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Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire ♀

Author: Hayaken
Illustrator: Nagu

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Chapter I: Inglis, Age 16—The Meaning of a Meeting

(1)

In Inglis's hometown of Ymir, the scale of the tea parties at the Bilford family castle was anything but ordinary. The table at which the mothers and daughters could have some privacy had been laden with a multilayered cake fit for a wedding. As mountainous it was, it was the third to be consumed that day.

"Still, hearing our girls came to the country's aid in its time of need... I couldn't be prouder." Inglis's aunt Irina was beaming.

"Chris, I heard you took down the Prismers with both hieran menaces?" asked her mother, Serena.

"Well, yes..." Inglis replied.

"Oh, I'm not doubting you. I'm just surprised... Then again, you always seemed to see things we couldn't. Have you always known you were this strong?"

"N-No... I knew something was different, but I think the lessons at the knights' academy have helped me a lot," Inglis said evasively. There was her past life, and there was aether itself, but neither were things she could go into detail about. To begin with, it would confuse people here, but more importantly she didn't want to be seen as something ineffable. In front of her mother Serena, she wanted to be just *her* daughter, Inglis Eucus.

"I see... You truly are impressive, Chris. Good job. Your father and I are so proud of you."

"Thank you, mother." Inglis had her memories—and her power—from her past life. But as a daughter, she adored her mother. This life was just as real as her previous one. She didn't want to say or do anything that would damage this relationship.

"C'mon, mom, aunt Serena! What about those letters you mentioned?" Rafinha seemed to notice Inglis's state of mind as she changed the subject, but

Inglis wasn't fond of this one either.

"Ugh... I'd just managed to forget about those..." Inglis muttered.

"Oh, right! The letters!" Irina said. "Well, so many people who saw you at the celebratory banquet in the capital decided to propose."

"And there are some from people whose lives you saved on the battlefield in Ahlemin," Serena added, grinning.

"So in other words, there should be no issues with your rambunctiousness or your appetites."

"Despite seeing that behavior, they're still interested in you."

"Now, Rafinha..."

"Listen, Chris..."

"This is your chance!" Serena and Irina exclaimed in unison. "While you're home, it's time to arrange something!"

"Aww, mom, aunt Serena... Yes, understood!" Rafinha nodded, a gleam in her eyes.

Inglis was pretty sure that Rafinha was driven more by curiosity than by a serious desire to marry. *Still, I have no intention of letting that happen!* "No! Rani's still too young for that! And we're students at the knights' academy, right? We need to focus on school! Mother, aunt Irina, please reconsider!"

"Chris..." Irina stared at her niece.

"The two of you are nearly sixteen years old. Your birthdays will arrive before you even go back to school," Serena said.

"Err...you're right, but..." Inglis replied. Her birthday was two days before Rafinha's, and it wasn't far away. It seemed so soon to be sixteen.

"This isn't too early at all. After all, I was sixteen when I had Rafael," Irina said.

"Wh—?!" Inglis gasped. Not just impure relations with the opposite sex, but pregnancy and even childbirth! That wasn't just precocious—it was astounding!

"Wow, Mom! I can't even imagine getting married and having a kid at our age... I guess we really are just kids compared to you then." Rafinha was staring

at her mother with newfound respect.

“Precisely, so you’re not too young to have this on your mind. Chris is a good girl, and she’s trying her hardest to keep her promise to your father, but you don’t have to worry that hard about what she says. These are formal proposals from noble families in good standing, so I’m sure there are no untoward intentions. Besides, if your father was being honest, it’s just that he’d be lonely without his daughter.”

“Ack!” Inglis understood that feeling all too well. That was why she took her promise to Duke Bilford so seriously—she felt the same herself. She didn’t want to lose Rafinha to someone else. In truth, she was using the duke’s words as cover to do what she wanted. “B-But, aunt Irina! We’re still just students! Rani is studying to be a knight, so it’s for our country’s sake! We can’t stop that!”

“You don’t have to marry right away, though. True, it would be better to save marriage for after graduation. It’s just... Don’t you think it would be reassuring to start getting to know your future partner now?” Serena asked.

“You mean, like an engagement or something arranged?” Inglis asked.

“Yes! And I’m sure Duke Bilford will approve as well. That would mean he wouldn’t lose his daughter so soon,” Irina said.

“Okay...” Inglis acquiesced.

This was bad. This was a terrible situation. She couldn’t logically argue her way out of this. If only Rafinha had objected too, it would have been so much easier.

“Hey, Mom! What kind of people are they? C’mon, spill the beans!” Rafinha asked.

Rafinha was, in fact, very excited. For a moment, the idea of telling Ambassador Theodore about this and letting him discourage her entered Inglis’s head, but that had its own problems. It might just cause the two of them to grow closer.

“Okay, come over here and let’s look at them together. It’s best to strike while the iron is hot! You have to make the right choice at your best moment,” Irina said.

Serena laughed. "Irina, you said the same thing when the duke proposed to you way back when, didn't you?" she asked her sister with a smile.

"Yes. And I made the right choice then, didn't I?"

"Yes. Very much so."

"Well, if it worked for you, I guess I'm not so worried! So, what are they like?" Rafinha asked. She and her mother began to scan through the letters.

"Here, look at these. There are other ducal families, even some royal dukes."

"Wow, foreigners too!"

"Yes. Ilrush, to the south, isn't too far from Ymir. Even they're paying attention. That's how impressive what you've done is."

"I guess hard work pays off! ♪"

Rafinha and Irina were getting really into this.

"Ughhh...!" *Dammit! I blew it!* Inglis wanted to scream. If her mother and aunt hadn't been watching, she would have. Maybe she even would have pounded on the table until it broke. It wasn't good to hit things, but she was profoundly upset at everyone else being so excited about these marriage proposals.

This was an obvious failure of hers. When planning her battle with the Prismers, she'd taken into account Rafael's future position, and done things with command—albeit temporary—of the Royal Guard. If Rafael and the Paladins' victory had been snatched from them by an obscure student, their honor would have been tarnished and their position weakened. And if that had happened, she might not be invited back to future battles.

Displeased with this prospect, she'd found a way to share the glory. Even though she had no intent of moving up in the world, she'd put that aside and stepped forward. She also had no intent of abandoning her position as Rafinha's squire, and thus had arranged for Rafinha to be nominally above her in the chain of command.

That was the only preparation she had thought feasible, pressed for time as she was. And it had worked to spread credit around. It had squared that circle.

She had never expected proposals to follow. She had made herself a bit too prominent—achieved a bit too much. And the flip side of her insistence on being Rafinha’s squire was that Rafinha had become a recipient of proposals as well.

Had she known this was going to happen, she would have been better off concealing her identity completely while defeating the Prismen. Maybe by borrowing the black mask of the Steelblood Front’s leader and calling herself the Black-Masked Lady.

Then again, if she had gone that route when defeating the Prismen, both the outdone Paladins and the entirety of Karelia’s royal forces would have had their reputations so shaken that she could see them launching an all-out war against the Steelblood Front. That was probably why the black-masked man himself had preferred to just lend her his power.

However, that wasn’t Inglis’s problem, and she was *not* interested in having a partner arranged. *I at least should have taken the Prismen down alone.* Waves of regret washed over her.

“Now, Chris, your letters are over here. Come and see,” her mother Serena gently called out to her. “Let’s look through them together.”

“Yes, mother... There are even more here,” Inglis sighed. She had received more than double the amount that Rafinha had.

“Yes. I suppose we’re more approachable.”

Rafinha’s family was ducal, part of the peerage, so there was a limit to how many people had the proper rank and background. Only other peers, and then among them only dukes or higher, would bother. The Eucus family, on the other hand, was related to a duke, but they were properly only knights in his service. Compared to the Belfords, hers would be of lower status. There was a wider net—that was what her mother meant.

There would be some from noble ranks below duke—earls and barons—but also from other knights, and from prominent burghers similar to the Rambach Company. Not that Inglis cared about a family’s rank. She wasn’t interested in marriage or romance at all. She was trying to live a life of mastering the blade—and looking after Rafinha.

“Mother... Do... Do I have to go through with this?”

Life seems long, but it is short. Let down your guard, and it will be gone in the blink of an eye. Inglis didn’t have the time or energy to get caught up in unnecessary things.

“Chris...” Serena wrapped her arm around Inglis and pulled her close. “Do you remember what I told you on the day of your baptism?” she said quietly, so as to slip undetected beneath Rafinha and Irina’s enthusiasm.

“Yes. That you hoped I didn’t get a special Rune, that they doom you to live and die for others... And I said I didn’t want anything that was going to dictate how I lived my life,” Inglis answered in the same quiet voice.

Her mother’s hunch hadn’t been wrong. That was indeed the fate of a holy knight: to fight Prismers for the sake of the people, and to meet an unavoidable death due to the effects of the Hieral Menaces. Inglis didn’t think her mother had known that then, but maybe she really was that perceptive.

“Yes, exactly... But now, even without a special Rune, you may be in that position...” Serena’s expression clouded.

“N-No, it’s not—” Inglis understood what her mother wanted to say—that the life of one with a special Rune was a life where one was expected to be a hero. And yet, even without such a Rune, achieving the same things set one on the same path. Her mother must have worried her daughter was walking that path now.

But she wasn’t. She had no intention of devoting her life to everyone, or anyone, else. She was going to enjoy herself. She’d master the blade, fight powerful foes, and look for chances to take on a Prism. That’s all there was to it. Even if the situation repeated itself, it was a battle Inglis welcomed.

Which, she supposed, could also be seen as being set on a path in life. But her path was to create opportunities to fight those foes no matter how they schemed, and to continue to use that as good practice to improve herself. She was bound by no outside force—only her own free will.

Still, she couldn’t exactly explain her full situation directly to her mother, so she needed to be vague.

“That’s why...” Serena paused. “I’d be less worried about you if you showed another side of yourself. At least, if there’s anyone you fancy here.” With a smile, Serena brushed her hand over the remaining letters. She was doing her best despite the worry peeking through her face.

Inglis could sense Serena was concerned about her own well-being, and she in turn cared so much for her mother. “Well... I suppose if we’re not firmly deciding anything yet...” She might have to concede at least that much. The failure of her own strategy had led her to this situation. Now she had to clean it up.

And if she made it through this, she’d be back to the knights’ academy. It would be a long time before she visited Ymir again, and in the meantime, fewer and fewer letters would arrive. Right now, the whole country was abuzz with the news of the Prism’s defeat, and her and Rafinha’s names were on everyone’s lips. If she held out, the storm would pass.

“Chris, is there anyone you’re interested in? What kind of person do you prefer?” Serena asked.

“If we’re talking less about their appearance or personality and more about what interests they have... It could be anyone.”

“So then what kind of interests would you want in a partner?”

“Well...someone who’s strong.”

“I don’t think that has anything to do with matchmaking...”

“But, mother! If I’m spending my life with someone, we’re supposed to help each other, improve each other’s lives, right? I still want to become stronger. So I think it’s important to have someone strong enough that we can grow together!”

“Well...okay. I guess that’s true.” Serena laughed wryly.

Irina, who was listening in, burst out laughing. “Like mother, like daughter! Chris, Serena said the same thing.”

“Irina... That was a long time ago...”

“What do you mean, Aunt Irina?” Inglis asked.

“Chris, did you know Serena used to be a knight?”

“Yes. Father told me.”

“Back then, she was the strongest of them all. It’s hard to imagine now what a hothead she was. She said she was only interested in men who could defeat her, and she beat every single man who tried.”

“Really, Mother?” Inglis couldn’t picture her soft-spoken, gentle mother being like that—but then again, that day when Inglis had still been a baby and a magicite beast had gotten into the castle where they were hiding, Serena *had* been the first to take up a sword. She definitely had courage when it mattered. Perhaps the young Inglis Eucus had gotten a glimpse of it.

“That was a long time ago,” Serena insisted. “Just a mistake of youth.”

“And then every single one of them gave up,” Irina continued, “but Luke, and only Luke, kept trying over and over no matter how many times he lost. It must have taken dozens of tries before he finally won, and they wed.”

“Really?” Rafinha gasped. “That sounds exactly like something Chris would do.”

“And really, Chris is so much more cutesy than Serena was then,” Irina said. “Serena kept her hair cut short, and she was brusque, very rough.”

“S-Stop it, Irina! I’ve gotten better, okay? Now I’m a proper mom to Chris!”

When Inglis thought back, her mother had always kept a close eye on her behavior. Not so much in terms of manners, but in how to be a girl. Like, for example, to sit with legs crossed. Inglis had needed help in forgetting all sorts of learned habits from a life lived as a man, and her mother was the one who’d taught her to be ladylike. Gently, forgivingly, but still strictly. This was part of what had made Inglis who she was, and maybe Serena had also meant such discipline as reminders to herself.

This had been an enlightening conversation. And now, she had an idea of how to resolve the situation. “I see...! Then I’ll follow my mother’s example!” Inglis stood and clenched her hand.

“What do you mean?!” the others asked.

“Reply to everyone who sent these! If you want me as your wife, you’ll have to defeat me first! If someone does, I will consider life with them seriously!”

“Wow... The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree...” Irina pressed a hand to her brow as if her head hurt.

“You’re the one who brought this up, Irina! Think about this, Chris. You’re someone who defeated a Prism. If you say that, who will take you up on it?!” Serena asked.

“That wasn’t something I did alone,” Inglis answered. “Eris and Ripple lent me their strength. And I’m not asking for it to be a one-on-one fight either. Bring your knights. Bring mercenaries. Try whatever you will! Whether it be your own power or your authority, your connections, or your gold! All of these are facets of someone’s strength! Come with all the forces you can muster!”

That way, Inglis could enjoy herself. Throw bands of elite knights serving noble houses at her, the most skilled of the itinerant mercenaries... Even a magicite beast would be fine. Strong men she’d never met coming from far away to fight her would be great. It would save her the trouble of finding them.

And in the end, she’d beat them all and win. All fun. The only engagement she wanted was one of combat. This would be like eating for free! Fun, fights, and—most importantly—her freedom. Two birds with one stone.

“If those are your conditions, then does that mean you want to see your partner’s overall capabilities?” Irina asked.

“Exactly! Isn’t this fine, Mother? I’m doing exactly what you did! So this way, I’ll be able to enjoy these meetings!”

“I... I suppose, if you insist... Very well, I’ll write them back with that.”

Inglis grinned. “All right! Thank you, mother!” She clapped her hands, obviously very pleased.

Serena laughed. “I’m not really sure that the glares exchanged before a battle count as ‘seeing someone,’ but...”

Inglis chuckled in amusement. “I never realized marriage proposals could be like this. This sounds much more fun. ♪”

"You should try hard to lose. I want to see what kind of face you make," Rafinha muttered.

"Huh? What was that, Rani?"

"Oh, nothing! But I'm going to do mine the more traditional way! I hope there's someone just right for me. Some of them sounded really cool!"

Rafinha's eyes had lit up, but Inglis tried to put a stop to that. "No! That's something else we have to discuss! Aunt Irina! Can you add the same condition for Rani too? I'm Rani's squire, so of course, if someone can't defeat me, I wouldn't be comfortable entrusting her to them. That would mean she would be less safe than before!"

"C'mon! I'm not going to let you try to lock me out of a date! Aren't you the person who brings me onto the front lines so you can combine protecting me with the fights you're after?! You've put me in a lot of danger a bunch of times!"

"But next to me is the safest place! That's just the most effective way to handle things!"

Irina laughed. "I haven't seen you two in a while, but it's good to know you're as close as ever."

"Yes, Irina," Serena said. "I hope that never changes."

As the mothers laughed with each other, a knock came at the door. *Tap, tap, tap.*

"Yes, come in!" Irina said.

"It's really you!" An adorable little girl of ten or so came rushing in. She had blonde hair hanging down to her shoulders, and her face was aglow while her breath caught in her throat.

"Alina!" Inglis and Rafinha called out.

She was the girl they'd met while helping with the Weismar troupe's performance in the capital. With no close relatives, the people of Ymir had taken her in. She looked well, with a fair complexion and cheerful smile. She'd previously been rather underweight, but now she had plumped up a little and

looked prettier.

“Hey! I missed you so much! I’m glad you’re doing well!” Rafinha said.

“Are you done studying? I’m sorry we called for you to visit out of nowhere.” Inglis had been curious how Alina was doing, and wanted to see her as soon as possible, but this was her time to study, so Inglis had requested that she come by when she was done. She seemed to be able to set aside time for schoolwork, which was impressive. Rafinha hadn’t been capable of that at ten years old.

“Weeeelllll... I missed you too!” Alina replied with a beaming smile.

It made Inglis smile too. It was like seeing young Rafinha again. Though Alina’s manners seemed to be better.



At the knights’ training grounds inside the Ymir castle, there was a girlish “Yaaaah!”

Rrrrrumble!

A small war hammer Artifact in Alina’s hand produced a stone, which struck and destroyed a wooden target set up at a distance.



“Wow! That was great, Alina! And you just started with Artifacts too!” Rafinha was as proud of Alina as she would be of herself—no, even more so. She seemed like a doting mother. It reminded Inglis of her own feelings toward Rafinha, and now that she was watching her cousin experience the same thing, Inglis felt deeply moved.

“Good job, Alina.” Inglis clapped for the girl. She truly had done well.

“Tee hee. Thanks!” Alina smiled and puffed up with pride.

Ada, the lieutenant-captain of Ymir’s knights, was watching too. “This girl has an upper-class Rune. A lower-class Artifact shouldn’t give her any trouble—she’s gotten used to it quickly.”

Inglis’s father, Luke—the Ymir knights’ captain—was accompanying Duke Bilford on his visit to Chiral, the capital. A full analysis of recent events was still ongoing. The two had been summoned before Inglis and Rafinha even arrived back in Ymir.

Meanwhile, both Inglis and Rafinha had already known Alina had an upper-class Rune. They knew even before they left to infiltrate Alcard. Inglis’s mother and aunt had decided to get Alina baptized in the capital before returning to Ymir. Inglis had noticed Alina’s potential for a Rune when meeting her, but having been sold into servitude, the girl had never been baptized.

After all that, Alina received an impressive upper-class Rune in the shape of a war hammer.

Alina had been happy, but the people of Ymir had been even happier. A knight with an upper-class Rune was an extremely valuable asset for an order of knights. Inglis’s friends Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte all had such Runes, so it was easy to come away with the impression that this level of Rune was not particularly rare, but only one per several hundred at most were so blessed. Inglis knew so many people with upper-class Runes only because the knights’ academy was established to train the very top prospects; from a more conventional point of view, Rafinha and the others were the *crème de la crème*.

The people of Ymir warmly welcomed Alina and her potential for greatness, and they also placed great expectations on her. As a result, Ymir’s knights

immediately took her in, and she began her training.

“I apologize for leaving her all to you, Ada,” Inglis said. She and Rafinha were still knights’ academy students. Taking in Alina on their own would have been impossible.

“Thanks, Ada!” Rafinha added.

“Please don’t worry about it!” Ada replied. “She’ll do great things for Ymir. Besides...the knights of Ymir took me in as well when I too was an orphan. This is my way of paying it forward.”

“Ada...” Inglis began.

“Oh, right... You were the same as her...” Rafinha murmured.

Inglis and Rafinha had accompanied the knights since they were little, participating in training and hunts of magicite beasts. Ada was usually the one who’d looked after them. She was almost like a sister to them, so of course they already knew she’d been an orphan when the Ymir knights found her. Ada had no family, which was probably why she’d been so protective of Inglis and Rafinha.

“Ah, don’t worry about me, though,” Ada said. “Besides, you two managed to take down a Prismen! I’m sorry I couldn’t be there to help.”

“That’s okay. I didn’t do much either,” Rafinha replied. “I mostly just sat there and watched,” she joked, shrugging.

“That’s not true. You helped how you could, and it didn’t just make me happy—it actually came in handy,” Inglis said.

“Really? I didn’t get that impression at all,” Rafinha said.

“You’re just imagining things, maybe? It really did help.”

“Well, I guess that’s nice...”

Ada laughed. “If you get the chance, I’d love to hear from you about your battle with the Prismen. I’m sure we’d all benefit from learning how you did it.”

“Well... That’s kinda...” Rafinha began with a frown. A full account would include Inglis knocking Rafael out to take his place, as well as other such

problematic details. For the sake of his honor, it was best not to say too much. “Maybe a little...but there’s a lot we can’t talk about.”

“Ah, sorry,” Ada said. “I’m sure some of it is state secrets, right?”

“You two beat the Prism and saved this country, right?” Alina asked. “I can’t believe such amazing people saved *me*... I want to grow up to be like you,” she said with a look of admiration.

“I mean, we beat it coincidentally, kinda? Just remember that everything Chris does needs ‘coincidentally’ attached. Don’t try to follow her too closely, okay?” Rafinha said.

“Huh?! What does that mean?” Alina was confused.

“Like now, after getting all those proposals in the mail, she’s saying she’ll marry anyone who can beat her and wants to fight all the guys! Chris solves everything through violence. What do you think of that, Alina?”

“Rani, that’s not the kind of thing you should be telling her...” Inglis interjected.

“I... I don’t really know,” Alina began, “but I think you should get married to someone you like, not someone who’s strong...” Her response was surprisingly poignant.

“Aha ha ha! Right? That’s exactly what I said! But that’s who Chris is, so don’t try to be like her, Alina.” Rafinha laughed and patted the younger girl’s head.

Ada laughed as well. “Aha ha! So that was your reply, Inglis? Like mother, like daughter! Serena was the same way!”

“But it wouldn’t be fun any other way!” Inglis protested. “And you need to enjoy yourself!”

“The point I’m trying to make is that there are problems with that idea of ‘fun,’” Rafinha said.

“Watching Chris fight sounds fun! She beat the world’s strongest magicite beast, so she must be the strongest in the world! I’m going to be a knight someday, so I want to learn by watching her!” Alina looked at Inglis admiringly.

Her pure innocence was adorable. Inglis couldn’t help but want to live up to

her expectations. “I still have a long way to go. But I’ll do my best if you’re looking forward to it!”

“Don’t try too hard. She won’t be able to learn anything if you do it too quickly for her to see,” Rafinha needled.

“I believe it...” Ada said. “When she scattered that pack of magicite beasts barehanded, it hurt my neck just trying to keep track of her. If she’s gotten even better since then...”

Alina gasped. “Is she really that fast?!”

Inglis chuckled. “Look forward to it. Anyway, Ada, is everything going all right with Alina? If there’s anything I can help with, I’d love to.”

“Hmm. There is one thing...”

“What is it?”

“I’ll help out too!” Rafinha announced.

“As I said, Alina has an upper-class Rune,” Ada began. “She’s gotten quite adept at handling lower-class Artifacts, but we don’t have a middle-class one to give to her. The best way to make the most of her talents would be an upper-class Artifact, but... It’s not exactly easy for Ymir to get one.”

Another way Inglis’s day-to-day experiences were out of the ordinary was that upper-class Artifacts were quite difficult to acquire. They had to be granted by the Highlanders, and the offering asked in return was quite heavy. In the worst case, it was enough to feed a village or a town for a year. The Bilford finances had been quite stretched just acquiring Rafinha’s Shiny Flow.

“I see... That’s a bit of a problem,” Inglis said.

“Too expensive, right? I wish we could just borrow one from the knights’ academy,” Rafinha said.

“Those are the academy’s spares, though. If we did that, everyone would want one.”

“Yeah, probably... It wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“Can Duke Bilford do anything?”

"He said he'll think about it...but Ymir's budget isn't the healthiest," Ada said.

"Hmm... Wait, I know!" Inglis clapped her hands together. "Can I borrow that Artifact for a little bit?" She pointed to the war hammer Alina was holding.

"Well, we have another of the same type. Shall I get that for you?" Ada asked.

"Yes, please! And any other spare Artifacts you have on hand."

"Understood."

"What are you going to do, Chris?" Rafinha asked.

"Oh, just tune them up a bit," Inglis replied with a grin.

In the capital, the aftermath of recent events was still being dealt with, but a lot had already changed at the knights' academy over the past month. The flying battleship Inglis had taken as a war trophy from Venefic had been repaired and transferred to the knights' academy. Talented new instructors had been recruited. Research had begun on how to cure the people who'd transformed into magicite beasts.

Ambassador Theodore had assisted with both the repair of the flying battleship and with the research. The latter, in particular, was for the sake of Rin—his sister, Cyrene—so he would surely put his all into it. There may have been a difference in how difficult things were for a surface human compared to a Highlander, but the goal was the same.

However, Inglis still expected it to be extremely difficult. The black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front, easily her superior in skill with aether, had said as much. According to him, it was impossible to return those turned into magicite beasts to their original form. So at the very least, it would require her to outdo his own capabilities. She couldn't say for sure whether that could be done, but she fully intended to try and help.

She had occasionally visited Principal Miriela and Ambassador Theodore's lab, where she had been able to learn about the technology used to construct Artifacts. Creating one from nothing was difficult. Perhaps, though, she could at least adjust or modify existing ones. This was her chance to try it out.

"Wow! You can do that now?" Rafinha asked.

"Yeah, I've learned some things from the principal and Ambassador Theodore, and I've read the research. May as well give it a shot! If I can make an Artifact stronger, it'll help with Alina's training."

"Wow! Thanks, Chris!" Alina exclaimed.

"Yes, that would be very helpful, Inglis!" Ada added.

Inglis herself hadn't been particularly interested in Artifacts. Her main interest had been finding something useful about their Gifts that she could reproduce. The physical frame of an Artifact was something she considered unreliable, something that would be destroyed if she infused it with aether. Leone's dark greatsword Artifact had shattered when she had done so.

It wasn't until she fought the Prismers armed with hieran menaces—the ultimate Artifacts—that her way of thinking had changed. The performance of the hieran menaces Eris and Ripple had been even more than she had expected. Truly, they were worthy of being called the ultimate Artifacts.

Now, hieran menaces were very different from other Artifacts, but that was still proof that an Artifact could have that level of power. And if so, Inglis wanted to see whether she could tweak an existing Artifact and create something that could endure her aether. Therefore, whenever she'd had the chance, she'd had Principal Miriela and Ambassador Theodore teach her more about how they were built.

What she wanted was something as strong as the sword forged from Fufailbane's scales. Hastily made though it had been—she'd simply beaten a pile of scales together into the rough shape of a blade—it had been a good weapon, one that could handle her aether.

Unfortunately, she had lost it in the battle with the Prismers and had no replacement. She wanted a new weapon: one strong enough for her aether and containing a Gift would just be perfect. That still wouldn't be up to the standards of hieran menaces like Eris and Ripple, but to her they weren't just weapons: Eris and Ripple were people who lent her their strength. That was something subtly different from mastering the blade herself. On the other hand, she was able to accept the dragonscale sword, or some as-yet-unknown enhanced Artifact, as simply a weapon of hers.

And thus, Inglis accepted the lower-class Artifact from Ada and returned to her birthplace, the Eucus residence, to spend some time with just her mother, Serena. Rafinha, likewise, was together with Inglis's aunt Irina. Inglis was sure they were talking about who would be a good partner. But she was going to strike first!

As night fell, Inglis again visited Ada, who was dealing with paperwork in her office in Ymir's castle. Alina must already have been asleep.

"Pardon me, Ada."

"Oh, Inglis! What is it? Ah, have you already finished modifying the Artifact?"

"No, I'm still... Uh, could you do me a favor, Ada?"

"Yes, what is it?" She smiled.

"Could you get this to Duke Bilford in the capital? And, sorry to put this on you, but as soon as possible, if you could." The contents were, of course, a plea to stop Rafinha's engagement, and the reasons were stated clearly.

The situation in the country after the defeat of the Prismers had not yet settled. For example, how far would the thaw in relations with Alcard go? Some would accept their apology and try to smooth things over, while others would demand revenge for the attempt on King Carlias's life. The same went for Venefic. People might demand an attack on Venefic in response to Rochefort's raid on the capital, or they might make peace on the assumption that an apology, and suitable reparations, were forthcoming. There were many opinions on what was to be done.

At a time when the future leaning of the court was unclear, it was an open secret that to welcome Rafinha as a new member of one's family after her honors from the Prismers' defeat was also to welcome stronger political influence. And if her partner's family were to take a different tack from Duke Bilford on these matters, it could lead to Rafinha being taken away from him by a political foe.

Now was no time to discuss marriage; the wait-and-see approach was best. Inglis had made that point in great detail. In other words, she was telling the duke that all it would take was his word to stop this. The same words could

carry a completely different weight depending on who spoke them. And she wanted them spoken by the most effective speaker.

She'd also been frank at the end, saying that she didn't want to be lonely with Rafinha engaged. As someone else with the same parental love for Rafinha, the duke could surely be relied on to understand her feelings. That was her hope. If this did not go well, she would consider resorting to force.

"Understood. I'll send someone right away. We do have a few Flygears, so if we travel without stopping, we should be able to get this to him fairly soon. Those things really do come in handy, don't they?"

Inglis also could have had them use the *Star Princess*, but Rafinha would have noticed its absence when she wanted to use it. That meant using one of Ymir's knights' Flygears was the only choice. "Indeed, they do. Thanks."

"Leave it to us." Ada smiled, and murmured, "Perfect. If you'd been a little bit later, we would have had to deliver this and Rafinha's letter separately."

Shortly before Inglis had visited her, Rafinha had also asked for a letter to be sent.

Ten minutes earlier, Rafinha had visited Ada in her office and said, "Ada! I need you to rush this letter to my brother in the capital! As fast as you can!"

"Urgent news?! Understood, I'll have a Flygear ready immediately!"

"Perfect, thanks!" Rafinha laughed. "Chris, you're coming along with me!" Her face bore an extremely suspicious-looking grin.

"Wh-What do you mean, Rafinha?" Ada asked.

"Don't you remember? Chris said that she'd marry anyone who beat her! And that she's going to fight all her suitors."

"Yes, there was that."

Rafinha laughed again. "She's so confident she's safe and she'll beat them all, but nothing's guaranteed!"

"Meaning?"

“Rafael. I’ll call in Rafael! I make sure she’s worn out as much as possible from the other suitors, and then in the end I get Rafael to jump in and beat her! That way, the two of them will marry! Chris herself says that a warrior never goes back on her word!”

“Well, that would be...nice! That way Ymir’s future would be secure!”

“Right? Right? You know how Chris is, and Rafael’s such a shoegazer, so this is a good chance to get them on the same page!”

This plan was why Rafinha hadn’t objected strongly when Inglis described her own take on meeting someone. Well, and that she didn’t want her own chances to be interfered with. But to Rafinha, if Inglis were to fall in love, it would be best if it were with Rafael. That way they would eventually wed, and Inglis would be the future Duchess of Ymir. Honestly, she didn’t want Inglis to marry anyone but Rafael. And she was interested in her own prospects, so it was hard to tell only Inglis not to pursue anything.

“So, this letter is very important, then!” Ada said.

“Yeah! It is! I’m counting on you!”

“Understood!”

With that, Rafinha left the office. Starting the next day, she and Inglis enjoyed themselves in their hometown, snacking in the old downtown section of Ymir for the first time in a while. They visited a familiar seamstress and tried on new clothes. They went out with the knights in pursuit of magicite beasts. And they had a different sort of pleasant time with Alina: not just hanging out, but watching over her study and finding books for her in the castle library. At night, Inglis retired to her room and worked on the Artifact.

Several days passed leisurely as the girls both kept secret the contents of the letters they had entrusted to Ada.



Several days later, Inglis was oversleeping in her room at the Eucus residence. She’d been up late. The door burst open.

Slam!

Someone was running.

Thump, thump, thump!

“Wh—?!” By the time Inglis realized what was happening, it was too late.

Fwump!

Someone had dived into her bed.

“Eeek!”

“Good morning, Chris!” Rafinha was sporting a huge grin. Her sudden landing had come with too much force, though. “Happy birthday! You’re sixteen today!”

“Rani!” Inglis exclaimed.

The pressure and pain Inglis felt were just from Rafinha’s rush to be the first to celebrate her birthday. Realizing that, Inglis couldn’t complain, only smile.

“Good morning, Rani. Thank you.”

“All right! You know what time it is!” Rafinha began to strip off Inglis’s already-thin nightgown. Rin, meanwhile, took this as an opportunity to dive into her cleavage.

“Eeek! Stop, Rani! Wh-What do you mean?”

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s your birthday, so I made you new clothes! And... Hmm? Has your chest gotten even bigger? I wonder if this’ll fit... Sorry.”

Squish, squish, squish...

Even as she spoke, Rafinha was conducting a more thorough examination

than necessary.

“Hm? I don’t think so. My undergarments haven’t been getting tight.”

“Mm... Yeah, right. I just wanted a quick touch.”

“That’s terrible! And that was *not* quick! Sheesh...”

Rafinha nimbly jumped from the bed and ran away. “Anyway, I worked hard making you this by hand, so I should get *something* out of it! C’mon, try it on! I’m sure it’ll look great on you!” Rafinha started spinning in glee, a cutely wrapped present in her hands.

“Sure, okay.” Smiling along with Rafinha, Inglis got out of bed to try on her present.

In the midst of it all, Rafinha stumbled over the desk next to the bed. “Aaah!”

Thump!

“Rani!” Inglis was, of course, there to catch Rafinha. Instead, the Artifact she’d been tinkering with fell from the desk to the floor. It, and a pile of parts and materials, fell down in a heap.

Poof!

Inglis didn’t know what had hit what, but a large cloud of smoke filled the room, taking away her vision for a moment.

“Ugh, what just happened?!” Rafinha coughed.

“We need to open a window!” Inglis said. As the smoke cleared, her vision of her surroundings gradually returned.

“Sorry, Chris. That was my bad...”

“I can just make another one, it’s fine. More importantly, Rani, are you okay? You’re not hurt, are you?”

“No, I’m fine...” Rafinha caught Inglis’s extended hand.

Something wasn't quite right. It felt different. It felt a little bit...soft.

"Hm?"

The reason for this soon became clear. Standing in front of Inglis was a much younger looking Rafinha, as she had been a decade or so prior.

"Wow! I missed this! So cute!" The two each said exactly the same thing.

"What?" And again.

"Th-The mirror!"

Reflected back at them were the five-to six-year-old Inglis and Rafinha.

"Whaaaaat?!" Even in this, their voices matched perfectly.

Chapter II: Inglis, Age 16—The Meaning of a Meeting (2)

On the day when the first suitors were due to arrive, Inglis and Rafinha had still not returned to normal.

“W-Well, this is a mess...” Irina muttered.

“It certainly is,” Serena said. “I wonder if they’ll ever change back.”

The two held their daughters in their laps.

“But this isn’t all bad.”

“I agree. Probably not the best for what we have planned today, but...”

They cuddled their daughters before exclaiming, “Aww, they’re so cute!”

Irina and Serena were worried to a degree about Inglis and Rafinha—apparently stuck in their younger bodies—but they were even more delighted to have their little girls back to hug.

The parents’ glee hadn’t stopped ever since the transformation several days earlier. Honestly, Inglis understood that joy. As soon as the deed had happened, she’d felt an urge to hug Rafinha tightly, and Rafinha had squeezed her just as tightly. Inglis knew her own cuteness as well; she found her tiny body adorable, and she’d been staring at herself in the mirror for many hours. Unfortunately, now she was too small to wear the clothes Rafinha had made for her birthday, but her mother and aunt were happy, so it was fine in the end.

But...something was wrong. Several days had passed, and Inglis and Rafinha were still stuck as young children. Inglis wasn’t quite sure what the problem was, nor did she know for certainty the state of the Artifact she’d been working on when it exploded, resulting in their aging down. She’d been experimenting with the idea of connecting multiple cores to an Artifact to both increase its overall power and change its Gift.

Her goal was to change the magnitude of its offensive power. Alina was only

ten. Inglis had wanted to give her a weapon that, if she was ever forced to fight other humans, would let her neutralize them without killing them. Leone's dark greatsword Artifact could change its size, something which she used to great effect against her foes. Inglis had been in the middle of trying to rework the core's mana-control configuration with that as a basis, infusing a bit of aether as her own secret sauce.

Perhaps the aether had been a poor choice. The core had been overloaded, and even a slight shock had caused it to explode, scattering the changed effect of the Gift indiscriminately. That was all Inglis could guess as to what had occurred. If she didn't change back, she'd have to consult with Principal Miriela and Ambassador Theodore on how to properly reverse the effect.

But for now...

"There's nothing wrong with staying like this for a little bit. If we haven't reverted by the time we get back to the knights' academy, we can ask for help there. And I don't mind a suitor meeting me like this. It won't cause me any problems," Inglis said.

Just because she was in the body of a six-year-old didn't mean she couldn't fight. It reduced her abilities, and these little short arms and legs shortened her melee reach, but she'd still take on any challengers.

Rafinha was of a different mind. "What?! It's a problem for me! How can I meet a guy properly when I look like a little kid?!"

"Looking like a kid doesn't mean you can't fight."

"Your mom was right! Glares exchanged before battle don't count as seeing someone!"

"Hmm, I guess your approach would be tough to do as a kid."

"No kidding! C'mon, can't you do something, Chris?!"

"This isn't really a good time. Sorry." Inglis grinned back at Rafinha.

If Rafinha's dates with suitors went poorly, that would be for the best in Inglis's opinion. She'd reached out directly to Duke Bilford to put an end to these arrangements, but the dates not feeling like dates would work just as

well. And while Inglis would have to literally fight off suitors as a young child, she had faith she'd succeed. After all, suitors who saw her in this state would likely underestimate her, leading to their downfall in both combat and courtship.

So it wasn't a question of whether Inglis and Rafinha could be healed, because right now, they *weren't* going to be. That worked better for her.

"C'mon, Chris, be serious about this! It's gonna ruin my dates!"

"I don't think so."

Rafinha muttered something quietly. "But it might be a good chance for Rafael..."

"Hmm? What was that?"

"Oh, nothing!"

Ada appeared and announced, "Everyone! We've got company!"

Inglis hopped down from her mother's lap and smacked a fist into her other palm. "Here they come! Ada, how many do the enemy number?"

"They aren't supposed to be enemies! They're supposed to be your suitors!" Rafinha remarked.

"She really is just like you were, Serena," Irina said, eliciting laughs from her sister.

"Well, just one..." Ada replied.

"Only one, huh," Inglis said. "That's a little disappointing, but more may show up later. And if he's daring it alone, he must be competent. What'd he seem like?"

"Well, definitely a strong one, but probably not here for a date."

So...who? Inglis and Rafinha tilted their heads.

"Could it be Rafael?" Inglis asked. But no, he wouldn't be "company." His would just be a visit home.

"No. It's the hieran menace Lady Eris."

“Eris?!” What was Eris doing here? They promptly set off to meet her.



“Ehh?! Wh-What happened to make you two look like that?!” Eris gasped in shock as she saw Inglis and Rafinha.

“I was trying to tweak an Artifact and messed up, and I think the Gift went wild.”

“W-Will you be okay like that?”

“Yes. It’s not bad being a kid for a little while. I’m having plenty of fun. See, look at Rani! Isn’t she adorable?”

“Well, I suppose that’s a glass-half-full perspective... You’re cute as well. So, this is what you were like when you were little.”

“Thank you. So, why are you here, Eris? Did someone hire you as a mercenary to fight me? Then let’s get right to it!”

“No. Why do you always want to fight me?!”

“I don’t mind if you’re here to claim me yourself!”

“That’s absurd! I-If I won, you’d have to marry me! How could we do that?!” Eris seemed to be very upset on Inglis’s behalf.

“Well, we can talk that part over later. For now, let’s get on with the match!”

“Absolutely not!”

“Now, now, Chris! Stop putting Eris on the spot!” Rafinha stepped in to bar Inglis from her fight with Eris.

“Then, why are you here, Eris?”

“I bring royal orders.”

“Royal orders?!” Irina and Serena gasped.

“Yes. That the marriages of these two be deferred.”

“Ehhhhh?!”

“The court demands such?”

“The attempted assassination of King Carlias, the Venefic raid on the capital, and the revival of the Prism... Too many crises have appeared on our doorstep in such a short period of time,” Eris explained to the mothers. “The country’s future course of action has yet to be decided, and their marriages would have too great a political influence. If, for example, the powerful nobles who wed them insisted that Venefic be laid to ruin, many would be swayed in that direction. Such is the prestige that they have now.”

“I-Indeed...” Irina and Serena shared a glance and then, their expressions becoming more serious, nodded.

“It is the will of the court that in order to avoid unnecessary repercussions, any decisions regarding their marriage not yet be made. Duke Bilford and Captain Luke have already given their assent, and the suitors have been notified. Therefore, I don’t expect any to arrive. I apologize for presenting this to you as a fait accompli.” Eris politely bowed to Irina and Serena.

“I see... Very well,” Irina said.

“If that’s the case, I don’t blame you...” Serena said.

“Well, with the state they’re both in, perhaps it’s good that this be postponed.” Irina gave Rafinha a squeeze.

“Exactly. This way, they can enjoy being little again for a little bit.” Serena did the same to Inglis.

“That would be nice... They certainly are both adorable,” Eris said with a rare smile.

“Aww! But I was excited for those dates!” Rafinha pouted.

“I wanted to fight the kingdom’s best!” Inglis complained.

“So what about that letter—” they began at the same time.

“Ah?! Chris, what did you do?!?” Rafinha asked.

“What about you, Rani?! What were you up to?!?” Inglis shot back.

“About those letters you sent... Both of these were delivered to Rafael. Duke Bilford was in an important meeting and couldn’t be interrupted.” Eris held them up for all to see. One was from Inglis to Duke Bilford, the other from

Rafinha to Rafael.

Inglis skimmed over Rafinha's letter. Its contents: that Inglis had promised to wed any who could defeat her, and that Rafael should return, challenge her, and win. It said nothing of Rafinha's own suitors, as if hoping to avoid interference. Inglis was, to be honest, fine with that. She welcomed the idea of an all-out bout with Rafael.

Rafinha read over Inglis's letter. "Ah! Chris listed a bunch of the same reasons Eris did earlier!"

"But I only wanted yours to be stopped, Rani..." Inglis whined.

"It's because Rafael suddenly requested leave. Prince Wayne and Ambassador Theodore asked his reason, and when they saw the letters, they agreed marriage at this point was a poor decision. While each of your letters was only about the other, it was clear that both of you were pondering suitors. Thus, Prince Wayne and Ambassador Theodore, with the assent of King Carlias, brought us to the current point."

"Ah, if only mine had gone to the duke rather than Rafael..." Inglis lamented.

If only Inglis had been able to stop Rafinha's arrangements secretly. However, Rafinha had sent Rafael a secret letter of her own, disrupting the whole plan once Rafael got ahold of both. And unfortunately, it had turned out to be a major issue. If only Inglis had gone ahead, she could have beaten everyone who challenged her, and she would've enjoyed her bouts without any risk of political complications.

"It's because you wrote to Rafael, Rani!"

"It's because you wrote things you didn't have to!"

Inglis and Rafinha argued with each other from their mothers' embraces.

Ada, even more flustered than before, returned to Inglis and the others. "Everyone! Th-Th-There's trouble!"

"Ada?!" Inglis said.

"What's wrong?" Rafinha asked. "You're so worried!"

Ada was far more shaken than she'd been at Eris's arrival. "L-Look and you'll

understand! Go outside and look up at the sky!"

"Outside... The sky?!" Eris asked.

"It might be a magicite beast!" Inglis swiftly slipped from Serena's arms and ran out headlong. With no duel with a suitor in the offing, at least maybe that could be a good fight.

"Ah! Hold it, Chris!" Rafinha said.

"I knew one would come for me! I hope it's strong!" Inglis tried to pick up Rafinha as she ran, but with how tiny she was, she tumbled.

"Eek! Sheesh...!"

Instead, Eris scooped her up. "You may look cuter, but you sure aren't any more innocent! You haven't changed at all!" the hieran menace said. Despite her complaints, she followed along to the knights' training ground in the courtyard carrying Rafinha.

"Hm...?" Inglis murmured.

It was dark outside even though the weather was good. A shadow had fallen across the entire training ground—no, across the entire castle. Across all of Ymir, in fact.

Uneasily, Inglis looked skyward, as Ada had suggested. There, she saw a gigantic floating island, many times—no, dozens of times—the size of Ymir.

One by one, Inglis, Rafinha, and Eris gasped.

"Wow! Is that...?!"

"I've never seen it this closely before!"

"What's happening?!"

The shadow made things eerily dark.

"It's Highland!" the three shouted together.



Highland had suddenly appeared over Ymir. Seeing it up close really drove home its scale and impact.

“Ha ha ha... Looks like it’s not your magicite beast, Chris?” Rafinha teased.

“But I’m sure they’re here to propose!”

“That couldn’t be right! But why...?!” Eris’s expression was filled with tension.

Ada, Serena, and Irina joined them.

“Ehhh?! Highland?!” Irina gasped.

“Wh-Why would Highland be here?!” Serena exclaimed.

“Anyway, we need to prepare our defense! The knights of Ymir will hold strong!” Ada began giving orders to the gathered knights, but Eris motioned for them to stand by.

“No, wait! That won’t help! If Highland attacks, there’s no way you’ll be able to hold out! Focus on getting the civilians to safety! I’ll hold them back as long as I can! Abandon the city! Get as far away as you can!”

Ada gave a nod. “Understood! Lady Irina, Lady Serena! Is that all right?!”

“Yes... If Lady Eris says so...!” Irina said.

“We’ll do as she says!” Serena said.

“In that case, Flygear squadron, go out into the city and tell the people to evacuate!” Ada commanded. “Instruct them to leave town! Tell them to run as far away as they can!”

“Yes, ma’am!” the gathered knights replied before scattering to their duties.

“Lady Irina, Lady Serena, you both need to hurry as well! Take a Flygear and flee Ymir!”

“No!” the two answered as one, shaking their heads.

“I will remain!” Irina said. “It is my duty to protect Ymir in my husband’s place!”

“My sister’s right!”

“Lady Irina, Lady Serena...”

“At least move inside the castle! Leave here to us!” Eris called out.

“Please, both of you! Eris is right, let’s get inside!” Ada implored.

Both daughters couldn't agree more. "Ada! Take care of mom and aunt Serena!"

"They're in your hands, Ada!"

"Of course! Then—!" With that decided, Ada, Irina, and Serena made their retreat.

Eris pointed at the sky. "Something's coming!"

"Flying battleships?!" Inglis said.

"Th-There are so many... Let's see, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven..." Even more than Eris had time to count swarmed out from Highland and formed a line between it and the surface. However, their deployment seemed to be ceremonial rather than tactical.

"Wow, Highland's amazing! So many flying battleships! Ooh, I can't wait! I knew my suitor would come!" Starry-eyed and in her younger body, Inglis resembled a kid watching beautiful fireworks.

As much of a power as Karelia was, it had only two flying battleships under its command: one granted to the Paladins by Ambassador Theodore, the other captured from Venefic and newly transferred to the knights' academy. But even at a glance, here, there were dozens from Highland. Just one look made the overwhelming difference in power obvious. How many countries could that fleet destroy? And that was only the beginning of the might Highland could bring to bear—if it even was their entire fleet.

"Gah! It doesn't matter if you're big or small—if you're up against a Prismer or Highland, you never change, Chris!" Rafinha cradled her own head.

"It's gauche to change your attitude based on your condition or who you're dealing with! I'll accept a challenge from anyone, anytime!"

"But they have to challenge you first, okay?! No starting anything with them!" Eris protested. "If you did, that would mean all-out war with Highland! It would be the end of Karelia!"

"Yes, but...if they try to do anything to my mother, my aunt, or Ymir, I will destroy them. Please don't try to stop me."

“Yeah! Chris and I won’t let them hurt Ymir!”

“I can only hope that doesn’t happen,” Eris muttered.

Flygears and a Flygear Port appeared from one of the battleships and began to descend. They seemed to be approaching them.

“A single Flygear Port?!” Inglis remarked. She was surprised they hadn’t deployed more. She saw only one Flygear Port and a few Flygears. They were a bit larger than the ones supplied to the surface and also had a different appearance. The small formation, without making any hostile moves, descended and landed in the training grounds of the courtyard where they stood.

After landing, soldiers emerged, wearing helmeted armor that covered their faces. A white-haired man in a smartly kept butler’s outfit followed. His forehead carried a Highlander’s stigmata. His expression was mild-mannered, and without the stigmata he would have seemed to be an older gentleman out of place among soldiers. Approaching Inglis and the others, the elderly Highlander bowed deeply.

“Pardon me. Might Miss Inglis Eucus be here?” he asked, facing Eris. It seemed Inglis had been described to him as a young lady. With Inglis and Rafinha in children’s bodies, Eris was the only one there who fit that description.

“Yes, but I’m not her,” Eris replied and gestured toward Inglis. “This is who you’re looking for.”

“And how may I help you?” Inglis asked.

“Hmm? You’re rather younger than I had heard...” The elderly Highlander’s eyes widened in surprise, but then his smile returned. “I am Carraldo. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“I am Inglis Eucus. Thank you so much for visiting.” She gave a curtsy. “What business do you wish with me?”

“If I may draw your attention,” Carraldo said, pointing at Highland above them. “That is Rüstung, the home island of my master, the dux.”

“The dux?! The Triumvirate are making a move as well?!” Tension shot across Eris’s face.

“You know about them, Eris?”

“You recall that the Triumvirate and the Papal League are the two major factions in Highland, correct?”

“Yes. And Ambassador Theodore is aligned with the Triumvirate, isn’t he? As was the previous ambassador, Muenthe.”

Since the time of Ambassador Muenthe, Flygears and Flygear Ports had also been granted to Karelia by Highland. And since Ambassador Theodore was a personal friend of Prince Wayne, he was trying to strengthen this trend.

“Yes. The Triumvirate are three Highlanders with the titles mechanator, quaestor, and dux. So he’s one of the most important people in Highland!”

“Ooh!” Inglis’s eyes gleamed.

Rafinha, meanwhile, was nervous. “Ah?! Even more important than Ambassador Theodore, then?! Wh-What kind of person is he?!”

Seeing this, Carraldo gave them a grandfatherly smile. “I believe that should tell you enough.” He nodded a couple of times and then turned his gaze toward Highland. “Take care, ladies. It’s going to be a little bit bumpy.”

As he spoke, a bulkhead on the bottom of Highland opened directly overhead, and something flew out of it.

“A person?!” the three girls exclaimed.

Not a Flygear Port, nor even a Flygear, but an unmounted human. Naturally, they fell faster and faster, with a sound like they were tearing through the sky. As they grew from a speck to something larger and larger, they became visible as a person standing perfectly still with their arms folded.

“Drrroooooooooopppppinnnnng iiiiiinnnnnnnn!”

Boooooom!

A loud shout followed by a landing, followed by a roaring impact. Like Carraldo had warned, the ground shook. Having leaped from such a high point, that person landed hard enough to crack the flagstones of the training ground, and displaced wreckage flew into the air around him. Such a feat would have killed a normal person, but he seemed completely fine.

He was a muscular man with long, flaming-red hair, still standing with his arms crossed. He looked to be in his midtwenties. His face was pleasing, perhaps even beautiful, but his slipshod bearing and dress implied that he didn't particularly care. On the other hand, they emphasized his beefy build. He was obviously powerful.

"And this is Dux Jildegrieva himself." Carraldo bowed reverently. "This is Lady Inglis."

"Hmm? Ah well, it doesn't matter what you look like—I'm interested in power! I heard if I came here, I could take on someone who wielded hieran menaces and kicked a Prism's butt! Ain't no one gonna turn down a date with a Highlander, right?!" Dux Jildegrieva's rough-and-tumble speech was at odds with his lofty title. His grin was bright and casual but also a bit overbearing.



“U-Uh, wow...” Rafinha and Eris shared conflicted expressions—trying not to stare and failing.

“I—” Inglis began.

“Yeah, so...?” Jildegrieva cut in. “Listen, if you’ve got a problem with it, I’ve got ways to—”

“Welcome! Welcome, welcome! Of course I’ll take you on!” Inglis’s eyes sparkled, and she immediately prepared for battle. A top Highlander challenging *her* to a fight was beyond her wildest dreams! There was no way she’d refuse; she wanted to get right to it—before he changed his mind! She’d make up for her plans being ruined.

“Well, that was quick! Thanks! Now bring it, kid!” Jildegrieva, obviously pleased, also crouched into a fighting stance.

“Of course! Then—!” Inglis replied.

His stance showed no obvious weaknesses. The time he’d spent training was obvious.

In a situation like this, she wouldn’t look for an opening.

She would charge in!

“Haaah!”

“All riiight!”

Inglis rushed toward Jildegrieva. Her tiny five-year-old fist swung as hard as it could. And as his meaty paw swung to meet it, their clash shook the very air around them.

Boooooom!

“Ha ha ha... He and Chris haven’t known each other for ten seconds and they’re already fighting...”

“They seem very much alike... I suppose there are people like that everywhere,” Eris said. Though she certainly hadn’t expected one of Highland’s

most influential to be this way.

“I guess this is better than them invading Ymir.”

“Indeed... I supposed he heard about the defeat of the Prismen and looked into her? And that’s how...” Even a royal missive would never have reached the Triumvirate, nor would it have been read if it had. They were simply too high above such earthly matters.

Carraldo laughed. “Yes, His Excellency is always looking for strong foes worthy of fighting him. A life of eternal training on one’s own is well enough, but the presence of a worthy opponent upon which to prove its results is more valuable than anything else. Having heard the rumors of Lady Inglis’s prowess, he could not resist paying a visit. I’m glad he’s having fun.”

Rafinha and Eris laughed hollowly. That sounded extremely familiar to them. As they watched, Inglis and Dux Jildegrieva’s fists slammed against each other.

Smack-smack-smack-smack-smack!

A tiny, smooth fist against a callused, muscular one. As could be expected, Inglis was being overwhelmed little by little. The point where their fists collided drew closer and closer to her. Soon, she was unable to meet his fist in time and was forced to cross her arms and defend herself. Dux Jildegrieva’s fist crashed into her tiny crossed arms, and she was knocked backward.

“Such heavy fists!” Even in her sixteen-year-old body, she would have been pressed back.

“C’mon! You’ve got more than that if you beat a Prismen!” Even as Jildegrieva spoke, he followed up.

“I suppose!” A grin rising to her face, Inglis released her gravity magic, and met the oncoming punch with one of her own.

Blammmmm!

This time, she came out slightly ahead. “Since you’ve come all the way here, of course I should show proper hospitality!”

“I see! Good!”

Smiling, she took a few steps back. He had visited due to learning of her defeat of the Prismer. As one of the Triumvirate—the elite even among Highlanders—there was no way his plan would be as insignificant as a political marriage with her or influence in Karelia. He had simply perceived her power and come to her to fight. And if that was the case, he probably saw himself as strong enough to take on someone who had beaten a Prismer. He hadn’t shown his full power yet—just as she hadn’t.

“Now it’s my turn! Show me what you’ve got!” Inglis said.

“Sure thing! Watch this!”

She appreciated they had a shared understanding.

Thwump!

Dux Jildegrieva’s muscles swelled strangely. His biceps, his quads, and his pecs all expanded to about one-and-a-half times their original size.

“Ooh! Nice!” It was obvious that he was stronger now—his power was likely off the charts.

“Haaaamph!”

Thuuuuuudd!

When their fists collided this time, Inglis couldn’t withstand it. The force blew her away. “Huh?!” She found herself flying toward the training ground’s walls.

Moments before impact, she shouted, “Haaaah!” *Aether Shell!*

The wall crumbled as if it had been hit by an explosion—but not from her crashing into it. It was from the force of her kick off it. Clad in aether, she recovered her footing and turned back toward him.

“Oooh?!” Dux Jildegrieva’s eyes widened as Inglis returned even faster than she’d departed. She was already winding up a kick, and he immediately crossed his arms to defend.

He managed to do so in time. Impressive. Her movements under Aether Shell were so fast that most Highlanders—even Archlord Evel—hadn’t been able to keep up.

Blammmmmmm!

This time it was his turn to be sent flying. “Ha ha ha ha!” A smile adorned Jildegrieva’s face as he was blown away. *Thwump!* His muscles swelled again to one-and-a-half times their original size.

A giggle escaped Inglis’s lips when she saw that display. He still had more to show her. *This is going to be fun!*

Stomp!

Dux Jildegrieva crushed the wall as he kicked off it. Just like Inglis, his return was quicker than his departure.

“Grahhh!”

“Haaaah!”

Dux Jildegrieva’s leg swung like the trunk of a tree, Inglis’s tiny leg like a twig. As they met, the power behind their strikes scattered outward as a shock wave.

“Eeep!” Caught by the shock wave, Rafinha tumbled. The walls groaned under the strain, and branches snapped from the trees. As the fighters regained their footing and continued to exchange blows, the entire castle began to shake.

“They’re evenly matched!” As Eris helped Rafinha up, her hair blew around from the shock waves.

“I can hardly see a thing!” Rafinha said.

“Don’t worry. I’m not doing much better... Even if I see it coming, I can’t react

in time. But if she can take on one of Highland's Triumvirate on an even footing..."

That might just change the world, Eris thought. Inglis could become even more powerful by wielding herself or Ripple. That would enhance her incredibly; she would be incomparable. Dux Jildegrieva also may not have been at his full power, but Eris didn't think anything he had left could completely neutralize her. Meaning...

If Inglis can defeat one of the strongest Highlanders...

The world Eris knew was one where the people of the surface had no choice but to suffer degradation and depredation, no way to survive but to submit to Highland. But that might not be the only way things could be. Inglis wasn't a holy knight. She could wield hieran menaces without losing her life. Maybe that power could be turned toward the heavens.

"If they're even...is that a good thing?" Rafinha waited for Eris to continue.

Eris dared not put word to the concept of warring against Highland. "Well, it's for the best that she's found herself a worthy opponent."

Eris had thought she'd drawn the short straw being sent here as a messenger, but perhaps it was a good thing she was seeing this fight. The difference in power between the surface and Highland, at least in terms of the single strongest force they could bring to bear, was not so significant. The surface might even be superior. This was a major discovery. Since Ambassador Theodore and the rest of the Triumvirate faction were relatively friendly toward Karelia, she didn't feel the need to take a stand here, but this was a very important thing to know.

"It's not for the best! If they keep going like this, they're gonna wreck the castle!"

"Ha ha ha... You're not wrong."

Carraldo laughed. "We will make amends should that happen, so pardon our intrusion. It's been decades since I've seen His Excellency enjoying himself like this, so I'd appreciate it if you allowed him to enjoy this duel to his heart's content."

His description seemed to be accurate: Dux Jildegrieva laughed loudly as his fists beat down like a hail of bullets. “Ha ha ha ha! Not shabby! What was your name again, kid?”

“Inglis Eucus.” She responded with an uncountable rain of blows.

“Got it! And I’m Jildegrieva, a Highlander! They talk big about me as one of the Triumvirate, they talk a bit about me as the dux, but there aren’t any fights in Highland, and getting put in charge of fighting just makes you a loser doing busywork! Gives me a lot of time to get swole, but every once in a while, I wanna see how that’s going! So like it or not, here I come!”

“Oh, but I do like it! As I said before, you’re quite welcome!”

“Ha ha ha! I like the way you think, Inglis! I knew you were different when I heard you wielded a hieran menace and took down a Prismen, but you think different too! That’s what I’m talking about! Surviving that means you’re different! And you being a kid like this just makes it even funkier!”

“I’m in a bit of a situation regarding my body right now, but all in all, you’re not wrong!”

“So if I take you down, that’s like I took down a Prismen too! I’m glad someone as sick as you exists!”

“Why don’t you try fighting a Prismen yourself?”

“Hell, I’d love to, but I’m a Highlander. I can’t get close to the things. Don’t wanna turn into a magicite beast.”

“Ahh, I see!”

“I can’t exactly fight other Highlanders either, so I’ve been waiting for someone like you to come along! And here you are!”

“The feeling’s mutual!”

Slammmmm!

The biggest shock wave yet knocked Rafinha off her feet again. Eris couldn’t stand to see this, so she scooped up the small Rafinha and held her securely.

“But I don’t get it! How’s a little thing like you take me on in a fistfight without even mana or a Gift? I can’t figure it out! Something’s making you glow like that, but I just don’t understand what! And that’s fun too! Ha ha ha ha!”

The glow was from Inglis’s use of Aether Shell, so it seemed Dux Jildegrieva couldn’t sense aether.

But Inglis had doubts of her own. Dux Jildegrieva wasn’t showing any evidence of using magic. It wasn’t anything like, say, when Archlord Evel had busted out high-powered magic using Mana Refine in a battle. The other times she’d fought Highlanders, they’d used magic too. She already had the impression that Highlanders possessed far stronger mana than people from the surface and thus didn’t need Artifacts to control phenomena that could be termed “magic.” But she sensed none of it from Dux Jildegrieva.

Even if she was in the body of a six-year-old, she was still a divine knight, a demigod, and her use of Aether Shell was taking her capabilities even higher. Despite that, he was taking that on in a bare-knuckle brawl without using anything that might be described as magic. Maybe he was just that beefy—she couldn’t think of any other explanation—but that in itself was shocking. Astounding, even. After all, a being as powerful as the ancient dragon Fufailbane had needed to use dragon lore to keep up with her in a brawl.

Inglis chuckled. “I can’t think of any explanation other than you’re just this good on your own merits, no tricks. How amusing!”

“Hey, it’s no joke. I eat well and work out!”

He must have had some special diet, some kind of workout plan. “Ooh! Think I could get in on that?”

“Huh? You wanna get this shredded too? I mean, not that I’d get in your way.”

She took a moment to imagine it. “I admit the idea isn’t especially aesthetically appealing.” It was scary, actually. Whether as she was now or in her normal body, she wanted to become strong, but she also wanted to look cute and girly in her outfits.

“Yeah, Chris, if you bulked up like that, you’d lose your cuteness factor,” Rafinha chipped in.

"Agreed," Eris said. "And if you were to then wield me and Ripple, well..."

They both wore expressions much like Inglis's newfound one.

Carraldo laughed inscrutably.

"But from what I've seen," Inglis responded to Jildegrieva, "it appears you're able to control your form to an extent. If that's the case, I'm somewhat tempted."

"Ha ha. So, you're fine with it as long as you don't end up stuck this beefy? But this ain't the end of where it goes."

"Ooh, really?"

"You wanna see? Think you can keep up, Inglis?"

"Yes, of course!"

Smack-smack-smack-smack-smack!

Even as they conversed, Inglis and Dux Jildegrieva continued to exchange intense punches and kicks.

"All right, watch this!" Dux Jildegrieva stopped for a moment, then nimbly hopped back away from Inglis. There, he watched her with a grin. "Ha ha ha ha... Never thought I'd be able to whip this out in a fight! Thanks a million! Sorry, I've only been giving you a peek of my power. That's just how I do things."

Inglis smiled. "I know that feeling. You want to take everything an opponent can give you and win! That's the way I get the most out of fights too. If you throw everything you've got at your foe and overcome them before they have a chance to show you what they've got, you lose your opportunity to learn from the fight. Plus, it's far less fun. So you have to take it slowly, step by step, seeking personal growth in every fight."

Dux Jildegrieva lit up as if he'd finally found someone who was on the same page. "Are you me?! That's exactly it! You might be a kid, but you sure do get it! I haven't had this much fun in decades, ha ha ha ha ha! All right, here I come!"

Watch this! Haaaaah!” Jildegrieva shouted.

Fwump! Fwpfwpfwpfwpfwpfwpfwpfwpfwpfwpfwp!

Inglis had expected his muscles to grow even more, but at some point, his muscles constricted, squirming as they wrapped around his arms and legs. Even as she realized what she was watching, he generated more muscle, swelling again before it also wrapped around him. His neck and arms, his chest and belly, his legs and feet—all over him, this strange writhing occurred. The muscles of his back behaved especially oddly, twisting and stretching, then becoming hard like bones. As they folded over themselves, they stretched out farther, creating a skeletal structure. Connecting that skeletal structure was the formation of a thin membrane.

“Wings?!” That was the only thing Inglis could imagine she was staring at. Being able to squeeze one’s muscles until they transformed into wings was inconceivable for Inglis. Perhaps she’d been misguided to apply conventional thinking based off surface humans to a Highlander. “Well, that certainly seems quite convenient.”

“Ga ha ha ha ha! Work out hard enough, and you can even grow wings!”

That was absurd—but also *interesting*. Inglis laughed. “You say such amusing things. I don’t believe I could imitate that.”

Other than where the wings had grown, his muscles had continued to condense.

His body size had in fact shrunk; just as he’d said, one did not need to end at bulking up their appearance. The tightly condensed muscles that wrapped around him hardened like the skeleton of the wings had, covering him like a suit of armor. With that, the intimidating aura he exuded became even more intense, though not in the clear-cut and measurable way mana or aether were.

“Gonna be serious here, maybe our ancestors had wings? Maybe I’m bringing back what they had by working out so hard. We Highlanders, we kinda spend too much time on technology and don’t get enough exercise. And if you don’t use it, you lose it!”

“I see... Maybe you’re onto something, and with convenient things like Flygears and Flygear Ports, you would have no need to rely on your own wings. After all, it would be tiring to use your own body.”

“Yeah, if there’s something more convenient... Anyway, let’s do this, Inglis! You’re the first person I’ve ever shown this to! Ha ha ha, I don’t even know how well it’ll work! Sorry, but I’m gonna be trying out a little experiment!”

“No need for apologies. I’m glad to be your test subject!”

“Thanks! Here I come!”

“Yes!”

“Hey, hold it!” Rafinha nearly shrieked.

“Huh?” Inglis and Dux Jildegrieva both looked at her in confusion.

“You’ll wreck the castle if you do any more than this! Can’t you move this out of town?!”

Two of the training grounds’ walls had already collapsed from where Inglis and the dux had kicked off them, and the shock waves they were creating were causing further cracks all over. The flagstones beneath them were becoming uneven as well, though the greatest damage was still where Jildegrieva had first landed.

“Oh! Right, right. That’s no good. Climb on, let’s take this outside!” Jildegrieva bent down and urged Inglis to climb onto his neck.

And, given the occasion, Inglis decided to oblige. “Thank you, Dux Jildegrieva.” She hopped up onto his right shoulder.

“Ha ha ha! You ain’t gotta be that formal. Don’t wanna bite your tongue during a fight, so let’s keep it short. Jil, Dux, Jil-bro, something like that’s fine!”

“I see. If you say so, Dux Jil,” Inglis replied with a grin. His attitude was more good-natured than one would expect given his position as one of Highland’s pillars of power. It was the behavior of a warrior or a martial artist, not that of a politician. Eris had said that the other two of the Triumvirate were the quaestor and the mechanator; presumably they handled governmental duties, something which would allow Dux Jildegrieva to remain a warrior, preparing himself for

emergencies.

She envied that he was allowed to do so, even though he was in a position among his countrymen much like that of a king. King Inglis had been too busy ruling to spend time mastering the blade. If she had been able to live as the dux could, pursuing such mastery, she may not have wished to be reborn.

Which would have presented its own problems, she thought. If she'd been satisfied then, she never would have been reborn as Inglis Eucus. Would never have met her beloved Rafinha. Would never have been able to behold her adorned beauty in the mirror to her heart's content. She would have missed out on so many things. Her life as Inglis Eucus—as a woman—had first brought her pause, but as she leaned into living it, she'd decided it was quite enjoyable.

And while Jildegrieva was able to devote himself to nothing but training for emergencies, it seemed those emergencies rarely occurred. The lack of opportunities for fights was eating at him. The people of the surface were always in peril, if not from the omnipresent threat of magicite beasts then from the oppressive rule of the Highlanders. But for a Highlander, life was peaceful. There were no major threats in the world, and a stable supply of goods came up from the surface.

Considering that, she found herself coming back to her conclusion that the life of a carefree soldier, always on the front lines in a dangerous world full of opportunities for battle, was best. Fortunately, that was the life she was living. Even the insignia of the lieutenant-colonel of the Royal Guard, acting duty though it was, was something she'd rather cast off.

“Hold on tight! Don’t fall off!” Carrying Inglis piggyback, Jildegrieva flapped his wings.

The world around Inglis suddenly changed. In an instant, the training grounds and Ymir itself slipped out of sight. Surrounding her was lush greenery, the grasslands surrounding Ymir. Jildegrieva’s speed was incredible. It seemed almost like she’d used Divine Feat to travel in the blink of an eye, but this was not that.

Crrrrumble!

The noise pierced the wind only then. The intense shock wave had left a trail of half-destroyed wreckage stretching from the training grounds through the city and to its outer walls behind them.

“Whoops, went a little too fast. That ain’t good! Ha ha ha ha!”

“I believe you are the only one responsible for that, Dux Jil. Rani’s scary when she gets mad, so I’d prefer she knew that wasn’t my fault. Ah, she’s the girl who wanted us to stop.”

“Really?! If you’re scared of her, she must be...”

“Yes. I’m not willing to cross her at all.” That was how much Inglis cared for Rafinha, and that meant caring about what she said. Moreover, Rafinha’s being in a five-year-old body really brought back memories. They reminded Inglis even more of why she cared and made it even harder not to indulge Rafinha.

“Well, now that we’re here, we can do all the fighting we want!” Inglis hopped down from Dux Jildegrieva’s back and prepared her tiny form for battle.

“Dragon Lore!” The pale, translucent mass of draconic power took the shape of a child’s arms to match Inglis’s smaller body. As her arms reached out, translucent ones quickly followed. It was like she had four hands—but that wasn’t enough.

“Hrmmm!” Inglis focused her attention. The speed of the dragon lore increased until it overlaid her own arms perfectly. Rather than four arms, her own two now appeared to be covered in a pale protective membrane.

The dragon lore Inglis had gained from Fufailbane was power which could imitate her own body or weapons and follow them. For example, if she unleashed a flurry of attacks with a sword while it was active, the dragon lore would follow with its own slashes, becoming an unmanageable number of blows.

However, here she wanted her moves to be overlapped rather than followed. The number of blows would be reduced, but the power of each would be increased. It was something she’d become able to do by improving her control over the dragon lore. Luckily, dragon lore was easier to control than aether.

But its applications were not limited to switching between a focus on more numerous or more powerful strikes. Inglis clenched her hands tightly and brought them together as if she were about to draw a sword. The dragon lore was superimposed on her motions, and as she made a drawing motion she cast the magic which created an ice blade. “Haaah!”

“Gwohhh!”

The ice blade which sprang forth from Inglis’s tiny fist was obviously different from normal. Instead of the crystalline tones of clear ice, the sound it produced was the roar of a rage-filled dragon. It looked different too, like a dragon’s fang or claw. By overlaying the dragon lore on the movement of her fist—that is, the flow of mana as she cast the magic—she’d made the two combine and transform. This was no mere magic—perhaps she could call it “dragon magic.” It was the result of her practice over the past month.

“This is all thanks to the work I’ve put in! Let me try it out on you!” Inglis yelled.

“Go right ahead! I’ll be doing the same!”

Seeing Rafael’s Dragon Fang and King Carlias’s Dragon Claw, Artifacts which seemed to have been made from parts of a dragon, had been her inspiration. They clearly mixed magic and dragon lore. And their power was clearly a level above that of other upper-class Artifacts—not to the standard of a hieran menace, but enough that they might be termed “super upper-class.”

Having seen them, Inglis got the idea that mana and dragon lore might be combined. There were also the examples of Leone’s and Liselotte’s Artifacts infused with dragon lore. Combining the magical blade of ice with dragon lore, Inglis intentionally tried to cause this to happen and created this dragon magic—this dragon icebrand.

“Let’s gooooooo! Haaaaaaaah!” Dux Jildegrieva crouched down and thrust his palm toward Inglis. He seemed too far away from her at first, but his intent became obvious in a flash.

Blammmmm!

His palm strike was so fast that it pushed the air itself toward her, producing a supercompressed mass of pressure in its shape. Not only that, but as it pushed the air around it away, the friction brought forth a wreath of red flame.

A red shock wave in the form of a palm strike, flying at extreme speed.

“That’s wonderful!” He caused that just by striking with his palm!

There was no way Inglis was going to miss out on seeing whether she could take that attack. She tried to swat down the crimson shock wave with the dragon icebrand that she gripped in her right hand.

“Huh?!” It’s so heavy! She immediately felt as though her arm was being torn off.

She quickly moved her left hand to join her right, switching to a double-handed grip.

But she was unable to hold her footing. The shock wave forced her back. The grass swayed. Her feet left ruts in the dirt. *“You pushed me back so far!”*

But there was good to go with the bad. Even after somehow taking the brunt of the crimson shock wave, her dragon icebrand was intact. Her normal blade of ice would have shattered, but this one hadn’t even chipped or cracked. It was significantly more durable.

“I got more for ya! Crimson Palm!”

“Yes! If you would!”

A continuous stream of crimson shock waves shot toward Inglis.

“Haaaah!” Crouching low, she planted her feet hard. If she didn’t swing with all her might, her sword would be pushed away. But if it wasn’t pushed away, how much could the dragon icebrand, infused with Aether Shell, endure? This was a highly practical test of its load-bearing capabilities.

Thwack-thwack-thwack-thwack-thwack!

Even as she was pushed back, Inglis cut down Crimson Palm after Crimson Palm with the ice blade. “One, two, three—ten, twenty—!” Still, the sword endured. It was beginning to form small cracks, but it was still fine.

“Faster, faster! Think you can keep counting?!” The intensity of the barrage suddenly increased.

He's right, there's no way I can keep track! “No, I can't! Impressive!” The dragon icebrand developed more and more cracks.

Krshsh!

At one or two hundred—maybe even more—the dragon icebrand gave out and shattered. But that was impressive considering how much it had withstood. It didn't compare to the sword forged from Fufailbane's scales, but it was certainly stronger and more usable than the normal ice blades she'd used before. Her first experiment in the heat of battle with dragon magic had been a success.

“I'm gonna get ya! How are you gonna handle it?”

“By not getting gotten!” *Aether Strike!*

Blammmmm!

A blast of aether scattered the Crimson Palms as it shot toward Dux Jildegrieva.

“Ooh! Interesting! This is how a fight should be!” He stopped and braced himself to take the Aether Strike head-on. “Orahhhh!” He thrust forth his chest and took the hit directly. His feet were pushed back a bit, but—“There!”—they not only firmly withstood the Aether Strike, but sent it flying back.

Whoomph!

With Dux Jildegrieva's strength behind it, the Aether Strike flew even faster than when Inglis had fired it.

"Wh—?! I don't understand at all how you managed that! But—!" Inglis changed the wavelength of the aether composing her Aether Shell to that completely opposite to the Aether Strike. That way, an aether-infused punch would repel the Aether Strike—just like it did when she used Aether Reflector. "I can do something like that too!"

With her fist reinforced by dragon lore, she punched the Aether Strike away, cleanly reflecting it back toward Dux Jildegrieva.

"What?! You punched it away?! Impressive, kid! That's the stuff! Ga ha ha ha ha!" Jildegrieva laughed as he again prepared to receive the strike. But this time, he was turned slightly sideways, as if he wanted to take it from the side. Since the Aether Blast didn't strike him directly, he couldn't grapple with it, and instead it grazed along his body.

"Hm?!"

As suspicion flitted through Inglis's mind, Dux Jildegrieva flapped his wings powerfully—and his entire body began to spin along with the Aether Strike. Inglis's attack propelled his wings further, and he used that to rotate quickly.

"Wh—?!"

"Hnnngh!" He spun like a top, and the force added by his wings brought him to an impressive speed. The aether strike spun around with him. As his rotation reached a ludicrous speed, it created a tornado which hid his body from sight.

Inglis laughed. "I see!" Well, she couldn't actually see, but what he was planning was obvious. So preparing for it, she planted her feet and gathered her strength.

"Here comes a fastball! Hnn!"

Vvvvvwwhooooosh!

The Aether Strike thrown back from his rapid spin sliced through the air with a

roar unlike any Inglis had ever experienced, and before she knew it, the strike was right in front of her. It was exactly what she'd expected, exactly what she'd hoped for. Some of her opponents had been able to handle Aether Strike, but none had been able to throw one back at her at such a speed. Not even the Prismers.

He's everything I want from an opponent! "Here it comes! Haaaaah!" Inglis hopped up, twisted around, and kicked the Aether Strike as hard as she could. Even though she'd had a shorter windup than usual, the perfect layering of Aether Shell and dragon lore made it one of her most powerful kicks ever. And her kick was, to begin with, several times stronger than her punch.

Thud!

Still, it wasn't enough to repel an Aether Strike volleyed back by Dux Jildegrieva. As it struck her foot, it pushed her back once more. "Ah...!" She was blown a long way back.

"Ha ha! See that?! Power is justice! My own sweat will never betray me! Ha ha ha ha!" Dux Jildegrieva flexed, obviously pleased with himself.

"That's right! Aha ha ha!" Inglis laughed too. This was so fun that she couldn't help but smile. Having an Aether Strike thrown back at her so hard she couldn't kick it back was just *perfect*. "But...!"

That didn't mean she was going to admit defeat.

She returned the wavelength of her aether to that of the Aether Strike before placing herself at an angle to its oncoming path, in a position where it could pass by her side while she was also moving. As it did, she struck it with her wrist. The blow added more aether of the same wavelength to the Aether Strike. This was essentially the same mechanism as Aether Breaker.

Boooooooooom!

A gigantic explosion tore the lump of aether apart. If she couldn't repel it, she

had no other choice but to detonate it here, in a safe location. But it would be boring to just fire off Aether Breaker where it wouldn't hit anything. Instead, she let the blast wave wash over her back. Using the acceleration, she flung herself toward Dux Jildegrieva!

"Haaaah!"

"Orahhhh!"

Fist met fist. The sheer force that was unleashed cut away at the ground, creating a crater.

"Whatever that is you've got, you're mixing with dragon lore? Not bad at all! You're amazing, kid!" Even as their fists continued to clash, Dux Jildegrieva smiled so casually at Inglis.

"You know about dragon lore?"

"Yeah, a bit! Dragons are great sparring partners!"

"I see. Archlord Evel certainly did seem to know a lot about them, so I guess Highland is well educated about dragons."

Inglis didn't know any but Fufailbane, but she was open to the idea that there were other ancient dragons sealed away elsewhere in the world. If Highland knew exactly where, she would love to get that information. That might let her make another dragonscale sword, feast on that delicious meat again, and strengthen her own dragon lore.

"If you know where any ancient dragons are resting, please tell me!"

"Hell, I'd love to know too! You think that gets to me, though? But I get it. If I knew where they were, I'd probably just dig 'em up and kick the crap out of 'em! Ga ha ha ha ha!"

Jildegrieva had apparently come down to fight Inglis just because he'd heard the rumors about her, so that sounded like it would be in character. Besides, she had done exactly that with Fufailbane. With how alike they seemed to be, it would be the natural thing for him to do. And it would only be natural to avoid carelessly giving such information to someone who would do so as well.

"So the location of ancient dragons is highly classified even within Highland?"

"Yeah! Well, even if I knew, it'd cause problems if I went and dug one up."

"So did it cause problems when Lord Evel dug up Fufailbane, transformed him into a mechanical ancient dragon, and took him to Highland?"

"He said he had no choice but to protect it from the surface people who were attacking it while it slept. Guess you owe me one!"

"I see. Well, that's not completely wrong, but..." In reality, Evel and the hieran menace Tiffanyer had been the ones who'd wanted to unearth Fufailbane, and they'd been willing to level Leclair for that.

"Did you see it? Or wait, were *you* the one attacking the sleeping dragon?!"

"That's outrageous! I would never attack someone in their sleep! I only sparred with him after he was fully awake!"

Cutting off his tail in his sleep had been for the purpose of acquiring much-needed food, not fighting. Their battles had been fair and square, no tricks. Anything else would have held no meaning.

"Well, then! I guess all's good! Fighting when your foe can't do their thing is just cheesing the win!"

"Agreed! How about you correct the record?"

"Sure, I'll tell 'em! Gonna leave the details to the quaestor and the mechanator, though! If I've got the free time to sit in a meeting, I've got the free time to lift instead!"

Inglis laughed. "You have it so easy, Dux Jil. I'm jealous." A smile rose to her face as they traded blows. He had a carefree, boyish innocence despite being one of the top Highlanders. That amused her.

"Ha ha. Inglis, you're an interesting kid for being able to keep up with Highland's number one busiest man at the gym!"

"But you won't be busy forever, right?"

"Hmm? Why d'you think that?"

"The chaos we've just recently cleared up was largely a proxy war between Highland factions... We wanted to draw closer to your Triumvirate, and the

Papal League—wanting to prevent that—manipulated the armies of both Venefic and Alcard to make a pincer attack. So the root of the conflict was the opposition between those two major factions. And it's still intensifying... When Lord Evel transformed Fufailbane and took him to Highland, he called him 'a shield to protect the pontifex from the throne.' In other words, he seemed to expect the proxy war to turn into a direct confrontation. And you yourself, Dux Jil—part of why you're here now is simply because you didn't have a suitable foe, but part of it is because you feel a need to have some practice for what's coming, no? You feel that your busywork will soon become meaningful, don't you?"

Jildegrieva laughed. "And if you're right, Inglis?"

"I do not know on what scale Highlanders expect this to occur, but I want it to happen before I'm old and frail! Because I'd love to join in!"

A serious war between Highlanders—that would be a wonderful battlefield, filled with strong warriors like Dux Jildegrieva himself, mechanical ancient dragons, and other superweapons that could compare. She could expect forces even more powerful than a Prism to be unleashed. She'd simply love to be there and test—and improve—her strength to her heart's content. A real fight was better than any training, after all.

Inglis's eyes shone as she spoke, and Dux Jildegrieva responded with a hearty laugh. "Ga ha ha ha! I really like you, Inglis! I wanna take you back to Highland with me!"

"But if you want to, you'll have to defeat me first!"

"Oh, right, there was that condition! I wasn't even thinking about that at first. I came here only for the fight! But now I'm gonna seriously try to win!" Dux Jildegrieva's expression turned serious.

"Oh ho ho. Is it time for me, then?" The voice came from the edge of the crater they were now fighting in. Carraldo was looking down at them with a grandfatherly smile. Near him, Eris was carrying Rafinha.

"Yeah, pops! She's earned it! Let's give her all we've got!"

"Ho ho ho ho. Color me intrigued." As Carraldo smiled, he was surrounded

with a golden glow. It intensified so much that it seemed like his clothing and skin were themselves turning to gold.

“Carraldo?!” Rafinha’s eyes went wide at his transformation.

"That's—! Are you a—?!" Eris's did as well. If anything, she seemed even more shocked, as she sensed something similar to herself.

“Ho ho ho ho. Turning into a weapon isn’t exclusive to hieran menaces. I suppose you could call me a ‘ripe old menace.’”

“A ripe old menace?!” Eris and Rafinha exclaimed together.

"Hi-yahhhh!" As he leaped high, Carraldo's golden form shifted into a sharp, long, broad, and thick blade. It was beautifully decorated, but also extremely rugged. The overall shape was that of a large machete. He had transformed into a gigantic sword more than three times longer than even Dux Jildegrieva was tall. The visual impact of the mighty sword suited him well.

“Hnn!” Lightly grasping the hilt with one hand, Jildegrieva casually swept the blade to the side. This was to heft it up onto his shoulders, but he unintentionally created a shock wave.

It bore a gigantic hole sideways from the crater they were in. The thin wall of the crater crumbled, replaced by a huge rift that extended far into the distance.

“Whoops, sorry! The one downside of this thing’s that it’s so powerful!”

As Jildegrieva spoke, his body changed. The gleam of the gigantic golden sword that Carraldo had become began to suffuse Jildegrieva as well, turning his body just as golden and hardened.

A warrior with a giant golden sword and golden wings—this, surely, was the dux's final form.

Just looking at him, Inglis could sense a force as sublime as it was powerful.
No way...

“Are you using...aether?!”

The wavelength she sensed differed both from her own typical one and from that of the Steelblood Front's leader. But there was no mistaking its nature—that of a deity wholly unlike Goddess Alistia, who had made Inglis a demigod divine knight. Worst case, it could be from one quite close to a demon.

Thus far, Dux Jildegrieva had shown no signs of either mana or aether, facing Inglis with only the might of his strong body. But now, he had almost become one with the sword Carraldo had turned into, and he was awash with aether. This raised his power in battle to a level incomparable to before. Inglis was sure of it. And she didn't have many options of standing against his aether.

"Now, don't hold back, Inglis! Show me the power that hunted down a Prism!"

She laughed. "If you're asking that of me, I suppose I must. However, I plan to make this a two-on-two, so that it's fair!" Smiling, she looked toward the rim of the crater. "Eris—"

But the hieran menace wasn't there. Instead, Eris was already a step ahead, having jumped down to stand at Inglis's side. "It's okay. I'm here. You're going to wield me, right?"

"Y-Yes... If you're okay with that." Inglis had thought Eris might object, but she was surprisingly proactive about transforming for Inglis. That was out of the ordinary.

"It's okay. Let's do this!" Eris confirmed.

Inglis paused, still unsure. "This isn't very like you, is it?"

Eris was, as she'd happily admit herself, not one who looked for fights; she only fought when necessary. Of the two hieran menaces, Ripple was more understanding of fighting for fun. So, if anything, Inglis had expected Eris to be the first to object.

"I never expected it would come to this, but we can't waste a chance for a match with a Highlander general. For the sake of what comes next..."

Those few words gave Inglis a picture of what Eris was thinking. A comparison—she wanted to see a comparison between Jildegrieva, the greatest force Highland could bring to bear, and Inglis, the greatest force with which the

surface could resist. Depending on the results, the attitude the surface could take toward Highland might change. It was a question that could sway whether they should continue in subservience.

However, this was predicated on whether Inglis would devote herself to working for the greater good.

"Eris...I'd appreciate it if you didn't pin too many hopes on me. I'm not here to make the world a better place, you know?"

"I was under the impression that you were here to make the world a better place for Rafinha, and that's not that much different. She's a good girl." Eris looked up toward Rafinha, who was peeking over the edge of the crater.

"You've got me there."

"I've spent a lot of time around you two by now, haven't I?" Eris smiled mischievously for a moment before returning to a more dignified expression. "So, let's go. You can have as much fun as you want! I'm with you!" She held out her hand to Inglis.

"Yes! Then let's go!"

Inglis took that beautiful hand in her own tiny one, and there was an explosion of light. Amidst the golden glow, Eris's form changed from that of a woman to that of twin blades which appeared sheathed at Inglis's hips. Just looking at them would elicit a sigh of awe at their beauty.

"Whoa! Nice swords! They seem real, uh, classy! They look great! Just a bit delicate!"

"Maybe compared to your blade, but these have a strong core too!" Inglis unsheathed the blades that were Eris, and crossed them in front of her.

"This'll be fun! Show me what you've got!" Dux Jildegrieva settled into a prepared crouch, his sword still at his shoulders.

"Yes! Here I come!" Inglis carefully shuffled her feet along the ground, approaching him with caution. She wanted to stay a step outside his range. Whose weapon was stronger and sturdier, whose strikes were swifter, could not be judged until they clashed. But one thing Inglis could say for sure is that

her own reach was far inferior, from both the length of her arms and the size of her weapon. If she wanted to land a blow on Dux Jildegrieva, she would first need to deal with one of his attacks.

Well, unless she closed in and struck faster than he could react. However, he was strong enough that he'd been able to respond to her movements even when she used Aether Shell. The likelihood of her outpacing him was slim, and it would be both disappointing and dull if he were unable to keep up. He was a like-minded individual, willing to enjoy a bout without any reason or self-interest. Inglis hoped she could enjoy extremely close fights over and over with him.

There was in fact one effective way to close the gap with Jildegrieva without allowing him to react: Divine Feat. Speed was irrelevant in that case; it was the divine ability to simply now exist at another distant point, and thus could be used to suddenly advance. If she appeared behind him so suddenly, he wouldn't intercept her in time. But that would be tactless. There was no point in winning until he showed her his best. She wouldn't win for the sake of winning; as always, this was to further her mastery of the blade.

Here it is! Inglis stopped a step short of entering the reach of Dux Jildegrieva's mighty sword. She crouched low, then jumped as hard as she could. Tiny though her feet were, the ground crumbled beneath her—not that Dux Jildegrieva heard the sound of the ground cracking. Inglis was moving faster than the speed of sound. Even though she accepted that her reach was inferior, she attacked headlong.

It was a bold move—a brave one. He liked it. He loved it. Not because she might be a beauty in her later years, though. She could have been a boy, or an old man. It wouldn't have mattered. As a fellow warrior, she fascinated him as a human being.

“Gutsy! Haaaaah!”

Just as Inglis expected, Jildegrieva swung the massive greatsword down, catching her a step beyond the halfway point of his reach. She thought she might have been just a little bit faster than him, but it was within the margin of error. With the blow coming from straight ahead, she was able to watch the

golden blade swing down at her.

Seeing this, a warrior had only one response. “Haaaaaaaaah!” Inglis crossed the blades that were Eris in front of her head. Bracing herself as hard as she could, she received the blow from the gigantic greatsword that was Carraldo.

Claaaannnnnggggg!

The noise of the clash seemed loud enough to echo all the way to Ymir. The shock felt like it would smash her flat as it pressed down on her. Inglis was able to hold out, but the ground beneath her could not, and it collapsed further. The crater broadened to many times its former size.

“You took that well, Inglis!”

“You honor me!”

She tried to force away the sword that was crushing down on her. Little by little, she pushed it back. But she had blades in both her hands, while his was wielded one-handed. Such was the gap in their power.

“Nnngh! You’re so damn strong for a kid! You little—!” Laughing happily, Jildegrieva gripped his sword with both hands. Now they were evenly matched.

Tink!

Small cracks appeared on the Eris-transformed blades where they struggled against Jildegrieva’s sword.

“Eris?!”

“Ughhhh...! I-It’s okay! I’m okay!”

The voice Inglis heard echoing in her head was clearly pained. Any damage to a transformed hieran menace hurt them as well. Inglis wondered what would happen if the blades broke, but she had no inclination to find out. Eris’s blades had easily cut through a Prism at maximum power and evolved further by absorbing people, and yet Jildegrieva’s weapon was cracking them. The gigantic

greatsword was truly astounding.

Crrrrrrk!

The cracks spread wider.

“Aaagh!”

“Oh no!”

This stalemate couldn't continue. Inglis could keep going, but Eris could not. Inglis couldn't force her to strain like this any longer. However, it wouldn't be easy to escape from this position.

There's only one option: Divine Feat!

Inglis disappeared without a sound and reappeared behind Jildegrieva.

His gigantic blade, having lost its target, slammed into the ground, digging another furrow out and spreading its power far and wide.

“Haaaah!” Inglis had used a nearly forbidden divine technique, but she'd needed to for Eris's sake. Quickly, she swung her right blade at him from behind. She'd finish the fight with an attack for his neck that she'd pull away to show she'd won.

But the dux reacted faster than she expected. “What?!” He'd flicked his wing to block her slash. “Ah! You're fast!”

The slash she'd intended to stop an inch before his neck instead cut through the wing he placed before it.

Slash!

She sliced off his left wing, which fell to the ground; the slash, stopped by the wing, did not reach his neck.

“Aaaargh!”

“Ah! I'm sorry, Dux Jil! I didn't mean to cut you!”

“Owww! No, don’t worry about it! Dinner, some rest, and we’ll all be fine!”

As Inglis had come to expect, Dux Jildegrieva was a blunt but positive guy. She found that intriguing.

“This kinda thing happens when you get really into a sparring match. I’m lucky I got away with just losing a wing even though you got behind me. That hieran menace really has an edge though, if she can cut me!”

“Yes, but...” The weapon Jildegrieva wielded was just as fearsome if it could damage Eris in a single blow. If Inglis had kept straining against him, it might have completely shattered her. “Eris, are you okay...?!”

“S-Sorry! I can’t...!”

As her voice echoed in Inglis’s head, Eris returned to human form. She was unable to stand, and collapsed on the spot.

“Eris!”

“Ngh...” she grunted. Her arms and legs were cut all over.

“I’m sorry for pushing you so hard!”

“I-It’s fine. I knew what I was getting into.”

Eris grimaced as Inglis tried to lift her to her feet. Inglis must have touched a spot that hurt. The bones of Eris’s right arm and left leg seemed to be broken. The damage a hieran menace took as a weapon was reflected in their form as a woman. What had just happened had taught Inglis that quite clearly.

“I finally found someone who’s able to wield me, but I only ended up holding you back... It’s shameful,” Eris bemoaned.

“That’s not true. Today was just a bad matchup. And I didn’t fight properly with you either.” Inglis had wanted to see just what Jildegrieva’s sword had behind it, but twin blades weren’t made for that kind of fighting. They were for overwhelming your foe with speed and flurries of blows. If she had wanted to block a weapon like that, she should have used something larger, or maybe defensive gear like a shield.

“Wanna call it here for today?” Jildegrieva asked. “We’re both pretty beat up.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Inglis agreed. Today was a draw.

Carraldo returned to human form, wearing a grandfatherly smile. “Oho! The young master’s wounds must be attended to as well.”

“I’m fine, pops. I’m not that much of a crybaby.” As he responded, Jildegrieva’s form also returned to that of a normal young man. There was a small cut on the back of his vest, likely from Inglis’s slash at his wing. “How’re you two doing, though? Sorry, I kinda got too into it.” He was concerned for Eris.

“I... I’ll be fine,” Eris said.

“Let’s head back, Eris.” Inglis wrapped her arms around Eris and lifted her up.

“Hey, pops, think she’ll be fine after a rest? Even though the swords cracked?”

“Well, I’m not completely sure. She should heal naturally to a degree, but if the weapon parts require serious repair, that would be rather difficult to accomplish on Rüstung. I suppose we’d have to send her to the mechanator. After all, it is there that responsibility for hieran menaces lies.”

“Hm... Hey, Inglis.”

“Yes, Dux Jil?”

“I’ll get in touch with the mechanator, and if anything’s not right your hieran menace will probably have to get checked out in person. If that happens, I’ll get in touch through the ambassador.”

“Thank you, Dux Jil!”

“Not that it really takes my pull. That guy’s got connections of his own.”

“Meaning?”

“Hmm? You didn’t know? This country of yours—what was it, Karelia? The ambassador, Theodore, is the mechanator’s son. He should be able to pull it off, no sweat.”

“Oh?! Really?!”

Eris gasped. “I had no idea!”

If even Eris didn't know that, then only a few people did. Even his personal friends Prince Wayne and Principal Miriela, or King Carlias himself, may not have. Certainly, there might've been some inconvenient moments if it was known that he was so significant in Highland. It would make him a good target for the Steelblood Front. Inglis could understand why he chose to keep his status a secret.

Theodore had made some bold moves for a Highlander, in ways that favored the surface. Perhaps what made that possible was that he himself had considerable pull and backing in Highland. As the child of one of the Triumvirate's leaders, he was something akin to surface royalty—akin to Prince Wayne in social status. Evel had described Highland's ambassadors as mere diplomats, but somehow a Highlander of a stature unfitting that description had taken up the role.

His sister Cyrene had also come down to rule over Nova. Inglis wondered whether such recklessness ran in the family. If she was that important of a Highlander, Inglis wondered whether there had been repercussions in Highland for her actions, and she wasted no time in asking about that.

"Dux Jil! Ambassador Theodore's sister, Cyrene, came to the surface as a consul, but she encountered unexpected circumstances. Was that a problem in Highland?"

"Oh, right, that. Let me tell you, the mechanator was *pissed*. We weren't even the ones who sent her down—that was all Altar. The ambassador here, Muenthe, was one of ours, so we tried to stop it, but they ended up forcing it through. And whew... The mechanator absolutely flew off the handle."

"So is that what intensified the conflict between the Throne and the Altar factions?"

"Nope, it's more than that. That's just a side issue—at least if you're not the mechanator."

"Ah, interesting." Inglis didn't have sources for information from inside Highland, so this was a deeply interesting conversation.

"Oho ho ho. Master, if you tell her too much, the mechanator and quaestor may scold you."

"Ha ha ha. Yeah, I'm probably running my mouth, but it's my future wife we're talking about here, so go easy on me."

Carraldo laughed. "I see, I see. There was value, in many ways, in visiting the surface."

"W-Wife?!" Inglis and Eris gasped as one.

"Hey, you're the one looking for suitors..." Jildegrieva reminded her.

"Well, yes..." Inglis began.

"I think you're way too young for marriage, but if you're serious, I can be serious too, right?"

"Well... There's a complicated reason for why I look the way I do right now."

"I like you, Inglis! I like your strength and your spirit! If you were a man, I'd be trying to recruit you, but since you're a woman, I want you as my wife!"

Jildegrieva flashed a big grin.

"But Dux Jil, I, uh..." Inglis Eucus had no intention of marrying. That was the elephant in the room.

"You'd, er, certainly make for quite the couple..." Eris remarked, not entirely at ease with the concept.

"Yeah! This lady gets it!" Dux Jildegrieva nodded. "Inglis, you gotta have been thinking things like 'I ain't got anyone to fight' or 'please, someone strong show up,' right?"

"Well, yes."

"If you and I were a thing, we'd always have someone strong right there! We'd never be at a loss for someone to go all out on!"

"Oh!"

"And our kids! Think about it! If they got what we have, they'd be a match for us too! Maybe even better than either of us! They'd make the perfect training partners, wouldn't they?"

"Mmm... Perhaps..." She considered that.

"Seeing you made me realize something, Inglis! I don't need to go looking for

powerful foes—I need to make them! Think we could pull that off together?"

"Well...I'm unsure..." Inglis was disturbed by the realization that he wasn't completely wrong. He was persuasive. She'd never thought of having a child and then practicing with them. Thinking about the idea made her think it had potential.

But there were too many other...*problems*...with the process. Certain acts were necessary to have a child, and she didn't think she could endure them. Now, if she could skip straight to the child part with some sort of divine act, that would be a different story. Maybe hi-aether would make it possible? Even if it was, though, it would require power she was incapable of wielding yet.

"But! There's something I've gotta do first!"

"Hm?"

"Beat you! The deal here was that you'd marry whoever beat you, right? And today was a draw. I'm gonna train even harder, and when you're old enough for kids, I'll be back and defeat you for real! Just you wait and see!" he said, excited.

Inglis laughed. "That isn't the kind of thing you say when you propose to a woman." But she didn't mind. It interested her.

"I guess. But it works when I'm talking to you!"

"I suppose." Inglis laughed. "Then, I'll be waiting. I don't intend to lose either."

A battle with a powerful foe, with marriage on the line—not bad. She just had to win. And no one went into a fight thinking they'd lose.

"All right! Then we're outta here, pops!"

"Eris, let's head back to the castle and get some rest."

Inglis and Dux Jildegrieva left the crater and looked toward Ymir. The city seemed slightly damaged, but still intact.

"Hm...?"

Something wasn't quite right. They could see the city—the actual city—from

the outside, which was strange. Ymir was a citadel, bounded on all sides by defensive walls. But the wall facing them had been blown away. The remaining three were still intact. That must have been done by Jildegrieva's final strike. Since Inglis had dodged it with Divine Feat, the shock wave must have reached the wall and crumbled it. The broad gash extending from the crater reached there.

"Uh-oh..." Inglis murmured.

Repairs would take many hands and a large budget. But something else was immediately more pressing.

"Oh, Chriiiiiiiiiiiis?" Furious, Rafinha was waiting for Inglis with her arms crossed.

"Ah, Rani... Everything's okay? That's goo—"

"Everything is *NOT* okay!" She pulled Inglis's ear hard. "What are we going to do about this?! Look! The wall is gone! I told you not to destroy the city, didn't I?! Chris, were you listening at all?!"

"It's not like that. See, the city isn't destroyed, is it? Just the wall is, and it did its job in protecting the city, so, uh, you know, thanks for everything, wall... Rest in peace..."

Rafinha snorted. "What does that solve?! I asked you what we were going to do about this!"

"Wait, it wasn't me! Dux Jil did it!"

Hearing that, Rafinha turned her unabashed glare at Jildegrieva. "Really?! Is that true? *You* destroyed it?"

"Y-Yeah! Sorry, I used too much force! I'll send some materials from Highland, so don't beat me up over it. It should be way sturdier than the rock you were using."

Rafinha paused. "I guess. And Chris, you can use that to rebuild the wall yourself? Though I can help out too."

"S-Sure... Got it."

At that point, some Flygears arrived with convenient timing. They were the

ones that Carraldo had led when he came down.

“Then, let’s get hauling! Let’s go, pops! See you later, Inglis! Don’t slack on your training so we can have another good fight next time!”

“Of course, Dux Jil! But next time won’t end in a draw. I’ll win.”

“That’s the stuff! I’m looking forward to it!”

“Oho ho ho. Be well.”

With a refreshing, if slightly overwhelming, smile from Jildegrieva and a grandfatherly smile from Carraldo, the pair soared off toward Highland.



The next few days were spent on construction, rebuilding the wall of Ymir that had been completely destroyed. Rafinha, Ada, and the knights of Ymir all helped out. Thus, Inglis wasn’t lonely; in fact, it seemed a good replacement for training to her.

The materials Dux Jildegrieva had left were, as he’d said, far stronger than the stones normally used for Ymir’s wall, so the new wall was stronger than ever. This left a smile on Rafinha’s face as well. A more complicated expression appeared when the topic turned to Jildegrieva’s planned return to take Inglis as his wife. But what Inglis was most concerned about was Eris’s condition. A short recuperative stay in Ymir’s castle had allowed her body, damaged to the point of broken bones, to heal at an amazing rate. She was able to move freely now. But one large problem remained.

“So, Eris.”

“Yes!”

In Ymir’s training grounds, Inglis took Eris’s hand. A golden glow spread from where their hands met, enveloping Eris. Usually, it would shine brighter and brighter, so bright that it was painful to face with eyes closed, and Eris would transform into a pair of swords, but this time was different. Just as the light was about to spread, it fizzled out.

“The same again, I guess...” Inglis noted.

“No matter how many times we try, the light disappears!” Rafinha said.

"Yes. It's no good..." Eris shook her head and sighed. Her human form had healed, but she'd become unable to transform into a weapon. They'd tried over and over, but she showed no signs of improvement. "I don't know what to do. I'm a failure as a hieran menace."

"I-I'm sure a little bit more rest and you'll get better! It's okay! You'll be fine! So cheer up!" Rafinha tried to encourage Eris. It was, to be honest, a very unconvincing argument, but little Rafinha trying her hardest was cute in its own way. Inglis was happy just to watch her and smile.

"It's fine. I'm sure there's some way to heal it. However, I can't sit back and relax until then." Eris seemed to share Inglis's opinion, as she smiled and patted Rafinha's head. She had held Rafinha throughout the beginning of Inglis's fight with Jildegrieva too; perhaps she liked kids more than Inglis expected.

"So it probably is caused by the swords breaking, then," Inglis speculated.

"Yes... I've never had this happen before, but I suspect that's the case."

"I'm sorry... This is because I was so reckless in that fight." Inglis apologetically dipped her head. As she did, it too received a pat.

"It's fine. I'm just glad it happened during sparring rather than in a do-or-die situation. It taught us a lot. We've all heard that hieran menaces are the ultimate artifacts, and I believed that too, but Highland has something even better... The greatsword that Carraldo transformed into is obviously far stronger than my twin blades. If our strengths had been equal, you would have won rather than ending that fight in a draw... Am I wrong?"

"Well..."

It was true that he had won in terms of direct strength, but it was possible that if she had used Divine Feat from the beginning, she could have won without getting Eris hurt. Whether that would have been fun, or whether it would've led to any growth for her, was a different matter. It would've been an empty win. And that's why she felt apologetic. However, just like she had Divine Feat to pull out in an emergency, Jildegrieva may have had something hidden away as well.

As Inglis wore a conflicted expression, Eris scooped her up. "I'm not saying I

should try to emulate you, but we, as people fighting alongside you, need to become stronger. I'd never even thought of that since I became a hieran menace, but... For now, all I can do is pray a Prismen doesn't appear, yet I fear one will. Just bringing myself to understand that is a big benefit. Plus, now we know that not even the best of Highland is unreachable to us."

"Eris..."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Do you like kids, by any chance?"

"Wh—?!"

"Just, the way you picked me up was so natural."

"Y-Yes... I guess. You were so cute, I just wanted to..." Eris blushed in embarrassment. She must have been holding herself back without saying anything about it.

"Then, me too! It'll cheer you up!" Rafinha looked up at Eris and spread her arms, smiling oh so adorably.

"I want to hug Rani too!" Inglis slipped from Eris's arms and squeezed Rafinha.

"I wasn't talking about hugging you, Chris! Not that I mind it."

"But you're so cute, Rani!"

"You are too, Chris!"

"Ha ha ha, that's true. You both are cute," Eris remarked.

"Yes, though I'd really like to be back in my normal body and still able to hug little Rani."

"I was thinking the same thing! I want to be big and hug little Chris!"

"Whoever turns back first will be lucky."

"Yep! No hard feelings either way, though!"

Inglis didn't feel any signs that she was getting back to normal. She'd probably have to think seriously about how to revert this. But for now, it was time to cheer up Eris.

“Well, Eris, if you’d like that hug.”

“Yes, go ahead!”

“You’re both so cute.” Eris beamed while hugging both girls. The embrace really did make her feel better. After staying like that for a while, she said, “I can’t remain unable to transform into a weapon, so tomorrow I’ll be going back to the capital. My human body is healed.”

“Eris, are you going to ask Ambassador Theodore about getting treatment in Highland?”

“Yes. Since the dux himself is arranging it, I believe I’ll accept that gesture of goodwill.”

“Eris going to Highland... What do you think about that, Chris?”

“At the very least, I think Dux Jil’s offer was made in good faith. He probably thinks that there’s no value in fighting me the next time we meet if my weapon is broken. That’s the kind of person he is.”

“He really is just the male version of you. It’s amazing how well you got along,” Eris said.

“You were fighting him not ten seconds after he landed...” Rafinha agreed.

“I feel awful about what happened to you, Eris, but at the same time, I had a lot of fun! It wasn’t a situation like the Prism where if I lost, a lot of people would die, so I was just able to enjoy myself! I can’t wait for the rematch!” Inglis’s eyes shone as she spoke of the battle.

She’d fought hard, and neither participant could be said to have won. Having a lot of fights like that would be great for her growth. And, just like Inglis, Dux Jildegrieva was the type who didn’t want to mix causes or ideals with power. He wanted to pursue might for its own sake, because fighting was fun. They shared a heartfelt enjoyment of their bout. And people only got better at what they enjoyed doing.

“But no dirty thoughts, Chris!” Rafinha protested. “It doesn’t matter how important a Highlander Jil is, Rafael is the only one I’ll accept as your lover! So you’d better not lose!” Rafinha declared emphatically.

"Well...I'm not really interested in romance. I don't need that in my life." There was a certain persuasive logic to the idea of having children who could put up a fight, but that was where she stood emotionally.

"Politically speaking though, it makes a lot of sense... The subservient relation of the surface to Highland would definitely be softened, and a child of the two of you might even inherit the ability to wield a hieran menace," Eris remarked.

"Noooooo way! Absolutely not!" Rafinha objected, crossing her arms in front of her into a big X. Her irked expression was adorable.

"Ha ha ha... That's right. What should matter most in this kind of thing is the feelings of the people involved, isn't it?"

"Don't worry, Rani," Inglis said. "I'll definitely win next time!"

"Seriously! Try your hardest, okay? Oh, but you can go easy on Rafael."

"No matter when, where, or who I fight, I will win!" Inglis had renewed resolve.

"Then, I need to be in perfect shape," Eris said. "More powerful than I am now, so that I'm not lacking in strength. If I train harder in my human body, I wonder whether my weapon form will harden as well?"

"I don't know, but Ambassador Theodore might know something."

"I suppose. I was wondering whether there was a way to not just restore me, but make me stronger... I'd like to explore such possibilities in Highland."

"Then, we'll come with you on your way to the capital. You should have someone with you in case something happens to you, and I've been wanting to talk to Ambassador Theodore and Principal Miriela about my and Rani's current situation anyway."

"Really? In that case, let's go together."

"Rani, are you okay with that?" Inglis asked.

"Yeah," Rafinha replied. "We've had plenty of time off, and I want to see everyone again."

Inglis had completed the modification of Alina's artifact that Ada had

requested, so she wouldn't be leaving anything important undone in making this trip back.

Just as Rafinha nodded in agreement, though, a voice reached them from the entrance to the training grounds. "Rafinha! Inglis!" It was a young woman's voice—they recognized it as Ada's.

Along with Ada was Alina. She must have finished her studies for the day and was getting started on training.

"Ada," Inglis began.

"What is it, Ada?" Rafinha asked. "Did something happen again?"

"No, I have a delivery for you."

"A delivery?" both girls echoed quizzically.

As Inglis and Rafinha looked at each other, Alina handed them an envelope. "Here, Rani, Chris, it's a letter from one of your friends!"

Leone's name was written on the back of the envelope in exquisite penmanship.

Chapter III: Inglis, Age 16—Leone's Homecoming

The *Star Princess* soared over the outskirts of Ahlemin as Rafinha clung to Eris.

"Wow! That flying battleship really came to Ahlemin!" Rafinha said in awe. Controlling the Flygear was too hard with her tiny body, so Eris had taken over the job.

"It's completely restored..." Eris murmured. The flying battleship hovered over the cathedral in the center of Ahlemin, originally built to contain the rime-bound Prism. The cathedral below it was undergoing a major renovation, with scaffolding erected and thronging crowds moving to and fro. The mood surrounding it was quite lively in contrast to the drudgery of the work.

With the rebirth and defeat of the Prism, Ahlemin's role in monitoring it had come to an end, but now the town would take on a new life as the base for the flying battleship. Originally it was under the command of Venefic's General Rochefort in his raid on Chiral, but Inglis had forced it down and captured it. With it assigned to the knights' academy, Ambassador Theodore and Principal Miriela directed an all-hands effort to repair it and had made it functional again.

"Ah! They're going over our paint job!" Rafinha puffed out her cheeks in a pout.

"Well, painting the whole thing pink was kind of, I mean... This will be the flagship for a new order of knights. It's going to be used in a variety of operations, so its color shouldn't draw too much attention," Inglis said to soothe her. While the students at the knights' academy were doing the repair work, Rafinha and Pullum had painted the entire ship pink, a decision that others considered inappropriate.

Inglis and Rafinha's own *Star Princess* was a different story, but this ship wasn't theirs, so its color wasn't actually up to them. The *Star Princess*'s design, the fruit of Rafinha and Pullum's friendship and cooperation, was unapologetically girly, with bright pink coloring and glittering eyes painted on.

“Ugh... But Pullum and I worked so hard on this one too...”

“Well, the color may have changed, but the eyes are still there, see? It’s fine.”

The glittering eyes Rafinha and Pullum had drawn—just like their work on the *Star Princess*—on the hull were intact. They were a dead giveaway that the battleship was the same ship no matter what color it was.

Leone’s letter had said that a new order of knights was being formed, with this as the flagship. Karelia’s forces were split between the Paladins and Royal Guard, and groupings like the knights of Ymir maintained by nobles at their own discretion.

The new order was to number among the former. With the Paladins already dedicated to fighting magicite beasts, and the Royal Guard to the defense of the capital and the royal family, Inglis wondered what its purpose would be. Leone’s letter had not filled in that detail, only noting that the ship was to be based in Ahlemin, which would be the home of the new order. However, Inglis had been pleased to find that Ambassador Theodore was coming here, saving her the trip to the capital.

Inglis and Rafinha had made plans concerning Leone’s family home, and they filled in Eris on what they’d done.

“Leone’s so serious and diligent. She could have thanked us when we met after vacation,” Inglis said.

“I bet she was just super happy about it. I love that about her!”

“I think it was a wonderful idea,” Eris said. “You two are very kind.”

“Thank you!” Inglis and Rafinha replied with a grin.

Eris winced. “It’ll be a bit of a shame when you two are back to normal.”

When Leone had entered the knights’ academy, she’d vacated the house and moved to the capital. The people of Ahlemin had still been bitter about their town’s reputation as a nest of traitors every time they passed by the Olfa manor, and she had needed the money for her tuition and expenses, so she’d decided to get rid of everything to fund her studies. Even if her friends offered to help, Leone, who was very modest, likely would have refused. Therefore,

Inglis and Rafinha had spoken with Rafael and made arrangements to secretly buy the house and maintain it so that Leone could return one day. To be precise, by the time they brought it up, Rafael had already made the moves they had contemplated.

During her first vacation home from the knights' academy, Leone had returned to Ahlemin to help with the repairs from the battle with the Prismers, and she'd noticed that it was unchanged. When she spoke with the financier who'd arranged its sale, she'd learned it was still hers and she could return to it whenever she liked. She'd immediately written a letter of thanks—a very serious act. How very like Leone.

"So, where shall we go first? To the Olfa manor?" Eris asked.

"Of course!" Rafinha said.

"If you would, Eris. It's over there."

With Inglis navigating for Eris, the *Star Princess* made its way to the Olfa manor. Gradually, it came into sight, no different from when they had last visited. There was the sturdy gate and a broad but completely denuded courtyard, but one thing was different. A crowd had gathered in front of the doors and appeared to be looking inside.

"Why are there so many people there?" Rafinha crooked her head.

"They probably all came here when they noticed Leone's return?" Inglis offered.

"Ah! You mean they're going to bully her again? This time in a big crowd?!" Rafinha's brow furrowed.

"No, I don't think it's necessarily like that."

"But if it is, we need to chase them off before they hurt her like that! She'll feel so bad! Let's hurry, Chris!" Rafinha tugged at Inglis's hand.

"Sure, sure. Set us down, then, Eris."

"Ah, wait!" Eris said. "You don't need to rush. I'll have it landed soon enough!"

"No! I'm going now!" Rafinha hugged Inglis from behind.

“You mean *I’m* going now?”

“Chris, your power is my power!”

Inglis laughed. “You’re not wrong about that!” Carrying Rafinha, Inglis jumped from the *Star Princess*, landing just in front of the crowd gathered at the gate. The sudden landing of a little girl carrying another little girl produced shocked gasps from the crowd.

“Huh?! What just—?!”

“She jumped down from above?!”

Inglis called out to them with a beaming smile. “Hello there, everyone. What happens to be your business here?”

“If you’re here to bully Leone, you’ll have to go through us first! So you should just go home!”

The crowd shook their heads in reaction to Rafinha’s proud stand against them. Many of them were dressed like knights, but some were not, and there were women and commoners as well.

“No, it’s not like that. That’s not why we’re here!”

“You two know Lady Leone?”

Rafinha nodded. “Yes. And?”

“Ah, I see! We’d heard she had returned here. Is that true?”

“Perhaps. Now, what is your business here?” Inglis asked.

Looking a bit embarrassed, one of the knights replied for the group. “We want to apologize for what we did to her.”

“Wh—?!” Inglis and Rafinha exchanged glances.

“I was in the fight with the Prism! After it fell, when a flood of magicite beasts attacked, I saw her fight desperately to defend Ahlemin!”

“Me too! One of them was about to get me before her sword cleaved through it!”

“Even though we wronged her... We are ashamed of what we’ve done to her.

We're here to apologize."

"I see." Inglis had lost consciousness after defeating the Prism, and the fighting had wrapped up by the time she awoke again, but it seemed the battle against the magicite beasts had been fierce. Even with the Prism itself defeated, the countless army of magicite beasts it had created had launched an all-out assault. With Eris and Ripple unconscious as well, Rafael—who had awakened shortly thereafter—had fought with the bravery and intensity of a lion, and Leone's own contributions had been second only to his. Liselotte had been a huge help too, leading to a recognition of her efforts at the banquet to celebrate the Prism's defeat.

The sight of them must have made quite an impact on the knights in the field. When Leone had left Ahlemin, she'd resolved to capture Leon herself and remove the stain from the Olfa name she'd experienced in Ahlemin. Even so, perhaps she had regained the trust of the people of Ahlemin in a different way.

"You should have told us that to begin with! I'm so glad—apologizing when you think you've done something wrong is the right thing to do!" Rafinha's face lit up, and she nodded repeatedly. "So, let's go see Leone! Everyone, come on in!" Rafinha beckoned everyone toward the gate.

"Rani, you can't just walk in... I mean, it's not *your* house."

"It's okay, we're friends! I'm sure she'll be happy!" Rafinha smiled, as relieved for Leone as she would have been for herself.

That smile of hers always got Inglis to go along with Rafinha's wishes, and it was at maximum strength coming from cute little six-year-old Rafinha. "Well, if you say so."

"All right! In we go!" Rafinha moved to push open the gate, propelling the knights into a panic.

"Wait, we can't just barge in..."

"That's right, if she can't bring herself to forgive us, it would make an even worse impression."

"Could you relay our message to her?"

The knights seemed reluctant. With how young Rafinha appeared, permission from her was less than convincing.

“Huh? It’s fine. Don’t worry about it!”

As Rafinha spoke, the gates opened from inside, and they saw Eris there. She must have landed in the courtyard farther inside.

“Oh, Eris. Thanks.” Rafinha was casual, but the crowd was astonished at the sudden appearance of a hieran menace, a guardian of their country.

“Wow!”

“It’s Lady Eris!”

“See? Even a hieran menace says it’s okay! Let’s go!” Rafinha proclaimed, but Eris’s expression sharpened.

“Wait! It might be dangerous.”

“Hm? What do you mean, Eris?”

“Dangerous?!”

“C’mon, Chris, don’t be happy about that!”

“It *might* be dangerous. You two come in. Everyone else, could you keep watch out here?” Eris asked. Inglis and Rafinha followed her through the grounds toward the house itself. The *Star Princess* was parked in the courtyard, and as they approached it, Inglis and Rafinha understood what Eris had meant.

“Ah! I smell blood!” Inglis said.

“You’re right,” Rafinha agreed. “What happened?! Is Leone okay?!”

“Let’s go find out,” Eris said.

The three approached the front door of the house. It was slightly ajar and could be pushed open easily. Inglis took point and put her hand on the knob. “I’m going in!” She pushed the door wide open and stepped in.

The large foyer had a grand staircase at one end. Inglis saw several people collapsed on it, bleeding. They were dressed like knights.

“They’re—!” Rafinha gasped.

“What happened here?!” Eris asked.

The smell of blood from outside correctly foreshadowed the scene before them. No, it wasn’t the worst-case scenario of it being Leone lying there, and Inglis was relieved for that, but only to an extent—this was no ordinary scene, and it made her worried for Leone’s safety.

“Oh no! A-Are you okay?!” Rafinha rushed toward the knights to check on them.

“Wait, Rani!” Inglis grabbed her arm and stopped her.

“But if they’re still alive, I need to heal them, or else—”

“It’s okay. We know whether they’re alive.”

“Huh? So there’s nothing we can do?” Rafinha’s expression clouded with the thought that it was too late.

Inglis shook her head. “Weeeellllll... Not quite. Watch.” She extended a finger and pointed at one of the collapsed men. “Drop the act and get up.”

Aether Pierce! Inglis shot a beam of light toward him. She had aimed for it to graze him, but before it struck, the man let out a roar.

“Grahhh!”

He leaped up, dodging out of the path of the Aether Pierce. His movements were swift and showed no sign of his being seriously injured. Inglis could see that his hamstring was cut, and he was bleeding from the wound, but these weren’t reflected in his actions. His expression and eyes were unusual as well, with his eyelids strangely peeled back and eyes glowing brightly. Even his teeth were unusually sharp and enlarged. His canine teeth were polished into blades.

“Wh—?! What is that?!” As Rafinha shouted in surprise, the man rushed toward Inglis, flailing with his sword. It was a desperate attack with no regard for his own safety. His speed was quite beyond that of a normal person, making him a fearsome assassin.

“He’s fast...!” Even Eris was surprised.

He suddenly halted, as if things had paused. The tip of the man’s sword stopped just in front of Inglis’s face, caught between two fingers. No matter

how hard the man pushed, the sword would not move.

“Hmm... You’re pretty strong. And you’re definitely faster than a normal person.” Inglis grinned. This wasn’t bad at all. A few dozen more of them, and she’d be having fun.

“He’s not a magicite beast, and he’s not using an Artifact! What *is* he?!” Eris didn’t seem to recognize what he was.

“He isn’t like the Rune-Eater either!” Rafinha said. “Wh-What is he, Chris?! There’s something not right about these people! What happened to them?!”

“He’s an undying.”

“A what?”

“You know, like zombies or vampires.”

“Huh?! I thought those only existed in fairy tales and scary stories!”

“Yet there’s one right here in front of you. You thought dragons only existed in stories, but they’re real, right?”

“Well, yes, but...”

“The world is just full of wonders, isn’t it?” However, these weren’t supernatural, otherworldly creatures like a dragon. These were within human reach. That is, they could be created with magic.

It was a forbidden magic that had existed during the reign of King Inglis. The king had made an effort to promote the spread of magic, but judged its use to transform humans in this way to be extremely immoral, and had banned the creation or control of undying as a forbidden magic. Powerful though it was, it was something that later generations would have no need for.

Inglis didn’t know how much time had passed since her reign as king, but here was that magic again. The victims were before her eyes. It could have been done with an Artifact, or by a Highlander’s magic. She had no way of knowing right now.

“The world can also be depressing.” She sighed. She had been trying to help by forbidding it, and yet...

The passage of time was cruel. It seemed all the acts of her past life had faded into nothingness. This was just another reminder. A reminder that, rather than chasing causes or ideals that would disappear with the passage of time, she should live to enjoy herself. Inglis Eucus would have no regrets in her final moments. She wanted to go into the great beyond smiling at the fun she'd had and the fact that she'd left nothing undone.

"Y-Yeah. That poor man... Chris, is there any way to change him back?"

"Once he's this far gone, I don't think we can. It's like with turning into a magicite beast." Responding to Rafinha, Inglis turned her eyes back to the undying before her. "Go for it! Just a little more force! Your sword's almost there!"

"Grahhh!" The undying pushed even harder, as if Inglis's cheers spurred him on.

"You can do it! This isn't over yet!"

"C'mon, Chris! You're not supposed to be having fun!"

"I mean, I might as well!" The situation being terrible didn't mean there couldn't be a chance for an engaging battle. No matter who or what she was fighting, Inglis wanted to keep a positive attitude and seek personal growth in the battle.

"Sheesh..."

Snap! Splorch!

He pushed too hard, and his leg broke. He had ignored the limits of his body. Undying could not reason and felt no pain, so this was a common occurrence with them. Since his hamstring had been cut, the break began there.

"Eeek!" Rafinha's face twitched in surprise.

"Th-They're..." Eris stammered. "The undying lose their ability to feel pain! It's torn away so that they don't value themselves at all!"

"So you do know about them," Inglis said. Of course, if anyone knew about the undying, it would be a hieran menace. She had such extensive knowledge.

"What's puzzling me is how you know so much about them... Then again,

there's a lot else about you that I don't get, so I don't really mind."

Rafinha fretted. She couldn't stand watching the man in his current state and had to help him somehow. "I can't sit by and do nothing! That poor man! Maybe this will somehow turn him back! Go!" Rafinha drew her trusty Artifact bow, Shiny Flow. The arrow of light it fired shone a pale blue, the color of those imbued with its healing Gift.

It struck the undying's broken leg. Rafinha's kindness was something Inglis found praiseworthy, but sadly, her efforts here were fruitless.

Crack! Goooosh!

Instead, the undying's body disintegrated even faster, collapsing into a gruesome pulp.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeekkkkk!" Rafinha shrieked.

"Healing works in reverse on the undying," Inglis said.

"So fast too. Though it's a horrific sight," Eris muttered.

Eris was right. The undying, unlike magicite beasts, were vulnerable to physical attacks, but they were still hard to defeat because they would not stop unless damaged to the point of physical destruction. Using healing magic on them was probably the fastest way to deal with them using normal Artifacts.

"T-Tell me that beforehand!" Rafinha protested.

"I didn't really have time to stop you," Inglis said.

"Ugh! Anyway, I'm going to go look for Leone! If she was alone and got attacked by these things, she must be terrified!"

"Wait, Rani. The ones napping over there are undying too."

There were a couple others lying on the stairs. Their bleeding must have been from Leone's counterattacks. But the undying, well, didn't die. They must have been lying in wait for someone to draw close to their "corpses," at which point they'd attack. Their creator must be controlling them to do so. This was no mindless assault, but complex behavior; it spoke to their creator's power. It was

quite impressive.

If Leone had let her guard down and approached them after “killing” them, she might have gotten hurt from their sudden attack. Inglis didn’t know whether Leone had fought them, or whether she was still in the mansion. But they needed to find her, *quickly*.

“I’d like you to take them down with the arrow you just used,” Eris prompted Rafinha.

“Huh?!” Rafinha gasped.

“It’s the fastest way to handle them. And if I did it, we’d end up destroying the entire building,” Inglis said. It was Leone’s home, so she wanted to show some concern.

“That’s right,” Eris agreed. “It takes a significant attack to finish off an undying. Your arrows can take them down without affecting anything else.”

“O-Okay... Go!” Rafinha’s healing arrows struck the undying and turned them into meat. Wounds opened where the arrows struck and spread out across their bodies until they were nothing but a gory mess.

“Ugggghhhh... I can’t stand to look at this...”

“C’mon, Rani. Let’s go find Leone. You can shoot healing arrows at anything that looks like a person.”

“Yes, they won’t harm normal people,” Eris agreed.

Thus, the three began their search of the Olfa mansion. A pass through the first floor revealed no Leone—only several more undying. Each was handled with a healing arrow from Rafinha.

“She’s not on the first floor, then,” Rafinha said.

“Then let’s go upstairs,” Eris suggested.

“Ah, wait, Eris. I remember there being a cellar here too. I noticed it when we spent the night,” Inglis pointed out.

“Then let’s split up,” Eris said. “I’ll check upstairs. You two look in the cellar.”

“Sure!” Inglis and Rafinha set off for the cellar, but the door was closed.

“Leone! Leone! Are you there?” Rafinha called out as she knocked.

“No response... And it seems locked,” Inglis said. Leone might have closed it to get away from her enemies. If so, she was probably hiding inside.

“Guess we’ve gotta do it, Chris!” What Rafinha meant was perfectly clear.

“Sure, got it.”

Destroy the door and move on. But as Inglis stepped toward the door, someone on the other side opened it.

Crrrrreak!

“Ah! Leone?!” Rafinha peeked into the gap, but the face looking back was not the face she wanted to see.

“Grahhhhhhh!” An undying thrust its face up toward hers.

“Eeeeeek!”

“Gahhhh!”

Rafinha shrieked as the undying tried to grab her.

Oh no you don’t! Inglis had already sprang into action. Her tiny fist swept in from the side and slammed into the undying’s cheek.

Bammmmm!

The undying shot like an arrow back down the staircase and slammed into the wall at its foot. “I’d prefer it if you didn’t touch Rani.”

While Inglis grinned, Rafinha gritted her teeth. “Ugh...! That surprised me! Don’t scare me like that!” She sent a healing arrow into the undying that Inglis had knocked back. “Don’t look, don’t look, I didn’t see that!” she mumbled to herself, averting her eyes as the undying disintegrated.

“Let’s go, Rani. Leone might be down here.”

“Yeah!”

Inglis took Rafinha's hand, and they descended.

"Leone! If you're here, answer us!" Inglis yelled.

"It's us! Rani and Chris! Our voices might sound a little funny, but it's still us!" they called out as they walked through the cellar.

They heard a quiet, wavering response from the deepest point of the cellar.
"Inglis? Rafinha?"

"Ah?! You're here?!" Rafinha replied.

"Over here!" Inglis said.

In a corner of the cellar used for storage, Leone shook as she embraced her dark greatsword Artifact. Her cheeks were streaked with tears. She must have been crying. Inglis could tell she'd had a very frightening and painful time of things.

"Leone! Are you okay?!" Rafinha asked.

"I'm glad you're okay. Everything will be fine now," Inglis said.

"Eh? Inglis? Rafinha? Is that really you?" Leone asked. Inglis couldn't blame her for being suspicious, since she and Rafinha appeared far younger than normal.

"Yeah, it's us!" Rafinha said.

"There was an accident with an Artifact, and we ended up like this..." Inglis explained.

"Ah, okay," Leone answered. "You startled me."

"Anyway, Leone, are you okay?!" Rafinha asked again.

"You're not hurt, are you?" Inglis asked.

Leone's clothes were soaked with blood—they couldn't tell whether it was her own or that of her enemies.

"I'm okay, I'm okay... Just... What have I done..." Leone's hands shook, and new tears welled up in her eyes.

"It's okay! It's okay!" Rafinha insisted. "We're here for you now!"

"Yeah, Rani's right," Inglis said. "It's okay now."

Inglis and Rafinha each took one of her hands and patted her on the back. They stayed like that for a moment, and when Leone calmed down, she began to explain the situation. "Thanks to Sir Rafael and both of you, I was able to return here. Thank you so much..."

"Yes, we got your letter," Inglis said.

"Because of that, we decided to visit Ahlemin," Rafinha said.

Leone's meticulous attention to etiquette was extremely lucky for her; without that, they would never have come here. If Leone had approached the undying pretending to be dead on the stairs without expecting anything, she might have been in danger.

"But the town's knights visited, saying they wanted to talk about something, and I let them in... But then they started acting strangely!"

"And you had to fight them..." Rafinha nodded, getting a picture of what had occurred.

"They wouldn't listen to me. I still didn't want to hurt them...but I couldn't avoid it. Even punching them didn't knock them out, and they were so fast... So — So I had to use my sword...on the knights of Ahlemin...!" Leone's hands began to shake again, and tears streamed from her eyes, as if just remembering it was traumatic. "Y-You all returned this place to me, but I never should have come back... I was a fool to think they would ever forgive me, but I got caught up in what I'd achieved and just came waltzing back in here, and then—! It... It's all my fault!"

Leone thought the knights of Ahlemin hadn't forgiven her and chose to attack her when they heard she had returned. Left with no other choice but to strike them down, she had done so in self-defense, but it still weighed heavily on her.

"That's not true, Leone! You did nothing wrong! Nothing at all!" Rafinha hugged her tightly. "Right, Chris? Isn't that true?"

"Yeah, Rani's right." Inglis, along with Rafinha, patted Leone's back. "Think back, Leone. Did you recognize any of the people who visited? You didn't know any of them, right?"

“Huh? Yes... That’s true... But there’s no way I’d know everyone in Ahlemin...”

“But the people out there might?”

“Oh...?!”

“They said they wanted to apologize to you, Leone. That after seeing you in the battle, they’d had a change of heart.”

“Th-That’s right!” Rafinha said. “The knights out there did say that! I’m not really good with faces, but...”

“They were the people who were angry with Leone the first time we came to Ahlemin,” Inglis prompted.

“Really...? Well, you’re good at recognizing people, Chris, so I’m sure you’re right! If even people who were that mad could have a change of heart, then the people that attacked you must be...” Rafinha was suddenly at a loss for words. “Must be... Er, what are they, Chris?” Rafinha had been so caught up in wanting to protect Leone that she hadn’t really thought matters through. That was charming in its own right.

“Assassins targeting you, Leone,” Inglis explained. “But no one related to Ahlemin.”

“Assassins...but from somewhere else?” Leone asked.

“But why?” Rafinha pondered.

Before Inglis could respond, someone else made a noise.

“Gwahhh!”

“You’re so loud. We’d all appreciate some quiet here.” Eris appeared, leading a single undying. He was carefully bound with sturdy straw rope so that he couldn’t be a danger to anyone.

“Eris!”

“Lady Eris!”

“Good, you found her and she’s safe. As for him... I thought I should take one of the undying into custody to serve as evidence and then turn him over to Ambassador Theodore,” Eris said.

“Good plan,” Inglis agreed. “He might have an idea of which Artifact or Highlander did this.”

“It looks like there are a lot of open questions,” Eris said. “I’m sorry. This feels like my responsibility to solve.”

Inglis laughed. “I get it. Look, Leone. He’s an undying... Something a particular Artifact or Highlander can turn people into. Think of him like a zombie or a vampire.”

“I thought those kinds of things only existed in ghost stories and folktales!” Leone protested.

“Well, someone created them for real, then had them pretend to be normal knights and attack you. They won’t die even if you take your sword to them. They just pretend to be knocked down and then leap up and attack you when you approach. You would’ve been in danger if they’d surprised you, especially because you were in anguish. Whoever it is planned for that.”

Leone had been deeply shocked by the thought that she had possibly killed the Ahlemin knights. In such a stunned state, unable to react immediately, the undying could have easily gotten the jump on her.

“Ah! That’s terrible! Who would do such a thing?!” Leone asked.

“I don’t know, but when you were in Ahlemin before, nothing like this happened, right?”

“Of course not!”

“So it’s probably not anyone from Ahlemin doing it. They already would have done something if they wanted to.”

Leone fell silent.

“I’m sure whoever made them into undying isn’t from Ahlemin. This many knights going missing would be noticed, and the people outside didn’t seem to have any idea, so they were likely brought here from outside Ahlemin. It’s something I need to investigate,” Eris said.

“Yes, please follow up on that.” Inglis nodded.

“See?” Rafinha turned to Leone. “It’s not like you thought.”

"R-Really? I didn't kill anyone from Ahlemin?" Leone asked.

"That's right! Let's go talk to the people outside!"

"Yes, evidence is better than theories," Inglis said.

It was fortunate that they had gathered at the Olfa mansion. That way, Leone would be able to hear from them immediately. And it was fortunate they'd lost their nerve and remained standing in a gaggle outside. If they had come in to meet Leone, they might have noticed something was wrong and entered the house itself, at which point they would have been devoured by the undying. That would have hurt Leone even more.

They left with Leone and asked the gathered crowd of knights and civilians about the situation, only to be answered with shaking heads.

"No knights have gone missing lately!"

"I haven't heard of anything happening either!"

"Does anyone here recognize this man's face? He may not look quite how he once did, but... Ah, he's dangerous, don't get too close." Eris pointed to the bound undying.

"No, not at all."

"Nor I."

"Not me either."

"And not me!" Everyone in the crowd shook their heads.

"Then, this may be hard to answer, but...can you think of anyone who, when they found out that Leone had returned, reacted viscerally? Or seemed to be planning an attack?"

In response to Inglis's question, the denials only intensified.

"Of course not! There's no one like that here! We knights of Ahlemin are ashamed of what we'd said to her!"

"That's right! We were so caught up in the reputation of her family that we failed to see her for herself! But even still, she stood at our forefront in the defense of Ahlemin! She saved many of our lives!"

"Yes, so we wanted to apologize for our rudeness and thank her for her acts in battle! Attacking her? Trying to hurt her? That's absurd! Not a single one among us would do that!"

Hearing the response, Inglis turned to Leone and smiled. "See, Leone? Who do you trust, the assassins or these people?"

"Th-Thank you, everyone..." Leone's voice wavered as she teared up, but these tears were different from the ones she had shed in the cellar.

"We're deeply sorry, Lady Leone!"

"Please forgive us for what we've done!"

"And thank you for saving our lives in the battle!" The crowd bowed to Leone as one.

"W-Wait! It's fine, you don't have to bow! Thank you for seeing me for me! Thank you so much!" Leone's voice caught, and more tears welled up in her eyes.



"Isn't that nice, Leone?" Rafinha asked happily.

"I don't think it's very nice to have assassins pretend to be townspeople and attack you," Inglis said to Rafinha.

In response, Leone wrapped her arms around Inglis and lifted her up. "It wasn't nice, but this situation here has turned out nice!" She buried her face in Inglis like she was a stuffed animal. This was bold indeed for someone normally as reserved as Leone. She must have been overjoyed.

Just as Inglis had said to Rafinha, this wasn't all an occasion for joy. Someone was sending assassins after Leone. It was almost definitely not any of the knights of Ymir. If they'd been going to, they would have done so before she had even left for the knights' academy.

They may have mistreated her, but they hadn't chosen to directly harm her. And it would've been unnatural for them to suddenly take such radical action. There was an outside force at play, but there was no indication that its motivation had anything to do with the Olfa family. It was quite possible that the motive was a completely different one.

Inglis leaned toward this line of thinking. In regard to Leone and the Olfas, Leone had done nothing to intensify the public's anger, and much to assuage it. So, what was the intention of this attack? Was Leone the only target? Ahlemin was to become the base of a new order of knights; might that be related? If it was, perhaps there was some conspiracy or political intrigue.

At any rate, there was the matter of the power to create and control undying. Inglis didn't know whether it was from an Artifact or a Highlander's power, but whatever it was deserved special mention, as it was strong, and it had to be eye-catching. An investigation would reveal the details. And while she didn't know who had done it, if they brought forth a stronger undying—some kind of ultimate version, maybe a lich—she could enjoy fighting that.

A lich would probably be just as strong as an ancient dragon. In preparation for her rematch with Dux Jildegrieva, it was imperative that she gain more experience and refine her might. It was not necessarily a bad thing to have a powerful foe lurking in the background.

“It really is nice...” Inglis giggled as she patted Leone’s head, buried in her chest.

“That’s a suspicious laugh...” Rafinha shot her a withering glare.

Chapter IV: Inglis, Age 16—New Semester, New Lifestyle (1)

It was the first day after vacation at the knights' academy.

"Mmm! ♪ Back to the old cafeteria! Let's get a fresh start by doing a lap of the menu!" Rafinha smiled as she strode into the cafeteria. "Good morning, everyone!"

Many other students returned her greeting.

"Good morning!"

"Morning!"

It was another cheerful start to the day.

"Oh! There you are, Rafinha! We're all ready, so come on and eat!" The lunch lady, all too familiar with Rafinha and Inglis and the amount of food they consumed, peeked out and delivered them a challenge.

"Yes, ma'am! We're back and ready for more! One of everything to start!" Rafinha's polite bow was at odds with her absurd order.

"Sure thing!" But the cafeteria staff were already used to it. The lunch lady breezily rolled up her sleeves and hefted a frying pan.

Having finished his breakfast, Silva passed by Rafinha on his way out. "Good morning, Rafinha. Where's Inglis?"

"Good morning, Silva. Chris is right here!"

"Huh? I don't see her..."

"Down here..."

Inglis peeked her face out from behind Rafinha. She hadn't been trying to hide, but she was short enough that Rafinha had inadvertently concealed her.

"Good morning, Silva!" Inglis, smiling gracefully, was still in her younger form.

Only Rafinha had returned to her original size; Inglis was still tiny. Principal Miriela had even prepared a child-sized version of the knights' academy uniform for her.

"Wh-What happened to you?!" Silva exclaimed.

The cafeteria echoed with voices in every timbre. "She's adorable!"

"Well, there was a bit of a mishap with an Artifact I made," she replied.

"And that's why you're so small? I'm glad you weren't hurt!"

"She should be back to normal at some point. Until then I get to enjoy having a tiny Chris around!" Rafinha said. "Isn't she cute, Silva?" She picked up Inglis and rubbed her cheek against her own as if her cousin was a stuffed animal.

They'd discussed who would revert first and be able to enjoy doting on the other, and Rafinha had won the lottery. It had happened naturally, without any intervention on the part of Ambassador Theodore or Principal Miriela. Inglis's resistance to magic should have been higher, but the effect had ended for Rafinha sooner anyway.

Inglis wasn't sure why that was the case. Was it because Rafinha had been physically farther away from the Artifact when it went off? That might have caused the difference in its effect. But was that enough to explain the reversal in magical resistance between them?

Inglis herself, after all, was clad in aether. It wouldn't have surprised her at all if she had gone completely unaffected and only Rafinha had transformed. It's possible that her own experiments with powering the Artifact with aether had produced a Gift powerful enough to work even on a divine knight.

She was under the impression from others' explanations that the effect's duration wasn't based on its power. That was what seemed to produce the most cohesive explanation.

In any case, she would naturally recover, so no special measures would be taken. After visiting Leone at the Olfa mansion, they had met with Ambassador Theodore and Principal Miriela in Ahlemin, which was when Rafinha had regained her original form.

"Yeah, she is. She really is," Silva replied.

Inglis saw a hand stretch out toward her. It patted her on the head even while she was in Rafinha's arms. "Such a cutie." Yua's face was expressionless, and her agreement could only be found in her choice of words.

"Yua! Good morning! It's been a while."

"Tiny Boobies. I can't really call you Boobies like this."

"Ha ha ha, you're not wrong..."

"Yua, do you want to hug Chris too?"

"Can I? Yaaay." Again, Yua's words carried the weight of her enthusiasm as opposed to her tone, but this time her expression showed the slightest bit of excitement as she took Inglis in her arms. "Wow. You're so soft. And you smell nice," Yua sniffed.

"R-Really? Thanks."

"Time to ride the Flygear! Fwoosh!" With Yua's strength, it was easy for her to loft Inglis above her head.

"Ha ha ha, isn't this something you'd normally do with younger kids?"

"Really? So you want to go even higher?" Yua tossed Inglis into the air. With a *fwoosh*, Inglis soared almost to the ceiling before falling back down, caught and tossed by Yua again and again. "Are you having fun, Tiny Boobies?"

"That wasn't really what I meant... And it's not like I'm a kid in *both* body and mind."

"Come on, Yua, that's not how you treat a child!" Silva protested. "That's dangerous!"

"You're just jealous, Four-Eyes."

"Th-That has nothing to do with it!"

"Here you go, then." Yua held out Inglis to Silva.

"I wasn't asking to take her from you!"

"You sure you don't want to hug her?"

“That wasn’t what I meant either!”

“Mmm. Here.”

“Ha ha ha...” Inglis was being treated like a stuffed plushie—or maybe like a cute little animal. She had no response but a strained laugh.

“Hmm... If I must...” Silva reached out his hands.

“Actually, nope.” Yua suddenly pulled Inglis away.

“Hey!”

“No getting handsy with your classmates. She’s only a little kid in body.”

“Well of course!”

“You disappointed?”

“Why you—”

Inglis laughed. “I don’t mind Silva holding me.”

“R-Really, Inglis?!” Silva lit up with a smile. So he *had* been jealous of Rafinha and Yua.

“Go right ahead.”

“O-Okay! If you’ll excuse me!” Silva snatched Inglis away from Yua. “Ha ha, this brings back memories. My family’s all boys, and I always wanted a little sister.”

“Ha ha ha. I’ve never seen you this happy, Silva. Beware little Inglis’s power,” Rafinha teased.

Another person appeared. “Silva! May I have a turn? I’d like to hold her as well!” Liselotte spoke with a bright twinkle in her eye.

Inglis hadn’t seen her over vacation and was glad she was doing well. “Ah, Liselotte. It’s been a while.”

“It most certainly has! I’d heard as much from Leone, but seeing you myself, you’re simply adorable!”

Inglis laughed. “Thanks.”

That seemed to be the cue for the other students to gather. Cries of “Can I

too, Inglis?" "Me too!" "Me too, me too! Boys are okay too, right?" surrounded her. In no time at all, a crowd gathered.

"Of course, of course! Everyone who wants to hug Chris, form a line!" Rafinha immediately set to work at organizing them. She had no intention of stopping them at all. Well, if Inglis were in the opposite position, she'd be happy that everyone adored Rafinha so much they wanted to hug her. If Rafinha felt the same, she didn't object.

"Er... How about teachers, Rafinha? Should we line up as well?" Tentatively, a young demihuman woman with catlike ears and tail approached Rafinha. She had a proper and ladylike demeanor, dressed in the uniform of a knights' academy instructor.

"Miss Arles! Of course, go right ahead!" Rafinha nodded to her with a smile.

Arles had previously been the hieran menace assigned to the neighboring country Venefic. Along with Venefic's General Rochefort—possessor of a special-class Rune and also her lover—she had taken part in the raid on Chiral, but when Inglis had put a stop to that, the two had been captured. Rochefort had been deathly ill at the time, seeking to leave one final mark on the world. However, Inglis had fed him the meat of the ancient dragon Fufailbane, famed as a panacea, and he was now clearly improving. Just before vacation had begun, the two had been assigned to the knights' academy as instructors, and Inglis and her friends had already trained with them many times.

This appointment had, of course, been made with King Carlias's assent, but it was not merely a result of his magnanimity and desire to make the greatest use of the talent available. Inglis herself had also desired to fight against Rochefort and Arles again. Thankfully, their appointment as instructors meant she could do that as much as she wanted—with the implication that she had to, of course, make sure things didn't get out of hand.

King Carlias was indeed perceptive of the hearts of his subjects. And considering the planned establishment of a new order of knights, Inglis felt that he must have had other goals in mind as well. It was an assignment that carried many meanings.

Regardless, Inglis was simply satisfied that she could train with them.

“Thank you! Ross, you should line up too! She’s so cute!”

“C’mon, I’m hungry over here.”

Arles waved at a red-haired man. Rochefort was, of course, also wearing an instructor’s uniform; Ross Rochefort was his full name. To Inglis, this made him Mr. Rochefort, but Arles and Arles alone could call him Ross.

“You can eat anytime! But this is your only chance to hug Inglis when she’s so cute!”

“I guess? I mean, *she’s* gonna keep *us* after school for more training, so can’t I just do it then?”

“No, that’s not the right time! Come on, let’s line up!” It was unusual for Arles, normally so reserved and quiet, to be so insistent.

“Sheesh... Guess I’ll go along with it.” Rochefort shrugged in resignation, but he seemed to be inwardly pleased with the idea. Maybe it was just because Arles herself took the initiative so happily. No matter what he said, she was his soft spot.

Lately, he was kind to Inglis and her friends as well, always willing to participate in their practice. Maybe teaching was his calling.

“Then, you too, Mr. Rochefort! Chris! You’ve got another customer!”

“This isn’t a store...”

After hugs with everyone who wanted one, Inglis and Rafinha finally made it to their long-awaited breakfast.

Munch! Munch, munch! Munch, munch, munch, munch!

“Mmmmm, this is all so delicious! As far as I’m concerned, the cafeteria is home cooking!” Rafinha pronounced.

“Yes,” Inglis agreed. “It hasn’t been that long, but still, this takes me back.” As she perched on Rafinha’s knee, the two rapidly worked their way through the food piled on their table.

"Inglis may be tiny, but she still hasn't changed at all," Leone remarked, shocked at the sight.

"Indeed... I can't understand how all that food fits in her stomach..." Liselotte agreed.

Inglis's expression sharpened. "No, it's completely different!" She reached out her fork toward the plate of fried chicken in front of her, but she couldn't quite reach. As she stretched for it... *Yoink!* Rafinha extended her own hand and grabbed the chicken.

"Hey! Rani, that's mine!"

"Mm haa ah wahafeh! Ehho hu hehha ihhihahih vih! (Meals are a battlefield! And those who take the initiative win!)"

"Ugh... Rani, you meanie!" With such short arms now, Inglis had no chance when sitting in Rafinha's lap.

"Now, now, there's still plenty to eat," Leone soothed Inglis from across the table.

"But there's an order I wanted to eat them in! And right now, I want fried chicken!" Since Rafinha and Inglis had been close since childhood, their tastes and the order they preferred were very similar. With their tastes overlapping, conflict was bound to arise.

"Really? Then why don't you sit here? You'll have an easier time getting at things."

"I think I will, actually." Inglis hopped out of Rafinha's lap. "If you'll pardon me." She climbed up into Leone's.

"Go right ahead." Leone seemed to have wanted the company as well.

"Mmm... I still can't reach." Inglis had wanted to reach the fried chicken from the other side.

"I'll get it for you, Inglis."

"Thank you, Leone." She was kind. Inglis made a note to try to be in her lap for meals instead. From a positioning perspective, she would always lose to Rafinha when they reached for the same thing while she was in her lap. Reach

meant a lot in the tabletop battle. “Mmmm, this is delicious!” Inglis shoveled into her mouth the food Leone delivered to her. She could now keep up a breezy pace without any interference from Rafinha.

But there was one slight problem. “Umm...”

“Huh? What’s wrong, Inglis?”

“Oh, nothing.” Inglis turned to face Leone.

Smoosh.

Her face was buried in Leone’s chest. Not intentionally, but accidentally, of course. “S-Sorry, Leone...”

“Don’t worry about it.”

But there was, of course, no way Inglis could avoid worrying about it. Leone was fine with it because she was currently a little girl, but if Inglis had still been the old king, surely Leone would have shrieked in disgust. There was no mistaking that.

And the source of both Inglis’s problems was the same: Leone’s chest was too big for this. Whether she stretched out or leaned back, it got in the way. Inglis had no choice but to lean forward uncomfortably. Someone more shameless might have found the feeling heavenly, but that was not who Inglis was. And moreover—

Jiggle, jiggle, jiggle.

Something was wriggling in Leone’s chest! “Ah! Wait, stop! Eep!” she gasped. Rin was now poking her face out from Leone’s cleavage and shaking her head.

“Ah, you want Leone for yourself? Sorry for getting in your way.” With Inglis in her current condition, Leone had become Rin’s only home. The sudden arrival of Inglis’s face had disturbed her relaxation.

“Ugh... You’re so cute now, Inglis, but maybe it’d be better if you changed

back soon..." Leone sighed. As long as Inglis was like this, Rin would be clinging to her chest.

"I guess?" Inglis asked. "I wouldn't mind staying like this just a little while longer."

"That's terrible! We need to help her get back to normal!" Leone, a tear in her eye, looked at Inglis reproachfully.

"Ha ha ha... If you can. Rani changed back on her own. I'm sure I will soon enough."

"Then, why don't you sit here, Inglis?" Liselotte, next to Leone, patted her lap and invited Inglis.

"Sure, why not?"

"Of course! Go right ahead!" Liselotte beamed happily. "And of course, I'll get your food for you! ♪" She joyfully set about the task. This way, there was no fighting over food like with Rafinha, nor were there worries about positioning or Rin's presence like with Leone.



“Hmm. I think this may be where I can eat most calmly.”

“Oh, truly? Then why not spend all your meals with me, for now?” Liselotte happily stroked Inglis’s hair while hugging her. She was careful not to interfere with Inglis’s eating, so Inglis didn’t mind. It seemed Liselotte’s lap was the best choice for meals. “You were turned small too, right, Rafinha? A shame I missed it. I’d have liked to see it,” Liselotte bemoaned.

“Yes, and she was adorable. Extremely so,” Leone replied, smiling.

“It’s too bad I didn’t have a reason to visit Ahlemin.”

“It wasn’t all good. We saw some pretty terrible things while we were there,” Rafinha pointed out.

“You called them the undying, right?”

“Yeah. They were—how should I put it? Creepy. Disgusting. Not suitable discussion over breakfast.” Naturally, they had reported the incident to Ambassador Theodore and Principal Miriela when they were in Ahlemin. Those two surely would have informed Prince Wayne as well. With the aid of Ahlemin’s knights, an investigation was underway.

“For that reason as well, I wish I’d been present. It’s a shame I wasn’t there to help a friend in need.”

“Thank you, Liselotte,” Leone responded sincerely. Inglis and Rafinha nodded as well.

“Of course I’d want to help you. Anyway, these, er, undying... They’re quite rare, are they not?”

“Yeah,” Inglis said. “I think they’re from either a very unusual Artifact or Highlander magic.”

“But I’ve seen something quite similar myself,” Liselotte said, frowning.

“Huuuh?! Liselotte, you saw the undying too?!?” Rafinha arose with a start.

“I-I’m glad you’re okay then!” Leone put a hand to her chest in relief.

“Can you tell us what happened?” Inglis asked.

“Absolutely. I’ve only heard your stories, so I can’t be certain I saw an

undying, but..." With that caveat out of the way, Liselotte began to recount the events of her own vacation.



In the conference hall of the royal palace in Chiral, things had calmed down a bit from the festive air following the defeat of the Prism, and the palace was playing host to several days of meetings with grandees from across the country. The purpose was to discuss how to deal with Venefic and Alcard, which had attempted a joint attack on Karelia. Conveniently, the upper crust had already gathered to celebrate the defeat of the Prism.

Liselotte was in the capital escorting her father, Duke Arcia, who was an attendee. While he had resigned as chancellor, he still had vast holdings in coastal western Karelia, centered on the town of Charot. His forces numbered many able knights, but Liselotte had personally requested to be present. With her mother having already passed, and the two left alone, this was a chance for them to be together as a family.

On today's agenda was the fate of Venefic.

The current chancellor, Duke Riegliv, was leading the discussion. "Perhaps Alcard is a different story, having already sent a messenger of apology and lent aid at the battle with the Prism, but we cannot afford to show mercy to Venefic! They have invaded many times in the past, and many of our people have fallen victim to their attacks! Yet we heard nothing in the way of apologies—not even now, after their raid on the capital itself! By the reports from the Paladins, they were indeed the ones who unleashed the Prism!"

"However, Chancellor Riegliv, we were the ones who moved the frozen Prism to the border to begin with. It is quite possible that they took it as a provocation. We are not without fault, and it is I who must take the blame, as it was my suggestion," Prince Wayne said. His calm voice and closed eyes sounded as if he was remonstrating against Chancellor Riegliv's zeal.

Now, it was King Carlias's turn to pacify Prince Wayne. "Frozen as it was, it still brought forth magicite beasts and continued to wreak havoc on its surroundings. If it had set its eyes toward Venefic rather than the capital, we may well have ended up joining forces with them. The results were

unfortunate, and yet Inglis saved us. I do not cast blame on you, Wayne.”

“Yet I am shamed, Father.”

“I certainly do not mean to cast aspersions on you, your Royal Highness! Yet, there are many in my lands who lost their livelihoods, even their lives, to the Prismers’ attack!” Chancellor Riegliv insisted.

His lands were in the east of Karelia, including portions of the border with Venefic. In fact, he prided himself on possessing the largest holdings in the east. And it was an undeniable truth that those lands had suffered from the Prismers’ attack.

He continued, “I ask not as chancellor, but as a lord of lands bordering foul Venefic! Let us take back what once was taken from us! Thankfully, losses among our knights in battle with the Prismers were far fewer than foreseen. Let us strike with those forces at Venefic! Let us sever the roots of misfortune, past and future!” Chancellor Riegliv shouted, and his party of nobles raised their voices.

“Your Majesty! Prince Wayne! Chancellor Riegliv speaks the truth!”

“Our lands have suffered, and the people will not accept a failure to claim recompense!”

“Fortunately, we wiped out the ones that attacked Chiral! Their forces are weakened! This is our chance!”

“That’s right!”

A clamor arose in agreement with Chancellor Riegliv. Looking at them, Liselotte could see that many held land in the east. Venefic had invaded the region many times in the past, and the eastern lords traditionally held a strong hostility toward their neighbor. Recent events had brought that animus to a peak, Liselotte felt, observing the scene as she stood at the wall behind her father.

Would this mean war with Venefic?

She understood why Chancellor Riegliv and the others were so adamant in their insistence. Yet still, none knew when the next prism flow would fall, or

when the next Prismer would spring forth and attack humans. That hadn't changed. And in such a situation, war between humans of the surface seemed unwise.

Though to the lords of the east who had suffered their attacks, Venefic might be just as hated an enemy as the magicite beasts. Perhaps her own reluctance to support an attack sprang from her family's own interests in the west being spared. However, having fought with all her might—although belatedly—in the battle with the Prismers, she could not bring herself to agree that those who had survived there against the odds should be thrown into another battle, this time against Venefic.

"We didn't fight for the sake of another war..." she murmured. Bodyguards were strictly forbidden to speak on their own account here, but she couldn't help herself. The faces of those she had fought alongside drifted through her mind. Leone, Rafinha, Pullum, Lahti, all would agree. And then Inglis—

"Uh..." Here, she felt her head swim. Inglis, and Inglis alone, would be the sort to already be out the door with a call of, "All right! And be sure to assign me to the front lines!" Well, handling that could be left to Rafinha, so it was best not to think too hard about it. The most impressive thing about Rafinha, alongside her ability as a knight, was her ability to marshal Inglis into line.

Inglis stood out in terms of military prowess, intelligence, and even appearance. Her personality wasn't bad, and she was kind and considerate of those around her. However, no one was perfect, and Inglis was particularly inclined to leave aside matters of "right" and "wrong" when she saw an opportunity to hone her own skills. Left alone, she could go astray in the blink of an eye. It was Rafinha who could keep her on the straight and narrow, arm in arm with her.

"Young mistress, are you feeling all right? If you aren't, perhaps you could rest in the cloakroom..." The woman who spoke to Liselotte was an elegant woman who seemed to be in her midtwenties. She was Liza, captain of the knights of Charot, one of the Arcia fiefs. It was rumored that she was older than she appeared, but she refused to specify her exact age.

To Liselotte, she was the woman who had mentored her in the duties of

knighthood. Another reason Liselotte had insisted on escorting Duke Arcia was to spend some time with her.

“No, I’m fine. Thank you, though,” Liselotte answered with a smile before she turned her attention back to the debate underway.

King Carlias and Prince Wayne did not yet seem swayed toward war, but the clamor of the eastern lords in favor of attacking Venefic was beginning to put pressure on them. More and more voices called out in favor of Chancellor Riegliv’s proposal.

The only one who spoke to calm the rising furor was her own father, Duke Arcia. “I have to disagree with the chancellor.” As he broke his silence, all eyes were upon him.

“Duke Arcia! This may seem like someone else’s problem to you in the far west, but we have suffered! We must teach Venefic a lesson!” Chancellor Riegliv glared at Duke Arcia.

“Indeed, Duke Arcia!”

“Are you simply reluctant to devote funds and troops to the needs of us in the east?”

“Mere parsimony!”

The lords of the east erupted at once in support of Chancellor Riegliv.

“We need no troops from the domain of Charot! House Riegliv’s knights shall form the core of the expeditionary army! With support from the Paladins and Royal Guard, we shall suffice!”

“Ah, Chancellor Riegliv! Truly, you are a man of action!”

Even in the face of such overwhelming counterargument, Duke Arcia responded calmly, “The damage to the east was caused not by Venefic but by the Prismers. What can be attributed purely to Venefic is only that caused by their raid on the capital. And, of course, the capital is under the direct jurisdiction of the royal family. Should not our assessment of the ills they caused follow that of His Majesty and Prince Wayne?”

Chancellor Riegliv grunted. “Are you asking us to merely lick our wounds?!”

“No, I only point out your arrogance.”

“What?!” the chancellor screamed.

“What do you mean by that, Duke Arcia?!” his supporters yelled in unison.

“Before you demand we march on Venefic, should you not show some shame for your failure in allowing Venefic’s forces to pass through your lands and reach the capital? His Majesty could have lost his life. I do not find the transgression of placing one’s liege’s life in danger to be a light one.”

Chancellor Riegliv grunted.

“W-Well...”

“True, but...”

Duke Arcia’s remonstrative gaze and pointed remarks produced dismay among the hardliners.

Of those present nobles who agreed with Duke Arcia against the chancellor, many were from regions other than the east.

“Indeed, Duke Arcia is correct.”

“Even given the Prismers’ attack, this is a serious matter.”

King Carlias’s voice carried weight. “Enough. I declare what has passed has passed. Let there be no more questions.”

Duke Arcia bowed deeply. “I’m sure I speak for all your retainers when I offer my thanks for your generous treatment.”

“Who said you could speak for us?!” Duke Riegliv spat. “Your Majesty, I am truly apologetic!”

The lords of the east said as one, “We apologize!”

“Enough, enough! Let us focus on what is to come, not what has passed,” King Carlias announced magnanimously, accepting the apologies. The debate over how to approach the matter of Venefic continued, but the atmosphere had changed drastically. Duke Arcia’s skillful politicking had swiftly disrupted the mounting avalanche in favor of war. Seeing her father’s work up close made Liselotte both impressed and proud. Furthermore, not wanting to go to war, she

was glad that he stood against it.

King Carlias continued, “On that basis, I am reluctant to agree to the deployment of troops at a time when we should be focused on rebuilding... But I would like to hear Duke Bilford’s opinion. While Duke Riegliv’s knights would surely form the backbone of a force sent against Venefic, other forces would be required as well. In particular, the participation of those who distinguished themselves in the recent battle with the Prismers would be a must. There is no reason not to use their power. And if they were to be deployed, several of them are from Duke Bilford’s family.”

“That makes sense. Rafael, Miss Rafinha, and Miss Inglis are his close family. I would like to hear his piece as well.” Prince Wayne nodded, prompting Duke Bilford to speak.

“Ah, er!” Duke Bilford was flustered, not having expected to become the center of the conversation.

He might not be the best with formal debate, Liselotte thought. He’s more reminiscent of Rafinha than Rafael. She had met him briefly before today’s session, and found him to be a man with a sunny disposition.

“We of Ymir are loyal servants of the crown. If His Majesty and His Royal Highness call for it, we will stand against Venefic. I will not lie about that. However... As their father and uncle, I will remind you all that, prepared as they are to fight magicite beasts, they have not been trained to kill a human enemy and take their land. Of that, I have concerns. If not for Rafael, certainly for the girls.”

Hearing that, Liselotte agreed in regards to Rafinha, but not so much about Inglis. It was only a moment later that she realized Duke Bilford might have different concerns for each of them. If sent against Venefic, Rafinha could be displeased with her orders, or even be hurt—the same worries Liselotte herself felt. But in Inglis’s case, the concern was that she might take to it *too well*. Both were concerns. Whether Duke Bilford meant it that way, Liselotte wasn’t sure, but he was right. “Concerns” was an interesting word choice.

“Most importantly, those who survived the fierce battle with the Prismers must still be exhausted. Honestly speaking, I would like them to rest for a

while."

Prince Wayne nodded in agreement. "I understand. This is no assault by magicite beasts, no call to halt an enemy advance. It is a decision we make ourselves, so we must be quite careful."

Chancellor Riegliv's party gritted their teeth in frustration.

The prince continued, "However, it is also true that those of Duke Riegliv's lands, and the other people of the east, have suffered. It is reasonable for their lord to want to give them hope, to at least let them feel that the threat from Venefic has been eliminated. And I also understand their desire to redeem themselves after the disgrace of allowing the attack on the capital to pass by. That, also, is loyalty. It pleases me."

Prince Wayne's considerate phrasing allowed Chancellor Riegliv to regain a bit of momentum.

"I-Indeed, Prince Wayne! Please, understand that we came to our decision through our devotion to Karelia!"

"Father, may I perhaps offer a suggestion?"

"Very well. Speak."

"Yes. First, let us ask Chancellor Riegliv to begin organizing an army to assault Venefic."

"Ah!" Duke Riegliv and the other lords of the east had not expected this turn of events.

"There will be no need to rush. Move slowly with care as to suggest that the force will be many times larger than it in fact is."

"Hmm..."

"Meanwhile, we shall open negotiations with Venefic to discuss the matter. At a minimum, we will enter a long-term nonaggression pact and further encourage them to participate in the joint defense plans we intend to conduct with Alcard."

"And if they do not accept, then our hand is forced?"

"It would be best to put the people of the east at ease without shedding blood. If not...Chancellor Rieglov may have a point. I would like to work closely with Ambassador Theodore to pursue negotiations with Venefic. I would be pleased if you would permit me to do so."

It was a compromise plan between the use of force and peace. Considering the will of Chancellor Rieglov and the other lords of the east to fight, this might be the best solution. Prince Wayne would allow them to prepare for war while working his hardest to make sure that would be unnecessary. The threat of military preparations in the background would only ease negotiations.

"I see. Well, it has grown late. I would like you all to consider Prince Wayne's suggestion overnight. If there are any other suggestions, I will hear them tomorrow." King Carlias announced a recess, and the meeting adjourned for the day.

Liselotte, her father, and Liza rode back to the Arcia villa in a carriage. When her father was the chancellor, he had resided there for easy access to the palace. Duke Arcia liked quiet, and it was some distance from the palace, in a secluded locale. But as their carriage passed along the quiet, wooded road near the villa, conversation was abuzz inside as Liselotte told her story about the battle with the Prismers, the events in Alcard, and her friends at the knights' academy.

"I see... You must have gone through a lot, but it's wonderful that you've made good friends. Lifelong friendships are hard to find," Liza said.

"Yes, I'm glad I enrolled at the knights' academy!"

Liza smiled at Liselotte's beaming response.

Duke Arcia's reaction, however, was a bit different. "Indeed, you've gotten stronger, certainly, and you've made good friends. But I can't help feeling, knights' academy student or no, we've asked too much of you. Just hearing about it makes my stomach ache..." He had broken out in a cold sweat. Despite all appearances, he was an anxiously protective father.

Liselotte laughed. "Well, it was with the approval of not only Ambassador Theodore and Prince Wayne, but His Majesty himself as well. There's no need to worry."

"So even His Majesty and His Royal Highness are leaning on you... In any case, I'm proud that your exploits in the battle with the Prismers were honored. You've done well for Karelia."

"The knights of Charot were overjoyed to hear of your efforts, none prouder than I. It's my honor to have taught you the duties of a knight," Liza said.

The pats on the back from both Duke Arcia and Liza filled Liselotte with joy. "Thank you. I'll continue to do my utmost."

As she smiled, Liza frowned in worry. "But what I'm concerned about is the situation with Venefic. If it worsens and war breaks out, perhaps even you will be drawn into Chancellor Riegliv's expeditionary force..."

"I'm a bit worried about that as well. I was pleased when you reprimanded Chancellor Riegliv and the lords of the east as they became so passionate. Thank you."

"It was as much my own opinion as it was for you. Don't worry about it. Focus on your own growth," Duke Arcia said.

"Yes, Father."

"But might you have gotten on his nerves arguing directly against him like that? I'm worried that you may have made an enemy of Chancellor Riegliv. Perhaps it would have been better to leave that to Duke Bilford," Liza suggested.

"No, it should be no issue. He and I have never seen eye to eye, not since I was chancellor when the moving of the frozen Prismers to the east was approved. He resents me for not stopping that. Duke Bilford is sincere to a fault, so I don't want to draw him into politicking. And besides..."

"Yes?" Both women waited for him to complete his thought.

"You surely could tell that neither His Majesty nor His Royal Highness show much enthusiasm for an aggressive stance. They simply don't want to ignore Chancellor Riegliv and his party. Thus, it falls to the royal dukes, relatives of the royal family, to advance the crown's position. Royal dukes must support the royal family as their shadow, their shield. Remember that well, Liselotte."

“Of course, Father.”

“However, it is true that I may have been overzealous. I was pleased to see that His Majesty and Prince Wayne were in agreement, and I overstepped. Recently, the two have been at odds over how we should deal with Highland. I hope this is an opportunity for them to reconcile...”

Duke Arcia’s faint smile was met with a worried expression from Liza. “However, Your Grace, if I may point out... Will the people of Charot be rewarded for your efforts? By the information Lady Liselotte received from the Steelblood Front, the royal family had pledged both Ahlemin and our Charot in exchange for a hieran menace to replace Lady Ripple. Of course, in the end this did not occur, but still...”

“Liza...” Liselotte murmured.

“I believe someone close to Chancellor Riegliv was the source of that information. That was certainly his intent. As I mentioned earlier, we do not see eye to eye, and he fears that I will reclaim my position. He must have seen it as a chance to prevent that, permanently. I had heard that His Majesty had pledged Ahlemin and Nova, both of which are crown lands. That would be the most reasonable course of action. Though that’s not to say that there are no problems with it at all. Still, though. Chancellor Riegliv must have been trying to change the terms without His Majesty’s input.”

“I see... I understand now. My apologies for making assumptions.”

“I’m certainly glad to know that, though! I was concerned as we—” Before Liselotte could finish her sentence, she was interrupted by shouts from outside the carriage.

“Aaaaah?!”

“Who goes there?!”

“We’re under attack! Captain Liza! We’re under attack!”

Clang! Clang!!!

Outside, blade clashed on blade.

“What?! An ambush?!” Liza’s expression hardened at once.

“The first since I resigned as chancellor... I shouldn’t be surprised. They likely want objectors gone so they can push through their war with Venefic.”

“Father, then they’re—!”

“Politics only stays politics while one can remain seated.”

“Young mistress! I shall counterattack! May I rely on you to defend His Grace?!” Liza asked in a hurry.

“Yes, understood!” Liselotte replied.

“May fortune be with you, then!” Liza took her Artifact, opened the door to the carriage, and leaped out. She wielded an upper-class halberd, just like Liselotte. Its Gift was different, but the base weapon was the same, hence why she had been chosen to teach Liselotte.

“Father, I will lead you to safety! Give me your hand!”

“Of course!”

Taking her father’s hand, Liselotte activated her Gift as she led him outside. She flapped her pale wings vigorously and carried them both into the sky. This way, they couldn’t be directly attacked. As long as she was careful not to be hit from below, they would be fine. Certainly safer than staying in the carriage, anyway.

Liselotte surveyed the battlefield below. There were six or seven assassins, all wearing black hooded cloaks. They had spread out around the carriage, encircling it. One of the guards—of which there were three total, including Liza—had been wounded. If that was the extent of the gap in numbers, Liza could easily handle it.

“Bastards! Bare blades at me, and I will show no mercy!” With swift, precise movements, Liza rushed toward the foes in front of the carriage to cut them down. It was impressive, and as Liselotte had predicted, being outnumbered was not a problem. However, this was the first time she had seen Liza fighting in quite a while, and it differed from her memories. Before she enrolled at the

knights' academy, even though they both wielded halberds, Liselotte had felt that she couldn't stand up to her teacher—a feeling that was only reinforced when they sparred.

But now, her honest assessment of the battle unfolding in front of her was that Liza was no Inglis. That was all. Liselotte herself may not have been Inglis, who took abnormal pleasure in training, nor Leone, who trained intently as if she had no choice, but she herself had in her own way and for her own motivations learned a considerable amount. Her realization right now just might have been a reflection of that. Liselotte laughed, and an unforeseen smile rose to her face.

"Huh? What is it, Liselotte?" Duke Arcia asked.

"O-Oh, nothing! Nothing at all!" When she had free time later, she would have to see with Liza whether it was true.

The situation below had evolved. With Liza charging toward those who had appeared in front of the carriage, those behind turned their focus to Liselotte above. They were aiming at her not with Artifacts, but with small crossbows. As their targets were humans rather than magicite beasts, they seemed to have found no need for Artifacts or Runes. The assassins with whom Liza crossed blades to the fore were also armed with ordinary weapons. That meant they had been selected purely as assassins—with no thought to fighting magicite beasts—in a way that was easier to organize in terms of both supplies and personnel.

"But our lives are not so easily bought!" Liselotte yelled. Liza was about to overrun the foes before, yet those behind were ignoring that in favor of targeting Liselotte, even though they could have offered support and surrounded Liza. These were the decisions of those who aimed only to bag their mark, not to win and return home safely. The assassins must not have valued their own lives.

"Liselotte, evade them!" Duke Arcia called out to her as she floated, watching the assassins. He wanted her to use her Artifact's Gift to evade the oncoming bolt. Otherwise, they were in for trouble.

Until recently, Liselotte would have agreed on that course of action, but not

now. If a foe paused to aim, then your own target was fixed in place.

“No, Father! It’s fine!” The dragon-jaw tip of Liselotte’s halberd pointed toward the assassins.

Fssssh!

A fierce blizzard emitted from the point as it shone a pale blue. The storm cast down the assassins’ bolts and struck them where they stood.

“Oh?”

“See?” Liselotte began. “We can turn this around!” She swept her halberd from side to side, spreading the blizzard. It froze the assassins, stopping them in their tracks and easily blowing away their bolts. This was the power of an ancient dragon’s mighty breath. And with the assassins too busy aiming, they made easy targets. If anything, it was difficult not to hit them too hard with the dragon’s breath and shatter them. It was important to take them alive so that they could find the group’s client.

“Impressive, young mistress!” Liza had won the clash to the fore and turned her attention to the rear. With the assassins frozen by Liselotte’s blizzard, she was able to easily bowl them over.

That should finish things, Liselotte thought. It’s safe to land now.

“Liza is correct,” Duke Arcia said. “You’ve grown much in the short time we’ve been apart.”

“I have to disagree. That’s thanks to my Artifact. But it is an heirloom from my mother, almost a part of me... I suppose it could be considered my growth as well.” A soft smile broke out on her face.

Duke Arcia nodded. “I’m sure Charlotte would have loved to hear that.” Charlotte was Liselotte’s mother, who had passed away when she was young. Liselotte had inherited the Artifact halberd she had wielded when she was a knight.

Liza rushed over to her. “Young mistress, I thank you for your aid.”

“You’re quite welcome. Though I’m sure you would have been fine without it.”

“Thanks to you, we were able to repel them quickly. Is that some new power you’ve gained? It was wonderful.”

“Thank you. I’m happy to hear that.”

After praising Liselotte, though, Liza’s expression turned grim. “Well... We avoided striking their vitals, so let’s escort several of the survivors back and get them to tell us in whose employ they are.”

“Y-Yes... Indeed we should.” Liselotte didn’t like the idea of harsh interrogations, much less torture.

“Please understand, young mistress. Our very lives are at stake.”

“Indeed. I suppose I’m more suited to fighting magicite beasts.”

“That is for the best. That’s what Artifacts and Runes are for, after all.”

“Don’t overdo it, Liza. Good assassins never divulge their masters. And if it’s whom we think it is, they would have spared no expense. If no leads are forthcoming, we should at least grant them a quick death.”

“Understood.” Liza nodded, and approached the collapsed foes in front of the carriage.

As she did, Liselotte’s halberd jerked in her hands. “Eh...?” The dragon’s-jaw-motif point swung toward Liza, not through Liselotte’s will but entirely on its own. “What’s going on?!” It seemed as if it was about to spew forth a blizzard on its own accord. “Liza! It’s dangerous! Get back!”

“Ah!”

Just as Liza reacted to Liselotte’s warning, there was a scream.

“Grahhhh!” A collapsed assassin leaped up, rushing toward Liza with his blade at the ready. He was fast—faster than when they had first fought. He was wounded and bleeding, but he showed no effect from it. And his face was twisted into something inhuman, eyes peeled wide and fangs bladelike, like a beast’s.

“What?!” Liza gasped.

“What is that?!” Liselotte asked in shock.

Thankfully, Liza had reacted to the warning, and Liselotte’s halberd had a perfect angle on the rising assassin.

Whooooooooosh!

The blizzard shot forth, catching the assassin who had transformed as it passed. Whatever he was, he was no longer human. Nor was he a magicite beast, but perhaps he was something close. This time, Liselotte focused on her target, freezing the assassin completely.

“Thank you. Honestly, if you hadn’t warned me, I would have been in danger! I apologize!” Liza gritted her teeth in frustration.

“I-It was nothing! Simply by chance, but I’m glad you’re safe!” Liselotte hadn’t called out because she knew the assassin was about to leap up, simply because her Artifact had swung toward Liza. The power of the dragon lore must have sensed something abnormal in the assassin and reacted. Liselotte was uneasy at not understanding precisely why, but she was glad that it had saved Liza.

“Grr... Graaaaah!”

“Ah! He’s still moving?!” The frozen assassin, despite being frozen, continued to growl. As he tried to force his body to move, cracks appeared and he shattered into pieces.

“Wh—?! What’s going on?! That isn’t right!”

“They don’t appear to know pain or fear! It’s like they’re not even human anymore!”

“Strange, indeed.”

“Be careful, the others might be the same!”

Just as Liza warned Liselotte, the other collapsed assassins leaped up. “Grahhhh!” All of them were... Different, in the way the one before had been.

“But if you’re not taking us by surprise...” Liza began.

“Yes, let’s do this! I’ll take the lead!” Liselotte turned the blizzard on the rising assassins. It caught one, but the remaining two spread out and evaded. “They’re fast!” Their movements were swift. Liselotte swung her halberd around to chase them.

“No, young mistress! Keep it steady!” Liza called out. She had already rushed forth, getting ahead of one of the remaining two. Her halberd, thrust from the side, impaled the assassin, who was caught in Liselotte’s blizzard—no, forced into it.

“One left!” Liselotte announced.

“Leave it to me!” Amazingly, Liza used the first assassin as cover from the storm as she moved in on the other. Soon, she was close in with the remaining assassin. Of course, the blind spot used as a shield was left behind in the blizzard. Liselotte couldn’t see well due to the storm, but Liza must have wielded her halberd, and herself, quite well. Perhaps her thought that she may have caught up a bit with Liza was just a figment of her imagination.

As Liselotte thought to herself, Liza forced the last assassin into the blizzard. Frozen, the assassins struggled to move before breaking themselves apart. That was all of the ones up front. The ones behind had been frozen by Liselotte, and hadn’t joined in yet. Things would have been worse if they had all been able to attack at once. Liselotte and Liza had been lucky.

“Young mistress! Let’s attend to the rear!”

“Yes, understood!”

Liselotte and Liza nodded to each other and moved to clean up behind the carriage.



“In the end, we were able to drive them back safely, but in those circumstances, we had no choice but to finish them off. However, it does seem they were very similar to your descriptions of the ‘undying’ who attacked Leone.”

Inglis nodded in agreement. "That seems likely, yes."

"I'm still shocked that not just I, but my father Duke Arcia, was targeted..."

"I thought there weren't many undying. So why do they keep popping up?" Rafinha asked.

"No, we don't know they were after Duke Arcia," Inglis pointed out. "They might have been after you, Liselotte."

"Ah! Myself?!"

"Yeah. If we think of it as them being after you and Leone, things become clearer. You two have a lot in common."

"We do?"

"They do?"

"Yeah. You distinguished yourselves in the battle with the Prismers, and a lot of people know your names and what you look like now, right? I don't think Leone was targeted because of anything to do with Leon or the Olfas. If that was the case, why wouldn't it have happened sooner? And with it happening to you too, Liselotte, I think that's it. With them around both Leone and Liselotte, I think the target was Liselotte herself, not Duke Arcia."

"I...can't disagree," Liselotte said.

"So you're saying we don't know exactly why, but they're after us because of what we accomplished fighting the Prismers?" Leone asked.

"Hey, Chris. What about us?" Rafinha asked.

"Who's saying that no one was after us? Or maybe they thought they could romance us." Inglis hadn't noticed anything out of place when back home in Ymir, so she leaned toward the latter.

"Yeah, if they showed up and saw Jil and you fighting the way you did, they'd probably run away in terror," Rafinha remarked.

Or perhaps their young selves had made them unrecognizable.

"I'd have been happy for them to join in," Inglis said.

"Come on! Those poor assassins, forced into what you two had going on?"

“Anyway, we don’t know whether more undying might show up, so be careful.”

The other three nodded at Inglis’s suggestion.

Then, someone from outside the group called out to them.

“Er, excuse me! Sorry everyone, I just overheard, but... Undying? You say you saw undying?!” Arles asked with a serious expression on her face. She must have overheard as she’d been leaving the cafeteria.

“Oh, Miss Arles... Yes, over vacation Leone and Liselotte were attacked by undying!” Rafinha said.

“Where?!”

“Myself, at home in Ahlemin!” Leone answered.

“And I here in the capital!” Liselotte said.

“Miss Arles, do you know of anyone who can control the undying?” Inglis asked.

“Y-Yes!” Arles turned to Rochefort at her side. “Ross!”

“Oh, yeah, I think I know that guy.” Rochefort’s expression turned stern.

“Who?” Inglis asked.

“Maxwell. He’s the same rank as me. Venefic’s invasion of Karelia under the cover of the Prismers’ attack wasn’t limited to just us.”

“Ooh! So a Venefic general has an Artifact that can create and control undying?! I’d love to meet him!”

“Come on, Chris!” Rafinha protested. “That’s nothing to be happy about! It’s a big problem!”

Inglis laughed wanly.

“She looks like a sweet, innocent child, but nothing else has changed...” Leone remarked.

“I’ve never seen anyone like this.” Liselotte laughed wryly.

“I figured he went back to Venefic after we lost and the Prismers got taken out,

but I guess he's still skulking around Karelia... I don't know where all of my former men who came with us went." Rochefort's eyes went sharp. "I thought they just couldn't assimilate in Karelia and ran away, but he might have turned them into undying..."

"And those were the undying who attacked me in Ahlemin?" Leone asked.

"Could be," Rochefort responded. "But it's nothing for you to worry your little head about. You've gotta deal with what you've gotta deal with. If there's anyone to blame, it's me for not stopping Maxwell from turning them into undying." Rochefort's phrasing was casual, but he seemed to burn with quiet rage. He was very angry.

"Ross..."

"Mr. Rochefort..."

"Mr. Rochefort, can you describe General Maxwell to us, just in case?" Inglis asked.

"Yeah, sure."

But then, a loud voice echoed through the cafeteria. "Everyone, it's time for an assembly! Hurry and gather in the auditorium! Prince Wayne and Ambassador Theodore will be giving an address for the start of the new semester!" Instructor Marquez announced.

"Prince Wayne and Ambassador Theodore? Did they tell us that before?" Inglis asked.

"No, I hadn't heard they were attending," Arles said.

"Then this one must be pretty important."

"We can talk later. Student and teacher both, we can't show up late," Rochefort said.

The two seemed to be taking their duties surprisingly seriously.

Chapter V: Inglis, Age 16—New Semester, New Lifestyle (2)

And just as Inglis had expected, Prince Wayne had a very important announcement to make. After a short introduction, he moved on to the main point: the establishment of a new order of knights.

“I’m sure some of you have already heard the rumors, but I am pleased to announce that Karelia will form a new order of knights to stand alongside the Paladins and Royal Guard. They shall be called...the Rangers.”

“The Rangers...?” people echoed.

“Their duty will be to hunt down magicite beasts and protect people from their threat,” Prince Wayne continued.

“So, an order of knights devoted entirely to fighting magicite beasts, then,” Leone speculated.

“That means they won’t have to fight other people, right, Chris?” Rafinha asked.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“However, is it not already the duty of the Paladins to fight magicite beasts? What sets them apart?” Liselotte wondered aloud.

Prince Wayne’s next sentence answered that quickly. “That said, their orders shall extend beyond Karelia alone!”

“What!?” The other students were just as shocked as Rafinha and friends.

“The Rangers will know no nation or border. They will strive to protect all people from magicite beasts wherever they may be found! If a call for aid arises, they will go anywhere in this world! They will be knights in service, not to our country, but to all the people of the surface!”

“Everyone on the surface!?”

“Not in service to Karelia, but the whole world?!”

The tumult grew louder as listeners burned with passion. That certainly did distinguish the Rangers from the Paladins. In the end, the Paladins were a force formed to defend Karelia. Meanwhile, the Rangers, if intended to operate outside the country, would presumably conduct most of their missions in foreign lands, with domestic defense left to Rafael and the Paladins.

“The era of each and every person living on the surface being forced to fend for themselves has passed. The technology we have recently received from Highland allows us to quickly deploy overwhelming force whenever and wherever it may be needed. It would be unjustifiable to use that for the sake of only one country. Wherever a cry for aid is heard, the Rangers shall reach out their hands! For those who have as yet been unable to obtain Artifacts and live in fear of the Prism Flow, the Rangers shall go to your aid!”

Rafinha excitedly listened to Prince Wayne. “Does that mean if the Prism Flow falls on Alcard and strong magicite beasts appear, we get to go help them out?! Is that right, Chris?!”

Inglis laughed. “Yep, it certainly seems that way.” It seemed like Rafinha already had her heart set on joining the Rangers. It made Inglis smile. Prince Wayne’s phrasing cut directly to her sense of justice.

“That’s great! Wonderful! If Lahti and Pullum are ever in trouble again, we can help them out! And if anyone else is in trouble anywhere, we can go to them! Right, Leone?!”

“Yes! It’s true, with not just Flygears and Flygear Ports but a flying battleship, we should be doing everything we can!” Leone responded.

“And if that’s the case, Alcard would no longer have a reason to attack Karelia,” Liselotte noted. “If anything were to happen, they could just rely on the Rangers.”

A false-flag operation by Evel and his underlings that had devastated Leclair had led Alcard’s leadership to embark on a policy of building up Artifacts and, if possible, obtaining a hieran menace. However, unable to pay the required tribute to Highland, they had instead been offered the role of opening up a second front in a war between Venefic and Karelia—an offer that they’d

accepted. If the Rangers had existed then, they could have been called in to deal with the situation in Leclair.

An important note was that the Rangers had to be trusted to leave when their job was done. If there was concern that they would come and take land under the guise of defeating magicite beasts, no one would allow them entry.

“The Rangers will accept any who share these ideals, regardless of nationality. And my intent is that they eventually grow to be independent of Karelia. Those of all nations, banding together to become a shield which defends all nations... The town of Ahlemin, having finished its role of watching over the Prismers, is now being reborn as a base for their operations. And although it can’t happen immediately, beginning next semester the knights’ academy itself will relocate to Ahlemin, and the number of international students will be greatly increased in order to train knights who can become the core of the Rangers.”

“I see...”

It would be an order independent of any country with the duty of protecting people from magicite beasts no matter where they were found. Less of a third Karelian order, and more something completely different. A new concept of mutual defense in which all countries joined together to create a force, the Rangers, not bound to any in their defense against magicite beasts

This was the proposal that Karelia now spearheaded. It would be greatly advantageous for countries like Alcard, which lacked the strength to defend against magicite beasts. Even if their forces were weak, the Rangers could protect them. From the perspective of the surface as a whole, concentrating Artifacts and the knights who could wield them into a single mobile force was a more economical use of both weapons and warriors rather than maintaining independent defenses. The time spent in garrison would be reduced.

“It boils down to the surface being able to defend itself more effectively with limited Artifacts and Flygears. I’m sure that will make Highland willing to accept it as well,” Inglis said.

“And that’s a good thing, right, Chris? Right?”

“Yeah. It means I’ll get to fight any Prismers that shows up, no matter where it goes.” Inglis grinned and laughed as she gave a cheer. “All right!”

King Carlias would likely turn to her no matter where a Prismen appeared in Karelia, but the idea of expanding her sorties worldwide was a dream come true.

“Well... That’s not really what I meant, but I’m sure it is for you. Sorry for asking.” Rafinha sighed.

“Fortunately, our neighbor to the north, Alcard, understands the merit of a defensive pact centered on the Rangers and is willing to accept their presence,” Prince Wayne said. “Thus, we will strike while the iron is hot, and the Rangers will immediately begin patrolling over Alcard using their flagship as a way of establishing a track record. I hope the world over will come to understand the ideals that drive the Rangers.”

Alcard itself was diplomatically obligated to Karelia after its conduct in the recent war. They probably didn’t particularly have much choice over whether to accept the Rangers. A plan like the Rangers which crossed national borders required trust and a proven track record. Since there was no precedent, it was difficult for any country to accept the idea *ex nihilo*. Without actual examples of how it could benefit them, the idea could not spread. But Alcard would cooperate to create that example.

A sudden proposal would not have been accepted; were circumstances not what they were, Alcard wouldn’t allow another force into its borders. Inglis wondered whether Prince Wayne and Ambassador Theodore had already been planning to create such a group and had taken this chance to put it into action. It was certainly a unique opportunity.

“However, we cannot spare many of the Paladins or the Royal Guard. If we neglect our own defense, we will not be able to gain the acceptance of the people. Thus, it falls to you to raise the flag of the Rangers. Someday, the Rangers will grow to include people from across the world—but you will lay its foundation. Some of you in particular have already acquitted yourselves admirably at the incident in the capital or the battle with the Prismen in Ahlemin. You are the core of the Rangers, and I pray that you understand our goals and choose to cooperate! I beg of you!” Prince Wayne bowed deeply to the students from his position on the podium.

A wave of applause swept through the crowd.

“Prince Wayne and Ambassador Theodore are both so amazing! They must have thought so much about what would really benefit a lot of people!” Rafinha looked at Prince Wayne and Ambassador Theodore beside him as she applauded enthusiastically.

“Yes... If we can help, we’d love to!” Leone said.

“Protecting all the people of the world... This is a chance to put our ideals into practice!” Liselotte’s eyes were shining brightly.

Principal Miriela, who also shared the podium with Prince Wayne, stepped forward in front of the students. “In other words, what we’ve previously called ‘special extracurricular activities’ are now duties with the Rangers, and now we’ll be wearing two hats: studying at the academy and protecting the world! Let’s do our best, everyone! Can I get a cheer?”

“Yeah!” The students smiled and cheered.

Rafinha was among them, and so was Inglis, of course, smiling and pumping her fist. “Ha ha ha ha... This’ll be tons of fun. Ha ha ha...” She was grateful for the chance to hunt Prismers no matter where in the world they appeared. And there were other possibilities as yet unseen.

“Chris, you’re the only one looking forward to whatever you’ve got cooking in your brain!”

“Nothing wrong with that. After all, if a Prismers shows up, we *will* have to take it down.”

“Y-Yes,” Liselotte hesitantly agreed. “Inglis and Miss Arles’s help will be indispensable, so it’s fortunate that they’re enthusiastic about the prospect.”

Eris and Ripple, still with the Paladins, likely wouldn’t be able to ride along with the Rangers; Arles on the other hand, as an instructor at the knights’ academy, could. In fact, it was possible that she and Rochefort had been recruited to the academy with this in mind, not just as a reward to Inglis. If they had been assigned to the Paladins or Royal Guard, they might have ended up fighting against Venefic, which would be difficult for them and might be taken as a provocation by Venefic. On the other hand, being assigned to the knights’

academy and then to the Rangers meant their foes would be only magicite beasts. Plus, because their duty would be to the people of all countries rather than just Karelia's, it could even be seen as fighting for Venefic.

It was also a commitment to the principle that all who shared that ideal could join. And, in terms of raw power math, while Inglis had defeated the Prismers, she hadn't done it alone, but with the aid of the hieran menaces. If they were expected to fight Prismers, Arles's presence was vital at this point in time.

Inglis had to conclude that both from a perspective of overall strength and from that of representing the Rangers' ideals, this was the ideal assignment for the pair. It really did make a lot of sense.

"By how Liselotte described things, neither His Majesty nor Prince Wayne seems to desire an attack on Venefic, so... It seems like they want to use the Rangers as leverage for cooperation in dealing with magicite beasts and a mutual nonaggression pact. First of all, Venefic only attacked Karelia because their land was so barren, making it difficult to afford sufficient Artifacts. They probably want to express that it isn't necessary to attack us, communicating that through actions rather than words."

"So you're saying the key to peace with Venefic is in our hands, then," Liselotte commented.

"Exactly. Let's use what's available and get to work. If we don't, Chancellor Riegliv and the lords of the east will have their expeditionary army ready, and we won't be able to hold back the domestic pressure any longer."

"I see. Yes, Inglis, that certainly seems to be correct."

"And if negotiations fail and it does come to war with Venefic, this might also be a way to protect the knights' academy," Inglis elaborated. "The Rangers could conveniently 'be on a mission,' and take refuge in Alcard or some other country and not have to participate."

Leone nodded. "I'm grateful they put that much thought into it. If there were to be a war not just between people of the surface, but one in which we were the aggressors, I'd have some resistance to the idea of joining in."

"Rather than that, let's work hard to make sure things stay peaceful with

Venefic!" Rafinha declared.

"Yes! That's right, Rafinha!"

"Let us work together to make it so!" Liselotte agreed.

As they nodded in agreement, Principal Miriela called out to them. "And that concludes our assembly! Ah, Inglis, Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte, could you see me in my office?" She seemed to have some separate message for the four.

"Just us?" Rafinha asked. "I bet it has to do with the Rangers! All right, let's do our best!" Rafinha was pumped up and filed out of the auditorium with exuberance. Leone and Liselotte followed, nodding.

Inglis smiled watching them, but her smile was mixed with a wince. *If this goes well, will it really lead to peace? When the countries bordering Karelia each accept the Rangers' activity, what will happen?* Those were the questions which brought forth her expression, despite the fact she hoped for peace as well.

Rochefort called out to Inglis, who had lagged behind Rafinha and the others. "Hey. Guess that's how it is. Prismers are gonna be your problem, so take good care of Arles."

"Let's do our best, Inglis!" Arles smiled and reached out her hand for a shake.

That, on the other hand, was something Inglis could smile about. "Mr. Rochefort, Miss Arles. Indeed, let's... But in any age, adults are cunning, aren't they? Ha ha ha..."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean? I'm a teacher, so I guess I'm supposed to hear your concerns out," Rochefort said.

"They all only say the good parts. I'm a little worried that it may hurt Rani and the others' kindness and sense of justice."

"What do you mean by that, Inglis?" Arles asked, a worried look on her face. A hieran menace's age couldn't be judged by her appearance, but Arles was definitely less experienced than Eris or Ripple. Her personality might have actually fit her appearance.

"Let's say Rani and I and the others work hard, the Rangers contain magicite beast attacks, and the neighboring countries, including Venefic, sign on. Then

what?"

"If everyone joins hands... The Rangers will become a shield for people who have been unable to protect themselves, and things become more peaceful?"

Arles's interpretation was the same as Rafinha's. It was a bit young, a bit purehearted. Inglis thought Eris and Ripple would have thought about it more along the lines that she did.

"In terms of the relation between people of the surface and magicite beasts, true. However, this is also a move being pushed by Ambassador Theodore—that is to say, Highland's Triumvirate. If Venefic accepts the Rangers and cooperates, that is nothing less than a move to peel them away from the Papal League. The same is true for other countries with a closer relationship with the Altar. So while the concept of the Rangers may appear to be a peaceful, idealistic initiative between countries of the surface, seen from Highland it is an extremely aggressive and dangerous attempt by the Triumvirate to strip the Papal League of their territory. The more successful the plan for the Rangers is, the more the Papal League will be provoked, and what awaits is a decisive violent confrontation. And first to face the League's wrath will surely be the Rangers."

"Ah! So you're saying no matter how hard the Rangers try, they won't lead to peace?"

"No, I wouldn't go that far. It will reduce the threat from magicite beasts, and that in itself could be called a step toward peace. But other threats will increase, and the failure of anyone to mention that was what I consider cunning. Then again, I'm not hesitant to confront the Papal League directly, so I don't mind. Ha ha ha..."

Just as Dux Jildegrieva said, the conflict between the Triumvirate and the Papal League is deepening. A showdown might be inevitable at this point, and this only serves to hasten it. There's no mistaking it. The harder I work, the sooner it will come, so I guess I should do my best!

"I-Inglis..." Arles seemed a bit taken aback by Inglis pronouncing doom with an indomitable smile.

"It's just... Like I said, I'd prefer to make sure this doesn't cause any grief for

Rani and the others. They're still innocent kids."

"Yes... Yes, they are. They really are..."

Watching, Rochefort sighed. "Hey, c'mon. Arles may be a hieran menace, but aside from that, she isn't much different from them. I'd appreciate it if you didn't scare her. But you are a very clever student. Your calmness and thought process are exceptional." He stroked Arles's hair reassuringly.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Rochefort." Inglis bowed politely.

"Well, I agree with you, but it's not really something we can do anything about from down here in the mud, is it? All we can do is watch while the ambassador does his thing and be ready for when it decisively breaks down. When it does, that's when we put our lives on the line."

"Then, to prepare for when push comes to shove, shall we double up on after-school training?"

"You're a real snake in the grass, aren't you. Can we pretend I didn't just say that?"

"Let's practice, Ross! We have to. After all, we're supposed to teach her!"

"I think she's gotten more than enough of the teacher-bullying she calls 'training' with us."

"Absolutely not! We will do whatever it takes to get these students ready!"

Inglis chuckled in amusement. "Thank you, Miss Arles, Mr. Rochefort."

"Chris! Where'd you go?! C'mon, let's go to the principal's office!" Rafinha, noticing Inglis's absence, turned back around and picked her up. "All right, here we come, principal's office! Then the Rangers, then Alcard! We might get to see Lahti and Pullum again!"

"Right. Let's go, Rani."

"If you'll excuse us!" Leaving Arles and Rochefort with smiles, Inglis and Rafinha set off for the principal's office.

Before long, a cry echoed from that very place.

"Huh?! We don't get to join the Rangers?!" Rafinha's disappointment was

palpable.

“Principal Miriela, is there some kind of problem with us?!” Leone asked.

“Please, reconsider! We’d simply love to join!” Liselotte protested.

In response, Miriela waved her hands in a dissembling manner. “Er, ah, no, it’s not like that at all. We’d love for you to join, but right now we have an even more important task for you than joining the Rangers in Alcard. Isn’t that right, Theodore?”

The ambassador was also present in the office and nodded intently when his name was called. “Yes, absolutely... I’m sure it will be an important experience for all of you.”

“So what are we supposed to do?”

“It concerns Lady Eris. Arrangements have been made for her to be examined in Highland, and she’ll be leaving in a few days. We’d like you to accompany her as guards.”

“Oh! So we get to go to Highland with Eris?!” Inglis asked. That was a fascinating prospect. She could see Highland’s weapons and technology with her own eyes, and if she was lucky, maybe even hope to see their strength up close. She could even learn about some technology that would help in her recent obsession with modifying Artifacts.

And it would be nice if there was a weapon there that was a match for Dux Jildegrieva, though she wasn’t holding out hope for that—maybe something like the mechanical ancient dragon that Evel had transformed Fufailbane into.

“So we get to go to Highland?! Incredible!” Rafinha’s eyes shone with curiosity.

“That’s right!” Leone agreed, nodding. “This will be an extremely valuable experience.”

Liselotte nodded as well. “Indeed, it’s an opportunity we normally wouldn’t be very likely to get even if we pursued it.”

“I tagged along with Prince Wayne on a trip to Highland back when he studied there, and for better or worse, it will definitely broaden your perspective,”

Principal Miriela said. “I think there’s no reason not to go if you have the chance. Who knows when you could go next?”

“Besides, while you’ll be termed ‘guards,’ there will be no danger,” Ambassador Theodore pointed out. “You can think of it more like a short exchange trip.”

“But I want danger!” Inglis proclaimed. “Eris will be getting checked out at the home base of the mechanator, one of the Triumvirate, right?! I’d love to take part in testing the combat performance of a superweapon that rivals Dux Jil or something! By all means!”

“Ha ha ha... I suppose,” he said.

“C’mon, Chris, don’t get too excited! You don’t want to embarrass Ambassador Theodore!” Rafinha chided Inglis.

“Well... I suppose that while Inglis still says Inglis things, we can hope that her being smaller and cuter than normal makes it less jarring...” Principal Miriela laughed wryly.

“I’m shocked the dux personally visited the surface to challenge Inglis to a bout. I suppose it is rather like him, though... Anyway, thanks to his support, we were able to obtain permission for you all to visit Highland,” Ambassador Theodore said.

“Yes, I’m glad he visited Ymir,” Inglis said.

“Though it was Jil who broke Eris’s swords to begin with,” Rafinha pointed out.

“That was because I chose the wrong way to fight him... So at the very least, I need to stay with her until she’s back to normal.”

“Yeah. I’m sure she’d be lonely if she was sent up to Highland alone.”

“And, I have another request,” Ambassador Theodore began, a serious expression on his face.

Inglis turned back to him. “Another?”

“What is it?” Rafinha asked. “Anything we can help with?”

“Yes. It’s about Rin... About Cyrene.”

Rin was currently peeking out from Leone’s cleavage. With Inglis so small now, she wasn’t exactly a good fit, and Leone was left to handle Rin all by herself. Because of that, Ambassador Theodore couldn’t exactly look at her directly, and instead took noticeable pains to look away as he continued.

“I’d like you to show her to the Highland technicians taking care of Eris. Miriela and I haven’t been able to get anywhere... But the technicians there are more talented than I am, and I would like their input.”

“So if we show Rin to them, there might be a way to change her back?!” Rafinha asked.

“To be honest, I’m not sure...but we may find something that could open up new possibilities.”

“So your attempts have stagnated a bit...” Inglis said.

“Indeed. I can’t deny there’s a significant gap between our capabilities here and what is possible in Highland—especially with the facilities available to the mechanator. If we could possibly make use of those... However, I’ll ask you to take care not to draw the mechanator’s attention. And do not tell him that Cyrene has survived in this state.”

“The mechanator... He’s your and Cyrene’s father, right?” Rafinha asked.

“Yes. I don’t know what he might do if he were to find out what happened to her. So please, take care that he does not.”

“We’ll do our best! I’m sure we’ll find a way to turn Rin back!” Determined, Leone nodded and clenched her fist. She currently bore the burden of Rin’s squirming alone, so Inglis understood her enthusiasm.

Jiggle, jiggle, jiggle!

Rin dug in, and Leone’s chest began to shake, as if she was trying to say, *Don’t treat me like an inconvenience!*

“Eek! Stop, Rin! I told you, not there!” Leone shouted.

“I... I’m terribly sorry she’s putting you through so much trouble.” Theodore’s expression was extremely apologetic.



“No, no, it’s no trouble at all! We’re fine!” Rafinha announced.

“You have no room to talk!” Inglis and Leone replied in unison.

“Sheesh!” Inglis continued. “You only get to say that because she doesn’t do anything to you.”

“Yes, exactly,” Leone agreed. “This is terrible.”

“Oh, come on, it’s fine. She wouldn’t even know they were there if you two didn’t keep showing them off.”

“We absolutely do not!” the pair shouted loud enough to echo outside the principal’s office.

In any case, Inglis and her friends had a new destination: Highland.

Extra: After-School Combat Training

“Yaaaaah!”

On the grounds of the knights’ academy, after class let out, a large round shield bore down on Inglis, accompanied by a woman’s battle cry. The shield was large enough to almost completely block Inglis’s view of her foe, and it carried enough momentum to easily crush her tiny body.

Which is exactly what I want!

“Haaaah!” Thrusting her hands forward, she met the shield up close. The weight of it pressing down on her felt great. This would be a test of strength.

“Ngh! You may be cuter now, but your strength hasn’t changed at all!”

The face that peeked over the shield was framed by the catlike ears of her instructor Arles, one of the hieran menaces Inglis had met. All hieran menaces could bring forth the weapons they transformed into: twin blades for Eris, a gun for Ripple, a spear for Sistia, and armor for Tiffanyer. Arles transformed into a shield, so that was what she could summon for herself. Although Arles was the most mild and reserved hieran menace Inglis knew, her fighting style was a physical one, involving charges and jabs with a shield almost as large as she was. Perhaps she was physically stronger than Eris and Ripple.

“No, Miss Arles, I wouldn’t say I can fight as well as I did.”

When put into practice, the difference in Inglis’s abilities was obvious. Her older body was physically stronger than her child one. Arles’s shoves pushed her back much more than they would have.

Whenever Arles could find the time, she joined Inglis for after-school combat training. Sometimes she did so with a hint of amazement or a strained laugh, but she’d never once said she didn’t want to. That was because, to her, it was a way of thanking Inglis for her help, and it was also a teacher’s duty. Inglis, therefore, had taken what she could get, and they had trained together many times even before vacation. And she was able to judge how her strength had

declined using Arles's charges as a measure.

"I'd wanted to overwhelm you today, but—eek!" Arles screamed as Inglis hoisted her, shield and all, off the ground.

"Haaaah!" The tiny Inglis threw Arles high into the air. It was a physical feat that didn't match her young appearance.

If Arles slammed straight back down, she would have left quite an impact, but despite wielding a heavy shield, she was extremely nimble on her own. "I'm not done yet!"

She twisted in the air to right herself, releasing her shield and doing a somersault, before propelling herself downward off it. The large shield's weight could be used to gain momentum. It was a bold choice to abandon her shield for an attack, but the increase in momentum was proportionate.

"Yaaaah!" Arles's kick met Inglis's crossed arms. It couldn't break through them, but it did push Inglis back a significant distance.

"So heavy!" Inglis's hands tingled.

A full-force jump kick from a hieran menace left a mark. Arles had dropped her chosen weapon to use it as a springboard for a kick, leaving her wide open.

This was a perfect chance for a counterattack, one might think—but then one would be wrong. As Arles landed after her jump kick on Inglis, her shield was already back in her hand. Eris and Sistia had the special ability to twist space and deliver blows across a distance. For Arles, that manifested as being able to draw her shield into her hand from afar. That was why she could fight so boldly by discarding it.

"Here comes more!" Spinning around, Arles flung her shield toward Inglis. Not sideways, but fully vertical, with its face aimed directly toward her. It had been thrown dexterously. The approaching shield was so large that it filled Inglis's vision from her lower viewpoint.

But how powerful will it be? It would be more deadly if rather than tossing it in such an inefficient way, she flung it normally, like a discus. Therefore, this isn't intended to directly attack me, but to blind me.

In her small child's body, the large shield blocked her view almost completely. The actual attack would likely be from another direction.

So, I'll hold back until the last possible moment, and then turn on her!

"...Ah! Above! Haaah!" Inglis saw something flit across the upper edge of her vision.

Now I intercept Arles's attack.

Inglis immediately leaped high. At the same time, she wound up a kick to intercept, but something was wrong.

"Wh—?! It's just clothes!" It wasn't Arles in the air up there, just the instructor's uniform she'd been wearing.

"Got you!" Inglis immediately felt someone grab her legs. It was, of course, Arles who had caught her. Since she'd stripped off her upper garments, she was wearing only revealing lingerie. "Like this! Hup!"

Inglis was swung toward the ground by her legs. "That's the stuff! Haaaah!"

Aether Shell! Inglis's hands hit the ground as if she was doing a handstand. She'd activated Aether Shell and stopped the momentum of Arles's attack with her arms.

"Ngh! That was close!" Realizing this, Arles let go of Inglis's legs and leaped backward to gain some distance.

Inglis also jumped up using her arms, somersaulting and returning to a normal stance. "That's, er, certainly a bold tactic, Miss Arles..." Inglis hadn't expected her to strip off her clothes and use them as a decoy. It had been an effective tactic, one which had caught her completely by surprise. But she felt extremely guilty looking directly at Arles's exposed skin.

"I-I suppose. I just wanted to give you some good training while I still can... And when I realized I could outsmart you like that, they were the only things I had for a decoy. But it is a bit embarrassing..."

Tomorrow, Inglis and her friends would leave for Highland. Arles, meanwhile, would be heading for Alcard to lead her students in their new role as the Rangers, so they wouldn't be able to train together for a while. Arles had

thought long and hard about what last few things she could teach Inglis.

Inglis felt grateful for the dedication Arles showed, but also a bit apologetic. Arles was extremely kind and devoted to her students, but she was also perhaps a little too self-sacrificing. That trait sometimes led her to the most unusual behavior with no regard for herself. Inglis imagined this behavior made Rochefort worry about her, or maybe it was part of what attracted him to her.

“I... I’m sorry I went that far...but it really did catch you completely off guard, so I think it was good training.”

“Oh? That’s good. Hold on a second, though, we can finish this conversation after you get dressed.”

“Err... Yes. I’d appreciate that.” Arles picked up her uniform and put her arms through its sleeves. “Ah, but let’s not tell Ross about this, okay? He might get mad.”

“Of course, Miss Arles.”

However, it was not to remain their secret. “Too late!” someone shouted.

A face peeked out from behind Arles.

“Eeek! R-Ross?!”

“Showing off that much skin... Have you no shame, Arles?”

“S-Sorry. I thought it would be good training for Inglis...”

“I apologize, Mr. Rochefort, for pushing Miss Arles so hard.”

“Well, we do kinda have to go hard now. It seems that it was good training for you anyway.”

“I’m sorry for troubling you.” Inglis bowed politely. “Plus, we’re both ladies, so I don’t think it’s that big of a deal...right?” Inglis wasn’t fully sure whether, with her own past, it was something that should be let go. She wondered how Rochefort would view this situation if he knew the truth.

“Good thing our guests are women too.” Rochefort turned back around to face Eris and Ripple.

“Eris, Ripple!”

"I was told I'd be escorted from here tomorrow, so I was recommended to stay here tonight," Eris said.

"And I came to see her off! I'm glad Inglis wasn't just bullying one of us by making her take her clothes off," Ripple teased.

"I was just on my way back from calling on these two. Seems like this was good timing," Rochefort said.

Inglis remembered Rochefort had wanted her for something before she started training with Arles, but she'd passed it up because she already had plans. He must have gone to visit Eris and Ripple.

Arles greeted Eris and Ripple with a polite but nervous bow. "H-Hello! Pleased to meet you! I'm Arles! I'm sorry I never introduced myself earlier! Apologies for causing so much trouble for you at the battle on the border!"

That must have been what Rochefort meant by "good timing." It was a chance for Arles to meet Eris and Ripple. Now that Inglis thought of it, Rochefort always took such pains for Arles's sake. He was dedicated enough to have charged all the way to the capital with his last few breaths for her sake, so this wasn't surprising at all.

"What's past is past. Thanks to her," Eris said while glancing at Inglis, "we kept losses to a minimum, and now we're working together, so... If anything, we should have welcomed you earlier. I'm Eris. Pleased to meet you." Smiling, she extended a hand to Arles.

"Of course!" Arles said.

As she shook Eris's hand, Ripple took her other one and jerked it up and down energetically. "Me too! I'm Ripple! That was you who I heard over telepathy before, yeah? That's great! Finally, another demihuman!"

"Yes, it's good to see you, Lady Ripple!"

"Just Ripple's fine. And I'll just call you Arles, no stuffy titles, okay?"

"S-Sure, Ripple!" Arles smiled happily.

"You can speak casually with me as well. No need for formalities," Eris added.

"Sure, Eris!"

The acceptance of her seniors put Arles at ease. She had never even met another hieran menace before, and befriending people who were like her was an encouraging experience.

“Hey, hey, Arles. Mind if I touch your ears?” Ripple asked.

“Go right ahead.”

“Thanks. So they really are cat ears... Guess that makes you one of the cat-eared demihumans?”

“Yes, that’s right. And you have dog ears?”

“Yeah. But I’ve never seen any of us with cat ears before... I’d heard you were already wiped out...”

“Huh?! But some people in my village had dog ears... Though I don’t think there are any of us left other than you or me now...”

“What might that mean, Ripple?” Inglis asked.

“It seems like Arles and I are from different generations from before we became hieran menaces. I’m not sure how long apart, but she probably came first, and me later. Before I became one, I remember being told that we were the last of the demihumans. As far as I knew, we were all turned into magicite beasts by the prism flow...”

“My group did keep getting caught in it and losing people. I suppose that is what happened afterward...” Arles said.

“That’s just what the prism flow does to us demihumans, so...I can’t see any other way it could have turned out. We were just washed away by it. It’s hard to accept that as our fate, but...”

“Yes, indeed... It has been difficult.”

“Does it take that long to become a hieran menace?” Inglis asked Eris and the others.

“We were put to sleep during the process, so I can’t say for sure, but I have the feeling it differs a lot from person to person. I’m sure there were many who were only put to sleep, not going through with the procedure... But when one is needed, surely one of them will be chosen?” Eris said.

"I saw a lot of other sleeping girls. I wonder what happened to them, how they're doing now... I don't know. When I awakened, I immediately got sent to the surface," Ripple said.

"With a large enough collection of samples, try enough and one will work. It seems like only a small number of them end up as hieran menaces," Arles said.

"We were each very lucky," the three said as one.

After a pause, Inglis said, "Doesn't sound like the trip up to Highland is all fun and games, then."

"That's right," Eris agreed. "I'm honestly not that familiar with the details...but I think you should steel yourself for what you're going to see. It will definitely be an eye-opening experience. I'm sure that's why Miriela and Theodore chose to send you there."

"Really. I kinda hope it doesn't shock you too much, but... You know, it's not really somewhere I'd recommend." Ripple looked a bit conflicted.

"I'm looking forward to it, though," Inglis said. "Just imagining all of Highland's most powerful defensive weapons and deadly creatures somehow going berserk and attacking me all at once excites me."

Eris sighed. "You child, always stirring the pot..."

"Ha ha ha, well, that's Inglis for you," Ripple pointed out. "But aren't you worried, Inglis? Like for Rafinha and the others?"

"Yes," Eris agreed. "I feel like it would have been better with just me and you."

"Nope! I don't want Rani and me to spend so long apart! I'm her squire, so it's only a given that I should be by her side!" Inglis said.

"I... I suppose I expected you to say that... I'd imagine that's why the principal included her and the others as well."

"So then where's Rafinha now? Since you're supposed to be by her side?" Ripple pointed out.

"It's an emergency situation. She was kept after class for added lessons. She didn't score well on the surprise exam after vacation."

"Ha ha ha, well that definitely sounds like an emergency," Ripple said.

"She should be just about done, and she'll probably come looking here after... But enough about that! Since we're all together, why don't we get some practice in?"

"Eh? With all of us?!" Eris asked.

"You want to fight four-on-one?!" Ripple asked.

"Of course, if I have the opportunity! How often do I get the chance for great practice like this?!"

Three hieran menaces and a top-tier knight with a special-class Rune! I couldn't line up opponents like this if I tried! she thought in excitement.

Arles turned to Eris and Ripple. "W-Well? Would you two like to join in?"

"Well, I don't really mind," Eris said, hesitating a bit. "But I can't use my blades right now, so I'll only be bare-handed."

Ripple looked askance. "But if all four of us lost at once, that would be kind of... I mean, I wouldn't want to tell anyone, and it would be embarrassing for us hieran menaces..."

"That's not true, Ripple. I don't think I've ever seen anyone stronger than Inglis... And she'll be wielding us in the end, so we're the ones who need to train harder so we're not a burden on her."

"Wow, Eris! I can't believe you're that hyped up about it! Do you have a fever? Did your weapon being damaged do something to your personality?" Ripple theatrically pressed her hand to Eris's forehead.

"Absolutely not! Just... If we want things to keep going like they have, we can keep going like we have...but if we want change, we need to change ourselves first."

"Well, if you're that motivated, Eris, I don't see a problem with it."

Rochefort laughed. "Well, I have to assert my authority as a teacher sometimes. Today's a schoolyard four-on-one, and I'll get to try out this new gear I've been gifted. This time we're gonna win." He grinned, just like Eris and the others had.

“New gear?” Inglis asked.

“Yeah, this.” Rochefort showed Inglis a familiar Artifact.

“That’s...Dragon Claw?! His Majesty wielded that!”

It was an Artifact well beyond others, one of a pair with Rafael’s Dragon Fang. While Dragon Fang carried the power of red dragon lore, Dragon Claw used blue dragon lore. It could be assumed, based on the nature of its power, that Dragon Claw was made from the claw of a being similar to the divine dragon Fufailbane—maybe even from a claw of Fufailbane himself.

Fufailbane had been sealed underground by King Inglis and had slept since then until recently being forced awake; had the claw been collected even earlier than that? It was a mystery.

Does that mean there are other beings like Fufailbane out there? If so, I’d like to meet them, Inglis thought.

“Yeah, he gave it to me when I went to pick these two up at the palace,” Rochefort said. “I really don’t get him. First, without reservations, he hires an enemy general who tried to kill him, but then he gives that guy his own weapon.”

“But I think it was a correct assessment of your skill,” Eris said.

“Yeah,” Ripple agreed. “You could use the armor right away. It took a while for Rafael to figure it out.”

“It must be that His Majesty has great expectations of you!” Inglis said. She had hoped—she thought vainly—for Rochefort to get a powerful Artifact and increase his strength too. That meant only good things for her training.

“As a sparring partner for you, you mean?”

“Among other reasons!”

Primarily for worldwide exploits as a member of the Rangers, and the key to peace with Venefic. That’s what Inglis expected the king’s reasoning to have been, but she couldn’t argue with that assessment as a secondary reason. Rochefort had many hopes pinned upon him.

“But that can’t be argued with, so... You want to try out that secondary

reason, then? Not very mature of you!" Rochefort unsheathed Dragon Claw's azure blade and held it on high.

"Gwoooooohhhh!"

A dragon's roar rang out, and Rochefort was covered with azure armor the color of the blade. Hard wings extended from its back. He laughed heartily. "It's no hieran menace, but it's not bad! All right, I'll take you on!"

But Inglis didn't respond to his invitation. Usually, she'd rush up punching with a sparkling grin, but this time she just watched intently.

"Huh? What's wrong?"

"Ah, sorry, Mr. Rochefort! Could you turn off the armor and then turn it back on again?"

"Huh? Sure, easy enough." He did as Inglis asked.

"Gwoooooohhhh!"

"There you go. Now bring it!"

"No, sorry, could you one more time?"

"What's gotten into you?"

"Gwoooooohhhh!"

"Just once more... Just once more! Please!"

"C'mon, first you tell me to fight, then you tell me to wait? What a selfish student."

"Gwoooooohhhh!"

“Is that enough? I’m getting tired of this.”

“Yes! I think I get it now! Thank you!”

“Get it? Get *what*?”

“Let me show you what I learned!”

Inglis crossed her arms in front of her body and rested an index finger on each shoulder. From there, she traced down across her chest, her waist, her legs, covering herself with dragon lore wherever her fingers touched.

“*Gwoohhhh!*”

Inglis was clad in the azure armor of Dragon Claw.

“Whaaaaat!?” Rochefort shouted.

“Is that—?!” Eris gasped.

“That’s Dragon Claw’s armor, isn’t it?!” Ripple asked.

“Y-Yes! I can feel the same strong power from it as from Ross’s!” Arles said.

However, it was a kiddy size commensurate with Inglis’s current stature, and had no wings. Recreating the wings seemed difficult, so she’d had to give up on those. And she didn’t know if she could do it again in her normal body; covering a larger surface came with more difficulty controlling it.

“It’s a little bit different, honestly... But I did use that as reference!” In form it was like the armor from Dragon Claw, but in material it was ice created by Inglis’s magic. She’d adjusted the control of the mana for an ice blade to take the form of armor. Then she’d woven in the dragon lore which covered her to create dragon magic armor. Dragon magic, dragon ice armor, she could call it. This was the first time she’d seen Dragon Claw’s armor be activated, but if she focused on the flows of mana involved it was surprisingly simple. One time wasn’t enough for her to replicate it immediately, but a few tries and she had pulled it off. The material and strength were a bit different, but it should also produce a strengthening effect like Dragon Claw’s. “All right, now let’s get to practice!” Inglis beamed adorably as she took up her stance.

"Hey, hey, I think you've got this all wrong. This was supposed to be me regaining authority as a teacher with a new weapon, but you've gone and copied it?" Rochefort complained.

"She's so difficult to keep up with!" Eris said.

"Being with the Paladins is rough work, but it seems like you have your hands full too, Arles! After all, you have to deal with Inglis!" Ripple said.

"I-I'll do my best!" Arles said. "I'm not very confident though!"

Now, to try out my new dragon magic with the perfect sparring partners! Inglis thought.

But then another person appeared—Rafinha had finished up her make-up work. Exhausted, she mumbled, "Ugh... I'm finally done..."

"Ah, Rani. Good job. You worked hard."

"Ughhhhhh! I'm exhausted! We're going off to Highland tomorrow, so why do I have to sit through more lectures?!"

"At the end of the day, we're *students* at the knights' academy. Studying is important."

"All that work with my head took a lot out of my belly... Let's go to the cafeteria and get something to eat, Chris!" Rafinha scooped Inglis up without waiting for an answer.

"Ah, um. I was just in the middle of training..."

"Never mind that! Let's eat! I can't take it anymore!"

"Yeah, when you're tired, that's the time for dessert. Let's eat plenty of sweets, okay?"

"Yeah! Here we go! If you'll excuse us!"

"I'm sorry, Rani seems to be hungry, so we'll have to leave the training for later. Pardon us." Inglis managed the politest bow she could to Rochefort and the others as Rafinha dragged her off.

"That kid... She just steals someone's tricks and then makes her escape." Rochefort hunched his shoulders in exasperation.

"So, now what, Eris?" Ripple asked. "Should we go get something too?"

"I think maybe it's more important for us to get some training in while we have the chance, honestly..."

"Whaaat? Just us?"

"I suppose," Arles agreed. "Inglis gets stronger in no time at all. We shouldn't rest easy."

"Then I guess let's do that. Say what you will about me, I'm dedicated to my students," Rochefort said.

The four nodded to each other and began their combat training.

Afterword

First, thank you very much for picking up this book! So, that's the ninth volume of *Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire* ♀. I hope you enjoyed it.

This volume was the start of a second arc in my mind, so a new start means a new Inglis, and a new Inglis means a new look! Well, that was how I came up with the change for her. I was also looking forward to new art of her as a young child again.

And I don't really have much else to say, so I think I'll write my impressions from seeing the recording for the anime. Actually, I was able to participate in the recording remotely each time. Pros at work are incredible. They work so fast!

I don't mean that they were rushing through it or anything, I mean that they work so swiftly and efficiently that it's hard for an amateur to keep up. The voice actors and actresses were delivering performances I thought were ready for broadcast from their first test reads. I wonder how long they've been voice acting. They were amazing.

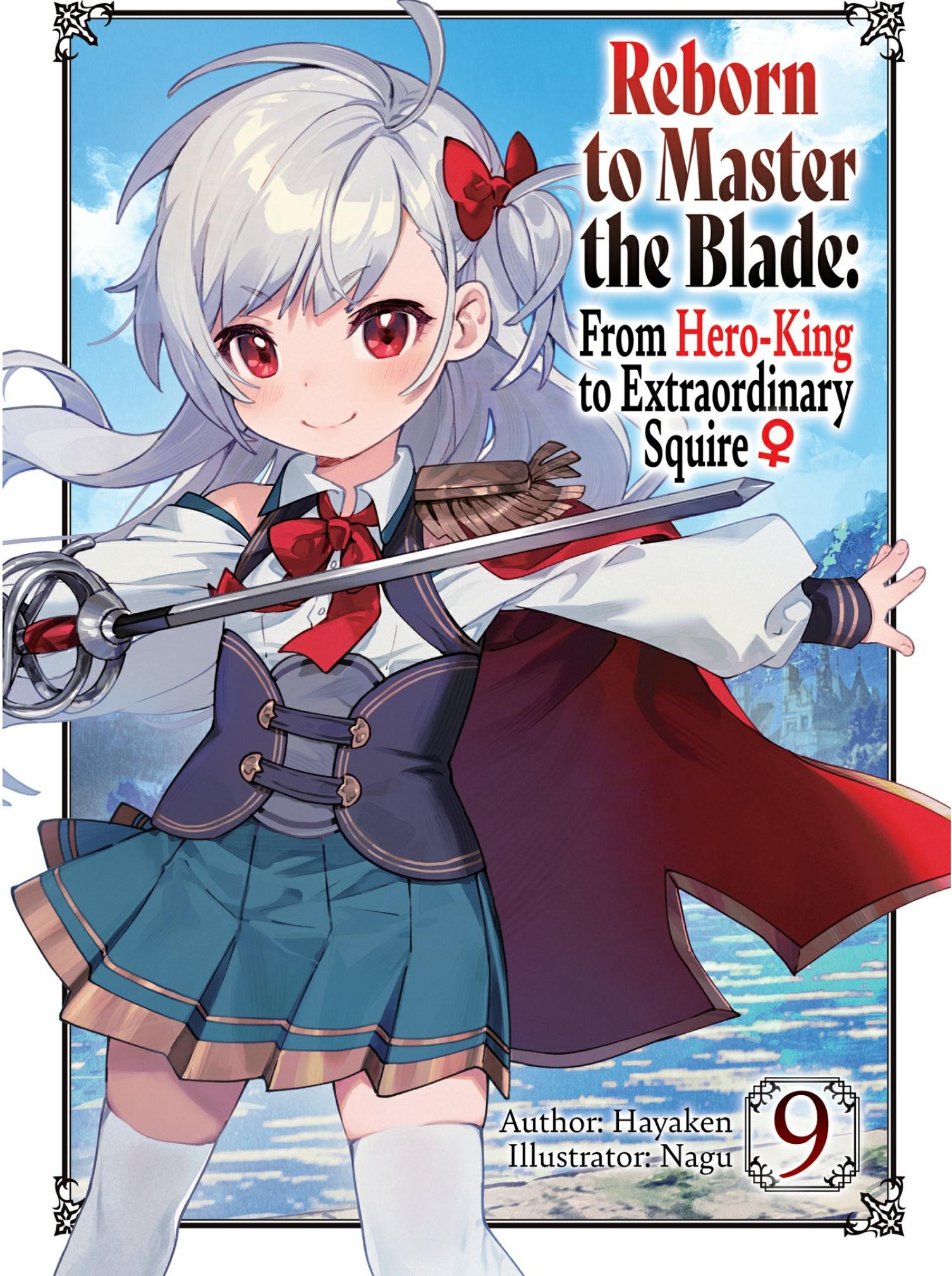
And while I was just thinking to myself, *Wow, this is unbelievable for right off the bat*, the directors were rattling off things like, "The way you say this," "This word's pronounced like this," "The tone of the scene is like this," et cetera, et cetera. I was like, *Really? I couldn't even tell anything was off!* But they were nice enough to ask, "How was that, Hayaken?" and all I could do was respond *"(That was so fast, I couldn't tell what was going on...)* Yeah, that was great!" My inexperience made me feel like I was just along for the ride, trying to keep up.

Honestly, I feel sorry for being propped up as something big and important when I felt like I couldn't add much that was helpful!

But it was a valuable experience. Not many people get that chance. If I had still been moonlighting as a writer, I wouldn't have been able to attend, so I'm

glad I decided to focus. Also, I went out drinking with my old boss, and they said that if I ever need work, they'd take me back, so my lines of retreat are secure! ...I hope.

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!



Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire ♀

Author: Hayaken
Illustrator: Nagu

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Jildegrieva

One of the Triumvirate, immensely powerful even in Highlands! He lives up to the martial implications of his title "Dux," meaning he gets along well with Inglis.

"You took that well, Inglis!"

"You honor me!"

Inglis
(Chris)

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

Rafinha

(Rani)

Inglis's childhood friend, with ambitions of becoming a knight. An Artifact has changed her physical form into that of a little girl too!

“Whaaaaaat?!”

Reflected back at them were the five- to six-year-old Inglis and Rafinha.

Bonus Short Stories

Not My Problem

Inglis and her friends relaxed in the girls' baths at the knights' academy, soaking in the tub before they'd depart for Highland the next day.

"Ahh, tomorrow's the day. I wonder what Highland's like?" Rafinha asked.

"Less what it's like generally, and more specifically what the cuisine is like, surely?" Liselotte asked.

Inglis nodded in agreement. "Got it in one."

"C'mon, Chris, aren't you wondering that too?"

"For me, it's not just the food—I'm also looking forward to what kind of destructive weaponry they might have." Inglis's eyes gleamed as her fists clenched.

"That's nothing to puff yourself up over."

"Ha ha ha..." Leone chuckled wryly. Rin was perched in her chest, a position she took for granted. With Inglis's body still that of a child, Leone alone was left to deal with Rin's claiming of territory. That was one of the advantages Inglis had from her transformation. It was a bit worrisome, though, that only Rafinha had changed back. Inglis wondered whether it was possible she could receive an examination in Highland.

A new voice cut in. "You're not going there on vacation. You'd better brace yourselves. Perhaps turning in early for the night would be for the best."

"Eris!"

Eris was staying at the knights' academy that day along with Ripple, who would be seeing Eris off the next day. They, along with Arles, had arrived to bathe.

"Hey there! Inglis, did you already wash your hair? If not, I can get it for you."

"Ah, Ripple! I want to wash it too!" Arles protested. She was extremely fond of the young Inglis and took every opportunity she could to be with her.

"You two might be taking this too casually too," Eris muttered.

"Hey, you're the one who walked right in and sat down next to her!" Ripple said.

"Th-There's nothing wrong with that! It was just where there was an open spot!"

Eris, as strict as she normally was, loved kids. Inglis remembered the smile on Eris's face when she'd hugged her and Rafinha during her visit to Ymir recently. "Would you come here?"

"Okay..."

Inglis had lived as a girl of the Eucus family for a while now. Being hugged in public by Eris as a child wasn't something particularly odd for her, but sitting on her lap in the bath made her feel tense—and honestly a bit guilty too. After all, there was her past life to consider. Eris would be embracing her in the nude. And the soft mounds Inglis felt poking her in the back were surprisingly voluminous compared to her mental image of Eris. They were comparable to her normal form, or Leone.

Hop!

Rin suddenly leaped from Leone's chest and darted toward Inglis.

"Eek?! Rin, I don't have—!" *I don't have breasts now!*

Inglis reflexively shrank back, but Rin passed her by and jumped onto Eris's chest.

"Eeeek?! What are you—stop it! Stop it! Eeep!" Eris shrieked.

"Oh, that's what Rin wanted..." Inglis mumbled.

"Eris, your clothes make you look so much smaller. Guess she's found a good new home," Rafinha said.

“This is awful!”

“We’re gonna lose this if we manage to help Rin return back to her original form in Highland... It’ll feel kind of lonely in a way.” Leone, freed of her burden, had room to turn introspective.

“Oh? If you want help with that, I’m here for you!” Rafinha grabbed Leone’s chest from behind.

“Eeek! I never said that!”

After a moment of pause, Inglis gave a quiet murmur. “Not my problem.”

A Certain Night’s Dinner

Downtown in Chiral, voices stood out on the busy street which passed by the palace.

“Wow! This is delicious! It might even be better than the food at the palace!” Rafinha exclaimed.

“Yes, Rani. I can see why this restaurant is so popular lately.”

“This meat pie is just perfect! I love a good roast, but this just takes it to another level! And the crust is so crispy and delicious!”

Rafael was there too, and his smile was just as bright as Rafinha’s. “I don’t think I’ve ever tasted anything this delicious before! Thanks, Rani! Thanks, Chris!”

Inglis and Rafinha had just returned from Ymir after the knights’ academy’s break, but Duke Bilford, Rafael, and Inglis’s father were also in the capital, so they ended up having dinner together.

Inglis chuckled. “I’m glad I brought along a special ingredient.”

Since this was a special occasion, the restaurant had allowed her to bring her own ingredients for their chefs to cook.

“Mister Dragon’s meat sure is delicious!♪” Rafinha said.

Great chefs could draw out the best from ingredients and transform them into truly mouthwatering delicacies. And when Inglis and Rafinha had returned

from Alcard, they'd brought both a tail cut from Fufailbane and a large amount of jerky they'd made. The fresh tail had been served at the victory banquet, and what was left over had also been made into jerky, so she still had quite a bit on her hands.

"Yeah. If it's this good, I hope more dragons show up!" Rafael said.

"And, hey! Did you know that if you eat a lot of dragon meat, you'll get dragon lore? It's this power dragons have! So dig in and get stronger!"

"Really? Then I need to chow down! Chris managed to take down the Prism, but that doesn't change my own inexperience or my duties as a holy knight. I have to get stronger!"

"Me too! I'm the only one who hasn't gotten dragon lore, so I need to eat more of it!"

The siblings' pace increased even more.

"Hey, wait, Rani! That's my meat! No fair!"

"That's fine! You're still little, so you don't need as much!"

Rafinha had already returned to her original size. Only Inglis was still in the form of a six-year-old.

"But that's not fair!"

Rafinha continued, "And I hate that I'm the only one that hasn't gotten dragon lore yet! Even though I've eaten just as much as Chris! Leone's and Liselotte's Artifacts both evolved, and Lahti didn't even eat *that* much before he was able to transform!"

"I think Lahti's especially suited to it."

"Well, I'm gonna make up for that in volume! Gimme!"

"Agh...!"

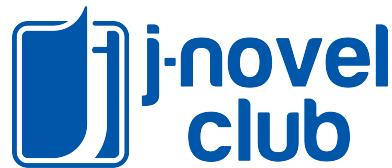
Suddenly, Inglis's father, Luke, called out to her. "Inglis, Daddy still has more, you can come have that."

"Ah! Thank you, father!" Inglis hopped up into his lap and stretched her hand toward the dragon meat.

“This takes me back. You’re adorable, Inglis.” Luke happily stroked her hair.

“Dad! Give me your meat too!” Rafinha swiftly snatched some meat from Duke Bilford’s plate.

“I’m jealous. I wish I had been able to see my little Rafinha again...” Duke Bilford let out an envious sigh.



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Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire ♀
Volume 9

by Hayaken

Translated by Mike Langwiser Edited by Carly Smith

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