed for the castle had been attacked by the magicite beasts, called to simply seal the gates and hold tight. “Don’t forget, everyone! She’s cold-blooded! She sacrificed people just like you to save her own circles and the upper crust, the knights! She can’t guide us! She can’t protect us! We need to take this country back into our own hands!”

Eris had rejected his suggestion so that they could bring the remaining soldiers inside, but in the end, for each soldier she had saved, magicite beasts had entered the capital city walls and killed several civilians. Despite her intentions, that was the reality.

“No! Eris didn’t want that! None of us did!” Tiffanyer watched the scene outside the castle, her eyes downcast and full of tears. She had come to attend Eris’s coronation.

“He’s not wrong, Tiffanyer... He’s not wrong. It was my decision that led to the civilian losses.”

“B-But...then what are we supposed to do?”

While they were at a loss, the recently appointed knight-captain called out to them. “Your Majesty! Give the order! Let us drag that coward who seeks to divide the people before you! With the old king gone—with your father gone—we must bring this land together if we’re to defend it. Yet he foolishly inflames the people and plots rebellion! He seeks nothing but the throne for himself!”

Eris and Tiffanyer had saved his life from an attacking magicite beast that day, and he had thanked Eris and sworn his loyalty.

“The captain is correct, Your Majesty!”

“We shall follow him!”

More of those that Eris and Tiffanyer had saved pledged their support. Eris’s decision had brought only resentment from the people of the capital, but among the knights and mages, it had earned trust.

But—no. This was not the way. “Wait, everyone! Calm down! It is true we must come together if we are to defend this land! But if we crush the townspeople by force, it will only hasten the collapse! I cannot assent!”

“Your Majesty! What other choice is there?!”

“I will go forth! I will face them and speak to them until they understand! That is my only option.”

“That’s dangerous! If anything were to happen to you, we would lose our one unifying symbol and collapse yet faster!”

“But if I don’t—”

As they spoke, the pitch of incitation outside grew even higher. “Why do they merely tremble behind their walls, saying nothing?! Are our wastrel royals and wastrel knights naught but cowards alike?!”

The argument was persuasive. People believed if only Eris had true power, she might have been able to protect the routed soldiers from the magicite beasts without losses to the people of the capital city. If she had, so many people would still be alive. Her father or her brother would have been able to. All Eris could do was gritted her teeth—but the knight-captain was not content with so little.

“Are those the words the people of the country should have for those who stood on the front lines?! They wait safely in the rear as they grumble their complaints! I can’t stand it! Your Majesty, Lady Tiffanyer, we shall sally forth! Do not stop us! Let’s go!”

The knights let out a war cry in approval of their captain’s call.

“Wait! Please, wait! If we do not show through our deeds that the country must unite—”

“I cannot overlook their deeds! They mock the old king, they mock your brother, they mock all who fell for our land! Only those who fought with us that tragic day could understand our rage!”

Eris flinched. She couldn’t stop them. Even she had remained at the rear during the war with Highland, unable to participate. She could not understand what was in their hearts; her words could not reach them. Words were less important than their speaker. Hers could not stop them.

“Forgive us!”

“Ah!”

The knight-captain and his knights shoved past Eris, on their way to the square. Both her father and brother’s words would surely have stopped them. The force of their magic, if talking had failed. But Eris had neither.

“Eris! Are you all right?!”

“Y-Yes...” She was alone, no one in the hall with her save for Tiffanyer, who helped her to her feet.

“Wh-What do we do? What can we do? At this rate...”

“It... It’s my fault... I can’t do anything. I may have been born a royal, but...”

“No! That’s not true! You tried so hard to protect the country and its people!”

As Tiffanyer protested, the noise from outside grew louder. The knights rushing out and the townspeople pressing had begun their clashing.

Angry shouts. The clash of blade on blade. Screams—

“Ah! I’m so sorry, father! I’m sorry, brother!” Tears welled up in Eris’s eyes.

A future where the survivors turned on each other was not what either of them had desired. The country truly was collapsing, its knightly guardians raising their swords against those who their duty was to protect. There was no way they could reunite their country like this. Eris knew this for a fact, but she had no way to stop the tragedy. And it was all because she, who had survived, was so weak. Her feelings of weakness, of guilt, crushed her.

But just then, around the walls of the castle where the knights and crowd clashed, a wave of explosions occurred.

“Gahhh!”

“Wh-What?! Whose work is this?!”

Neither side had expected them, and the confused roar fell silent.

*Whirrr... Whirrr...*

Mechanical sounds came from the faraway sky.

“Ah... Eris, that’s—!” Tiffanyer pointed to a squadron of flying ships.

“H-Highland?!” Eris gasped.

And thus, a slaughter among compatriots was avoided—though none could yet tell if that was a blessing in disguise.



“I am Archlord Greyfrier of Highland. It pleases me to make your acquaintance.” The commander of the Highland forces spoke to Eris from the throne which had once been hers.

“Greyfrier!” The man who, she had heard, had killed her father and brother in combat. *So he’s—*

“Then you’re the one who killed my dear sister’s family! Damn you!” Tiffanyer cursed.

“Stop that, Tiffanyer!” Eris sharply scolded Tiffanyer, who glared at Greyfrier. It was true that she wanted vengeance for her father and brother. However, if he had bested them on the battlefield, he was surely quite powerful. How else could he have taken their castle with only a few men? Forcing a confrontation was unlikely to end well.

“B-But...! Don’t you resent him?”

Greyfrier watched Tiffanyer silently. His gaze was fearsomely intimidating, full of murder. Like a lion or tiger regarding its prey before it pounced.

“Uh... Ah...” Tiffanyer stopped as if frozen.

“J-Just be quiet for now, Tiffanyer!” Eris stepped between the two, as if to protect her from Greyfrier. “We accept your...Highland’s proposal. Artifacts for the fruits of the land and the product of the earth.”

Greyfrier quietly shook his head. “That would be too lenient. Those are no longer the terms.”

“What are you implying?”

“Those are terms for *amicable* trade. Do not forget that your country raised an army against us—and lost that army. We, too, had our losses. This is no

merchant's prattle; this is a demand for your surrender following your defeat."

"A demand for surrender..."

"Accept, or be destroyed. Bear that in mind. You have no other way to stop this ruin."

Neither Eris nor the knights who had gathered could object. The country no longer had the might to fight off Highland. The coalition army was spent, the remnants unable to so much as combat the magicite beasts in their own lands.





And they were on the brink of civil war. It was by no means a sure thing that Highland would manage to destroy them before they themselves did. Thus, they could give only one answer.

“The situation is as you describe. We surrender to Highland.”

“A commendable decision.” Greyfrier quietly let his gaze wash over Eris, head to toe, as if evaluating her. She shuddered in fear as she felt it wrap around her. It felt like it could see through to her deepest fears. But, crowned or not, she had inherited this country from her father. No matter what, it was her duty to protect it. She clung to that determination.

And thus, she asked Greyfrier, “What are the terms? What is asked of us?”

“Your house may continue to reign. I do not intend to change the structure of rule. However...”

Greyfrier’s conditions were harsh.

Quartering of Highland troops and personnel.

Provision of produce and matériel as Highland demanded.

Handing over the commanding of defenses to Highland, against magicite beasts and against other countries. In addition, Highland would have authority to levy conscripts for those purposes.

The provision of Artifacts, but only for use by Highland forces.

In other words, the country’s people and riches would be served up to Highland on a platter. And while Highland would protect it, the Artifacts used to do so would be kept strictly out of the hands of Eris and her compatriots. The terms were vastly different from the initial trade offer—enough to essentially make the country a Highland possession, with the royal family remaining in name only, as mere figureheads.

And beyond that—Highland would hunt the mages, not only eradicating them but also burning and banning their books and tools. It would leave nothing but Highland’s Artifacts for defense from the magicite beasts, and cut off any hope of a future rebellion.

They were each almost unacceptable terms. But in the current situation, Eris

had no choice but to accept them. The only saving grace was that, at least, the arrival of Greyfrier and Highland's army had prevented the outbreak of a civil war.

At least there was that. *At least—*

All she could do was to take that as salvation, and no matter the circumstances, she would do what she could to the best of her ability. Thus, Eris faced her future.



Eris was panting, lying on a rumpled bed while she caught her breath. She wrapped the white sheets around her and felt the sweat seep from her skin into the clean cotton. She felt bad for dirtying them, but she needed to have some sort of shield around her. Despite it all, she hadn't yet given up. Holding those sheets in place was the only way she had found to resist. This was not something she wanted.

"What are you resting for?" Archlord Greyfrier peeled away the sheets she'd wrapped herself in. His expression remained stoic even as he forced the depths of his desires upon her.

"Please let me rest for a moment." Evading his gaze, she wrapped the sheets around herself again.

"Hmph. Do not vex me. If you do, I shall have to send for another princess."

"N-No! Please! Not Tiffanyer! I'll be your partner, I've rested enough..."

Eris pulled back her sheets and lay nude in front of Greyfrier.

"Mm. A willful one, you are." A faint grin spread over his face for a second as he pulled Eris's legs apart.

*How many times has it been?*

At first, it had filled her with disgust and fear, then pain, and she had cried alone after the deed was done. Now, she had gotten used to it. She still hated it, but it was the only way for a queen in name alone—lacking power and popularity—to fight back against an archlord from Highland.

In a way, it was a blessing in disguise that his eyes had fallen on her. Her price

at first had been an end to the mage hunt; she was able to negotiate for their banishment instead. She hated that they had lost their homes, but that was better than losing their lives. At least she could hope that they had found peaceful lives in some country far away.

In addition, while Highland could still freely recruit from her people, she had managed to add the conditions that they must join of their own free will, report to her at her palace, and not be treated as slaves. Her threat to Greyfrier that she would take her own life if these terms were broken had worked, or Greyfrier seemed to be following them.

The price she had demanded from Greyfrier for her body was counted in the saved lives of her compatriots. So...it was a trade she had made. It was the best she could do. She supposed some might say that she had sold her country to Highland to live in the lap of luxury, or that she was merely their whore. Surely, the reputation of Queen Eris was not a sterling one.

Several hours passed, and Eris's panting continued.

Once Greyfrier had left, Eris had continued to lie in bed, thinking while she tried to catch her breath. No matter what was said, she would do what she could for her country and its people.

That was the trade she had made.



Approximately a year after Greyfrier's arrival, Eris walked through a deserted corridor leading to the courtyard.

"Hmm, strange."

It was still early in the morning, but not enough for it to be so empty. The maidservants should have been busy with their morning duties.

Eris loved to take in the courtyard's flowers early in the day. Tiffanyer was visiting, and they often strolled through the courtyard together, so Eris was familiar with the daily rhythms of the palace staff.

She quietly tilted her head in confusion as she walked along, and she soon

discovered why her surroundings were so quiet. Several armed knights leaped out from the shadows of the pillars.

“Ah?! Wh-What?!”

In no time at all, they had their blades at the ready and surrounded her.

“A-Are you turning on me?!”

Their intentions were obvious, though. They were here to take her life—this was an assassination. What disturbed her most, though, was who was among them: the knight-captain who had taken her side in the rebellion just before Greyfrier had arrived.

“No whore for Highland can be our queen! Your life is ours!”

“W-Wait! If I hadn’t gone with the archlord, do you know what would have happened?! Even more people would have died! And if I don’t keep this going, things will be even worse for our people! If I didn’t—!”

Eris no longer valued her own life. Regardless, no matter how pathetic, humiliating, or worthy of criticism it may have seemed from the outside, she believed it was for the sake of protecting her country and its people.

“I know you all are hurting, but believe me!” she pleaded.

Authorities with Highland’s blessing had assumed most of the knights’ rightful duties; those under Eris’s rule couldn’t act without explicit approval from Highland. Their only remaining role was as palace guards. Eris knew the Highlanders looked down on them for it, jeering that even a dog could handle that job. Still, she’d thought the knights had noticed that she suffered alongside them.

“No excuses! There are things in this world more precious than life!”

“That’s something only the powerful can say! People like my father, or my brother!”

“I said, no excuses!” The knight-captain leveled his sword at Eris and prepared a lunging thrust.

“Yes...you’re right...”

As its gleaming point jabbed toward her stomach, Eris stayed still. She truly was on her own here; the knights had cleared the hall of everyone, meaning not one of them among them or among the servants or other workers around the palace saw fit to prevent her assassination. Not a single person had tried to warn her. Therefore, no one would mind that she'd be gone. Of course, things had turned out this way—they had furrowed their brows at her, not understanding the good she was trying to accomplish.

Perhaps her death would be for the best.

No longer would she be Greyfrier's plaything. No longer would she suffer. It was what everyone around her wanted. Eris closed her eyes and waited for the fatal moment. This would not be an untimely end; it would be liberation from her burdens.

Yet that moment never came. She clearly heard the sound of something striking something. Yet she felt no pain.

"Wh—?!"

Hearing the knight-captain gasp, she fearfully opened her eyes, only to see his sword embedded in Tiffanyer.

"Tiffanyer?!"

"My dear Eris..." Tiffanyer smiled at Eris as she crumpled to the ground.

Eris rushed to her side. "Tiffanyer! Tiffanyer!" The sword's blade had pierced her stomach, and blood welled forth, staining her dress crimson. "Aaah! I-I'm so sorry! I'm sorry! This is all my fault!"

Eris had no one else to blame for Tiffanyer's pain but herself. The knights misunderstood her decision to offer herself up to Greyfrier and the Highlanders, not realizing she only wanted to improve their treatment of her country and its people. Nonetheless, she was the one who'd made that decision.

Even when Eris was broken and powerless, Tiffanyer had not abandoned her, had protected her with her very life.

*When I just wanted it to end, when I was ready to die, she sacrificed herself for me...* Eris couldn't stop the tears. She let out a loud cry, as if the walls she'd

been trying to keep up had suddenly collapsed.

“I-It’s okay. Don’t cry. You sacrificed yourself to protect me, and this country, and its people... So I...I did the same...” Tiffanyer coughed, and her lips were stained red with blood.

“No! Tiffanyer, no, don’t speak! Let me treat your wound!”

“Do you really expect us to just stand around?” The knight-captain and his men stayed crowded around Eris. He pointed his sword at Eris, Tiffanyer’s blood still on the blade. “What a shame. But at least we can send the queen and her family off together!”

“A shame?! Who, then, do you think did this to Tiffanyer?!” Eris asked.

“You, when you failed your duty as a queen and sold your body to a Highlander!”

“How dare you! *You* have failed as knights, muttering complaints now that you’ve lost your status!”

“Impudent, aren’t you! Here’s an idea: what if we kill you and bring peace to the country?”

“Just try!”

Tiffanyer had saved Eris’s life, and she couldn’t bear to lose it here. She wanted to live now. She would resist to the very end, struggle, and somehow survive. Even if she was unarmed and outnumbered, she couldn’t let Tiffanyer’s last memory be anything else.

The knight-captain gave a scream as he swung his bloody sword, but all he hit was thin air. “Huh?!”

Eris, too, was trained in martial arts. She dodged its sharp tip and managed to keep away from the subsequent rising slash and sweep. Somehow, she was keeping up. *I’ll find an opening somehow!* she thought, but then something heavy smashed into her back. She gave a high-pitched grunt as the pain spread through her. Caught by surprise, she slumped to her knees. One of the knights had closed in from behind and bashed her with his sword’s pommel.

“Ngh! Not yet...!” She still wouldn’t give up. *Couldn’t* give up.

“Hold her down!” Before she could stand up, the knights quickly swarmed her, pinning her to the ground.

“Release me! Get off of me!”

“You’re not getting away now!”

Eris struggled, and the knight-captain grinned from above her. She expected his blade to fall on her immediately, but it did not. Instead, he crouched in front of her, pulling her head up by her hair, and he laughed. “If we’re doing this anyway, maybe we should have a little fun with you before you die. Really show that Highlander what for! Don’t worry, boys, you’ll get your turn too!”

The knights grinned at one another to Eris’s disgust. Her country had lost their best and brightest, her father and brother among them, and men like these were all who remained.

But for her, this was an opportunity. “Do what you will.” It would keep her alive a little while longer—give her an opportunity to find a way out. As long as she was still alive, she had a chance of getting away. Tiffanyer wouldn’t want her to give up anyway.

“No, I will not allow it,” a deep, displeased voice said.

Eris heard something roll along the ground, and suddenly, she was looking the smiling knight-captain in the eyes. At least, looking his lopped-off head in the eyes.

Eris couldn’t help but retch. It was Greyfrier who had taken his head.

He must have been using some kind of advanced magic, as his arm itself had transformed into a heavy blade and dispatched the knight-captain in a single blow. She felt, somehow, almost relieved to see him, but that feeling lasted only for a moment. A second later, she saw nothing but red as the blood spurting from the knight-captain’s head covered her face.

“Eeek!” While she tried to control her shock, she heard men’s voices rise in anger.

“You killed the captain!”

“You damned Highlander!”

“We’ll put you in the ground!”

It was likely for the best that Eris could not see what was happening in front of her. Scream after scream rang out as blood poured down on her, its choking scent wrapping around her.

Eventually, all went silent. She stood, wiping her face to see Greyfrier picking up Tiffanyer’s body.

“Tiffanyer! Tiffanyer!” Eris ran to her and called out, but she did not respond. Meanwhile, Greyfrier strode off with Tiffanyer in his arms. “What are you doing?! We need to treat her wounds!”

“I’m taking her to Highland.”

“Can they save her?!”

“If she’s lucky.”

“P-Please! Please, I don’t care how...!”

“I make no guarantees.”

At that, Eris bowed her head deeply to Greyfrier.

Tiffanyer never again returned to Eris’s palace after her departure.

But even though this had all begun with Highland’s invasion of the surface...

Even though Greyfrier had killed her father and brother...

Even though he threatened her with the specter of violating Tiffanyer as well...

Even though he kept her caged...

Even though she knew exactly who he was, even though she resented him, even though she hated him...from the next time Greyfrier visited her chambers, Eris stopped hiding herself beneath her sheets.



But those days came to a sudden end.

A long rainy season of the Prism Flow was sweeping the land. Highland’s Artifacts had improved their ability to resist magicite beasts, and somehow the



people endured—until their defenses were no longer enough.

A Prismer appeared. The long rains had finally brought forth one of the strongest and vilest of magical beasts. Its very existence was a natural disaster. Nothing on earth could stop it. People could only flee for their lives.

Nor was it any different for Highlanders.

*Whirrr... Whirrr...*

From the windows of the palace, ships could be seen taking to the sky. Meanwhile, Eris had latched on to Greyfrier. “Wait! Please, wait! You take us for all we have when it’s convenient, and then you flee when it suits you?! You’re cowards! After all Tiffanyer and I went through!”

“We can fight magicite beasts with Artifacts, but Prismers are something different. I never said we could destroy those.”

“But if you don’t—”

“I have my regrets, but I cannot sacrifice my men for nothing. Highland has made many investments in this country, but nothing can be done about a monster like that. Consider this your warning: run somewhere far, far away.”

“I have nowhere else to go! I’ll fight to the end for this country and its people! If you won’t defend us with your Artifacts, at least leave a strong one behind for us to use!”

“No existing Artifact can do anything against that Prismer. You’ll die trying.”

“I’ve been as good as dead for so long!” She had killed her heart, and she would kill herself for the sake of her country and its people. She would stick to that resolve until the end. There was no turning back.

“Hmm... Would you prefer to take a gamble? In exchange for the power to destroy a Prismer.”

“Ah! That’s possible?!”

“No, Prismers are indestructible.” Greyfrier shook his head.

She hated him for lifting her hopes, only to dash them. “Are you mocking me?!”

“I’m doing no such thing. Nothing can destroy a Prismer—thus, we must create something which can.”

“How?”

“We make the ultimate Artifact, one with human form—a hial menace.”

“A hial menace?!”

“Some call it absurd, but I find it just as absurd that something like a Prismer can be beyond human reach. We have tried before, but each one has ended in a failure. The odds of success are minimal. Nonetheless, will you risk becoming a hial menace?”

“Yes, I will,” Eris replied unflinchingly.

She would do whatever she could for her country and its people. This was for Tiffanyer’s sake too. If there was a chance, she would take it. There was no time to hesitate. Each moment, the Prismer drew closer to destroying the country. If she didn’t hurry, she’d be too late.

“How is it done?” she asked. “We have no time to waste!”

“Let us go, then. The equipment is in Highland.”

“Understood. Let’s hurry!” she said with a nod.

With that, Eris followed Greyfrier.

She would return. She would protect her people. She would offer up everything for this land.

Thus, Eris set off for Highland. When she awakened as a hial menace, time had long passed her by. The country she’d sworn to protect had vanished completely from the world.



When Inglis came to, she was in front of the device containing Eris. The light which had washed over her had faded, and the world around her was filled with an unchanging silence as if nothing had happened.

Eris was still crying inside.

“Eris...”

Was that vision real? Had that been the life Eris had led?

“That’s terrible...”

Inglis couldn’t point to one single reason why Eris was crying. There were too many horrible experiences. No matter where Inglis looked, there were moments worthy of tears. Eris’s memories were vastly different from King Inglis’s memories of glory or Inglis Eucus’s memories of happiness. Nothing had gone her way. She had made decisions she thought were the right ones, only for things to become worse. That was Eris’s very real tragedy.



“I haven’t treated Eris well, have I...” Inglis pondered.

After all Eris had experienced, Inglis had bullied her into sparring matches, had instructed her to transform into a weapon so that she could play around with divine feat, had even broken Eris in her weapon form. All this led to her having to reenter the Greyfrier sarcophagus. Eris must have hated it. Just hearing Greyfrier’s name must have stirred up memories of the past. That must have led to these tears now. Despite that, Eris had not flinched. She had bravely chosen to enter the Greyfrier sarcophagus. She was a strong woman, someone who Inglis felt deserved a lot of respect.

“And, Tiffanyer... The next time we meet, I’ll have to be a bit nicer.”

Tiffanyer treated Rafinha cruelly, something which Inglis couldn’t forgive, but a bit of kindness might be a good thing regardless. Greyfrier had sent Tiffanyer to Highland when she was at death’s door after taking the thrust meant for Eris, and she must have also been made a hialal menace sometime after that. She was quite different now, but perhaps something happened that had decisively twisted her personality. Inglis didn’t know, but Eris might.

Eris must have seen so much between being reborn as a hialal menace and now. Greyfrier had never told her the process would take hundreds of years. She had expected to become a hialal menace right away, return to her country, and fight the Prismar. Nor had he warned her that she would drain her wielder’s life. What had Eris and Tiffanyer thought when they found that out? Even from Eris’s memories, Inglis could only guess.

“Archlord Greyfrier, an enemy to all women.”

Even if he was a Highlander, he had been alive for centuries before. It was quite likely that the only remnant of him in this world was his name for the sarcophagus. But if she ever met him—well... As much as Inglis preferred to focus on self-improvement in her fights, she would have no objections to wielding Eris and fighting him as she wished.

“And that’s another reason I have to do something about this.”

Inglis couldn’t rest forever. She slapped herself lightly on the cheek to work herself up.

“All right! Wait for me, Eris.”

Turning away from Eris, Inglis returned to her training.

## Afterword

First, thank you very much for picking up this book! So, that's the eleventh volume of *Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire* ♀. I hope you enjoyed it.

This volume really fills a lot in, but from an author's perspective, I was addressing previously undefined events and deciding which way to go with them. Up until now, I'd been talking big, but now I've done my best to clarify things. Once it's officially in print, there's no turning back, so I'm a little worried about how some parts will turn out.

I'm the kind of person who likes to leave things vague, if possible, and leave room to tweak them later, so I get nervous when I have to definitively state details before I proceed. However, I'm working on a long series, so I think this has been a valuable experience. Thank you for sticking through it. There were a lot of things which needed to be set up properly before moving on.

I'd certainly like to keep doing my best, but honestly, this volume drew such a clear line that as I write this afterword, I don't really have any idea how volume 12 will go, but I'm sure I'll figure it out when I get there! I'm feeling good, so I am raring to go!

As I wrote in my profile, I've been working out every day and trying to keep myself under fifteen hundred calories for the past three months. Mentally, it's kind of like a challenge run in a game, except it's IRL. I'm down ten or fifteen pounds now, and during it all, I've reliably been pumping out twelve hundred words a day. It really has made clear how much my writing condition depends on my physical condition, so it's a habit I'd like to keep going. I've been posting about my daily life on X (formerly Twitter), so check it out if you're interested.

If I had to pin down what made me start, it's that I went to Okinawa with my family last summer, and when I looked around at the hotel pool or the private beach, I got embarrassed about my physique when compared to all the other dads. I'm glad I went, because it gave me the impetus to change.

In any case, since my writing stamina's gone up, I'd like to branch out from this and my other series *Sword Saint Adel's Second Chance* to do even more! I'd like to push myself to my limits before my time as a writer ends. I'm sure someday this career will no longer be practical for me, so I want to make the most of this time. I'd love to still be writing as a grandpa, but we live in a world where if there's no demand for your art, you can't keep doing it. I'm not letting my guard down even one bit, and I don't have time to get carried away. That's also why it's so fun and super rewarding. Compared to my time at a real sweatshop when I was younger, as well as when I was a part-time writer after my day job, the hours are still shorter. I'd like to keep going like this for a while.

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 Stories

## Favoritism?

“All right, that’s enough practice for today. Good work, everyone!”

In the courtyard of the knights’ academy, Rochefort had led the day’s combat training. Given that he had a special-class rune, he was even able to borrow Principal Miriela’s staff Artifact and handle the enhanced-gravity exercises that previously only she could. These exercises had become notably more frequent now that he was an instructor.

“Yeah, I really worked up a good sweat today,” Inglis said.

“That was more than just a good sweat!” Rafinha protested. “This is really tough!”

“That’s right,” Leone agreed. “I think this might be the hardest kind...”

“I’m sure it is quite effective, but...” Liselotte trailed off.

While Inglis vigorously wiped off her sweat, the other three plopped to the ground. And then...

Meltina huffed and groaned beside them. “I-I feel terrible...” She collapsed, not able to take another step.

“A-Are you okay, Meltina?” Inglis asked.

“I... I can’t do this...” Meltina laughed weakly, her eyes blank as if she were about to pass out.

“I guess we used to be like that too,” Rafinha said.

Leone couldn’t help reminiscing. “Yes, we couldn’t even move after it was over. Inglis always used to have to carry us.”

“Even being able to chat like this afterward is a sign of how far we’ve come,” Liselotte said with a faint smile.

“Then I guess I’m the one carrying Meltina back to the dorms?” Inglis asked.

“Yeah, if you could, Chris.”

That’s when their instructor approached. “Nah, you don’t need to.”

“Mr. Rochefort?”

Rochefort had approached, carrying a clean towel, drinks, and a large amount of some decidedly delicious-looking snacks. “Your Imperial Majesty, I believe it would be for the best if you drank this,” he said, while picking Meltina up in one arm and bringing a drink with a straw to her mouth with his other.

“Mm... Ahh, it’s so sweet and cool and delicious...”

“Sweet things are good for getting your energy back,” Rochefort said, while wiping the sweat which dripped from her brow and neck.

“Ah... It smells wonderful...”

“I chose a scent appropriate for yourself, of course. When you’ve caught your breath, I recommend some of these.” He removed the snacks from their bag for easy availability, and waited.

Rochefort was being quite diligent today, though it made sense—having been a Venefic general, of course he would be like this toward Venefic royalty.

Rafinha, though, didn’t seem to quite get that nuance. “That’s no fair, Mr. Rochefort! This is favoritism! Blatant favoritism!”

And Leone and Liselotte were nodding in agreement.

“Hm? I can do no less for her. She’s a princess of the royal blood I once served.”

“But I’m an exiled princess now...so...” Meltina began, but Rochefort shook his head.

“You can say that, but it doesn’t change your birth. It would be easier for both of us if you didn’t insist.”

Meltina fell silent, apparently not wanting to debate it with him.

In that silence, Rafinha came upon an idea. “Wait, I know! Miss Arles! Miss Arles! Mr. Rochefort is all lovey-dovey over some girl!”

“What?!”

“R-Ross?!” Arles appeared from seemingly nowhere, her voice already raised. “What’s going on? Explain yourself!”

“Arles?! W-Wait, it’s not what it looks like!” His attention completely turned to Arles, Rochefort dropped Meltina.

“All right, here’s our chance at the snacks! ♪” Alas, Rafinha’s true goal was obvious.

“Heh, looks like the usual for me.” Inglis picked Meltina from off the ground and carried her back to the dorms.

## Unsung Valor

The cafeteria at the knights’ academy was lively, full of smiling faces and happy laughter.

“I don’t like to talk about other people, but Meltina sure does eat a lot! She’s the first other person I’ve seen who eats as much as us! Right, Chris?”

“No one but you, me, mother, Aunt Irina, and Rafael.” In other words, ‘us’ there referred to a particular set of blood relatives.

“Maybe Meltina’s related to us too!”

Inglis laughed. “You know, we just might have some shared blood.”

“What do you think? Maybe I should ask mom sometime?”

As their idle mealtime chatter continued, though, sharp stares followed them.

“It’s no use! We’re out of ingredients!”

“Keep talking, c’mon, keep talking!”

“This lunch break needs to end before they get up for more!”

The cafeteria workers behind the counter were locked onto Inglis’s table. The cafeteria staff were the ones who had been most impacted by Imperial Princess Meltina’s arrival at the knights’ academy. She was a third threat alongside Inglis and Rafinha, one which they were exposed to without any particular increase in

staffing, and it had placed quite the load on them. Whenever any of the three in question were in the cafeteria, they couldn't let their guard down for even a moment; now, they watched with bated breath.

Principal Miriela appeared, alongside Rochefort and Arles. "Everyone, it's almost time for afternoon classes, so get to your classrooms!" she said.

"If you're late, I'll start taking off points. You know I know your faces," Rochefort said in self-satisfaction.

"Ross, you don't need to threaten them like that..." Arles winced.

The students wasted no time in getting a move on.

"Ah, oh no! We talked so much, I didn't get quite enough to eat," Rafinha said.

"It's okay, Rani. You can have plenty at dinner," Inglis said.

"Yeah, they do say it's better not to stuff yourself..."

"Exactly. Anyway, let's go!"

Inglis and friends joined the rapidly departing stream, and as the lunch ladies watched them go, they let out deep sighs.

"Phew... They're gone..."

"They're the cutest little things... Except for their dreadful stomachs."

"Aaagh!"

*Clatter!*

One among them dropped the ladle she used to stir a large pot to the floor.

"What's wrong?!"

"A-Are you all right? You look terrible!"

The stricken one laughed. "I thought I was better than this, but I...I can't lift my arm... This is as far as I go."

"Natashaaaaaaa!"

“What’s wrong?” Miriela asked, peeking her head behind the counter.

“Ah, Principal Miriela!”

“We’re getting chewed up out here! Natasha got taken out stirring the pot!”

“Ever since that Meltina girl showed up, there hasn’t been a day we’ve had enough food!”

Miriela laughed awkwardly. “Well, the palace is paying for her tuition, room, and board, so we’ll pull through somehow.”

“What about our labor?! Especially the next shift without Natasha?!”

“We can’t do this on the same old pay!”

“Weeeeeelllll... There’s not exactly room in the budget for a raise...”

While Miriela prevaricated, though, Rochefort rolled up his sleeves. “Then I’ll pay in sweat.”

“That’s a good idea, Ross,” Arles agreed. “We don’t have much money, but we can lend a hand.”

“We were once loyal to Venefic, so, y’know. Miriela, you can help out too.”

“M-Me?”

Thus the three of them could be spotted in the cafeteria working during meal breaks until more staff could be hired.



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Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire ♀  
Volume 11

by Hayaken

Translated by Mike Langwiser Edited by Carly Smith

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