



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

5

Author: Hayaken
Illustrator: Nagu



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Chapter I: Inglis, Age 15—The Evil Hieral Menace (1)

Whoosh... Whoosh...

A chill wind howled, carrying snow along. The snow covering the nearby trees took on a red tint from the setting sun. This was where Inglis and her group would bid farewell to their country, Karelia. The border shared with their northern neighbor Alcard lay just ahead. It was already quite cold, but it would become even more frigid as night fell.

“Phew, it’s freezing. I’ve never been this cold in my life.” Leone shivered as she peered through the trees at a mountain stronghold. It seemed to be a guard station held by Alcard’s army.

Once they passed the border into Alcard, they’d be infiltrators. The expedition was organized around a single Flygear Port acting as a mobile base. It carried several Flygears—including Inglis and Rafinha’s personal aircraft, the *Star Princess*—as well as mountains of foodstuffs.

They were, to give a succinct description, quite conspicuous.

A Flygear Port soaring through the sky in the light of day would surely be spotted. Their plan instead was to wait for now and cross the border under the cover of darkness.

“Indeed, it is. The wind is stinging my cheeks,” Liselotte said. She was well prepared for the weather, with fur clothing and even earmuffs, but the unfamiliar chill sunk down to her bones.

“It’s because we avoided the plains and went through the mountains... The route through the plains is a bit warmer this time of year,” said Pullum, clearly a true native of Alcard.

“It’s not like we wanted to go this way, but it looked like Alcard’s army was gathering in the plains,” Rafinha said. Thanks to that, the group of students had needed to traverse the mountainous area of the border.

That didn't make this path easy, though. There was a scattering of forts, requiring them to be cautious. Alcard's army seemed to still be mobilizing and hadn't made any formal moves yet.

If they were spotted here and provoked Alcard, word might be sent to the forces on the plains, causing them to accelerate their moves to war. There would be no way to avoid a direct clash between both countries, as the Karelian army was mobilizing as well.

The Karelian army was a combined force made up of the Royal Guard, under the direct authority of King Carlias, and a number of feudal levies, including—from Inglis and Rafinha's hometown—the Ymir knights under Duke Bilford's command. Their group's mission was, before the two armies clashed and sustained significant casualties, to infiltrate Alcard and trigger a coup, a revolution, or a change of position by the country's leaders, thus forcing Alcard's army to pull back.

A connection to those leaders wouldn't be a problem with Lahti along. He'd hidden his identity, but in truth he was Alcard's prince. There was no one better suited to the task.

This had been Inglis's idea, and if it worked, it could prevent a war. It could save the lives of many knights and soldiers as well as those of innocent civilians who could be caught up in the conflict. However, by Rafinha's analysis, Inglis was perhaps more concerned with the chance to fight Alcard's military elite, Highlanders, Prismers, or whatever else happened to cross her path.

Leone wasn't going to press Inglis on that matter, considering she wouldn't be able to stop her anyway, and she considered the mission meaningful and an important duty. She couldn't afford to be preoccupied just because she was cold.

"Maybe I should exercise a little. I don't want to be all stiff if anything happens." She held up her dark greatsword Artifact and was about to start swinging it when Rafinha called out to her.

"Leone, Liselotte, eat this if you're cold. It'll warm you right up!" She flashed a grin as she gestured to a gigantic pot. They couldn't help but wonder how many people such a large pot was meant to feed.

Inglis and Rafinha had specially ordered a pot intended for field kitchens, saying that a smaller one would be too much trouble to constantly refill. In it, a hearty seafood stew simmered.

"It's good to fill your stomach with something warm when you're cold, right?" Inglis said with a gentle smile.

Leone stared. "But we already ate."

"I'm absolutely stuffed!" Liselotte said.

Ordinary people couldn't possibly eat for as long as Inglis and Rafinha. They needed a different method to get warm now.

"Really? Then I guess we should finish it?" Rafinha suggested to Inglis.

"Stew is even more delicious in a place like this," Inglis remarked.

"The setting really brings out the flavor. Agreed, toootally! ♪"

Lahti grimaced as he watched. "Ha ha ha... A bunch of food's gone already. Will our supplies even last?"

"Well, we can always buy more on the way!" Rafinha insisted.

"We still have the military funding from His Majesty—and we'd like to try out some of the local specialties while we have the chance," Inglis said.

"Exactly! That's why we checked ahead of time for what's tasty in Alcard!"

"I kinda think you should've been focusing on other things..." Lahti replied.

In the middle of their conversation, a boy approached nervously. This wasn't Lahti, of course, but it was Ian. Thanks to Yua's wanting to take him home with her, he was the sole survivor of his countless duplicates involved in an assassination attempt of King Carlias. The group had rescued him from Yua's clutches, her kidnapping attempt nearly successful, and he was accompanying them on their mission.

He was the one most familiar with the current situation in Alcard. He'd been complicit in going after the Karelian king, but he was remorseful now. He also showed no malice toward Lahti, the prince of Alcard. Thus, everyone, not just Inglis, had decided he wasn't a threat.

On the other hand, if he ended up being a problem, Inglis would naturally welcome that. She wanted as many tough opponents as she could get—as long as they didn’t lay a finger on Rafinha.

“Umm, Inglis, Rafinha. Would you like some more vegetables?” Ian asked.

“Sure! Thanks, Ian!” Inglis answered.

“Fish too, please,” Rafinha chimed in.

“Understood. I’ll go get them.” Ian was working hard to atone for his crimes. To be honest, it was a great help to have him along in the current circumstances.

“All right, I’m going to find the best spot to chow down! Maybe those cliffs,” Rafinha said.

“Don’t fall off. I’m going to try up that tree,” Inglis replied.

“Ah! So we’re leaning toward the higher, the tastier? Then maybe I’ll eat in a Flygear!”

“That’s a bad idea! It’ll draw attention!” Leone insisted, flustered by the pair’s losing track of why they needed to be covert in the first place.

With one-track minds for food, Inglis and Rafinha continued eating until the sun had completely set.



The next day, Inglis and her group entered Alcardian territory. It was around dawn when they arrived at the town of Tsira, near the border. Since their plan was to secretly infiltrate the central regions of Alcard, it was theoretically best to march under cover of darkness and conceal themselves during the light of day. However, because the two countries’ armies inched closer to clashing as time went on, and because of the situation in Alcard, it was hard to know whether it would be better to advance with haste or to proceed with more caution. Making such a decision required as much information as possible.

Therefore, Inglis’s group concealed their Flygear Port in the forest on the outskirts of Tsira and made their way into the city for reconnaissance.

“All right, city living! I think the spicy food here is supposed to be good,”

Rafinha announced.

“It’s perfect for warming you up too,” Inglis said.

“Ahh, I’m starving. Let’s hurry, Chris! I can’t wait to check out the town!”

“Me too, Rani. I can’t help imagining all the tasty food.”

As the two worked up an appetite, Leone broke in with a sigh. “You two, we’re not here to sample the local cuisine. We need to gather intelligence...”

Inglis chuckled. “You’re being too straightforward, Leone.”

“Huh?”

“People will be wary of us if we look like we’re hunting for information,” Rafinha remarked.

“We’d seem more natural as tourists who really were here to try the local cuisine. Right, Rani?” Inglis continued.

“Yeah, that’s what I mean. It’s not like I just want to eat here so I can get out of cooking, or that I want to sleep in an inn because a tent’s too cold!”

“Sheesh. You *should* take your turn cooking. We’re all supposed to do it, right?” Leone scolded.

“But you’re so much better at it...” Rafinha whined.

Leone had often cooked for herself in her hometown back in Ahlemin. After her brother, Leon, had abandoned his position as a holy knight and joined the Steelblood Front, the Olfas, who had come to be despised as a family of traitors, had lost their servants. Leone had been forced to take care of herself—and so, her cooking skills had improved. She had been the one to prepare the stew the group had loved the night before.

“That line won’t work on me. It’s a knight’s duty to eat well and stay in shape while on the march. That’s why you need to learn how to cook.”

“But the knights’ academy doesn’t have cooking classes,” Rafinha argued.

“I’m not the best at cooking either, so it would be nice to eat in town,” Liselotte chimed in.

Leone sighed. “Even you, Liselotte?”

"See, Liselotte gets it," Rafinha said.

"After all, it would truly be a shame if you fell ill with a stomachache from my cooking."

"Huh?!" Leone gasped. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, when I made a meal for my father, he became ill..."

"Th-That just happens sometimes. I'm sure it wasn't the food. Chancellor Arcia has poor health to begin with..."

"But it's happened more than once. More than twice, even."

"I-I see..."

"I imagine things have been hard on him," Inglis remarked. The former chancellor had seemed to be a stiff and formal man, but his risking his health repeatedly for his daughter's sake revealed a more devoted side. Inglis felt a commonality with him in that parental love. Rafinha was a granddaughter to her rather than a daughter, but still a dearly adored one. It was nothing to her to put herself at physical risk for Rafinha's sake. She hoped for Rafinha's happiness from the bottom of her heart—as long as it didn't involve illicit affairs with the opposite sex. Rafinha was still too young for that.

Having quietly listened until now, Ian chimed in, "D-Don't worry. I'll help out. If anything comes up that might look suspicious, I'll point it out." His fur hood was pulled up tight, so his eyes couldn't be seen. Ian was Alcardian nobility, and Tsira was near his family's lands, so he was being cautious so that residents wouldn't recognize him.

Next to him, Lahti also wore his hood in the same way. As Alcard's prince, it was even more important that he conceal his identity. Pullum had no need, so she was wearing her hood normally.

"Thanks. That'll help," Inglis replied to Ian.

"Of course. If there's anything I can do, just ask. At the very least, it lets me make up for what I've done..."

"Well, anyway, I'm hungry, so I'm off to eat! Then I'm going to sleep in a bed in a warm room! It's important to be well rested!" Rafinha called out.

“So first up should be an inn with a kitchen!” Inglis agreed.

“Yeah! Ah, how about over there?”

“Looks good to me.”

“Then let’s go for it.”

“Ah, hold on, Rani. You’ll slip on the snow. Don’t go too fast.”

“Eeek!”

“As I was just saying...”

Lahti laughed. “You two definitely *look* like tourists.”

Things were going well so far.

That is, until Inglis and Rafinha spoke with an innkeeper.

“I’m sorry you came all the way here, but we’re not serving meals right now. There isn’t enough food. It isn’t just us either. Every restaurant in town is the same.” The innkeeper sighed, frowning.

“Whaaat?!” the two girls yelled.

Grrrgl!

The pair’s screams and stomachs echoed in unison.

“So...the restaurant’s closed?!” Rafinha asked.

Inglis was in just as much of a panic. “And all the others are too?!”

They wouldn’t be able to enjoy the famous local cuisine at this rate. Having no spicy delicacies was coming as a shock to them both.

“Yes. We’re still offering lodging, so I can get you a room... Would you like that?” the innkeeper asked.

“If everywhere is the same, we should at least have a place to sleep. I guess it’s our only choice,” Inglis said.

“Yeah, agreed...” The others nodded along with Rafinha. They were short on sleep since they’d been traveling at night. They all wanted to rest.

“But why is there so little food? Was there some kind of disaster?”

“No,” the innkeeper answered. “They took most of the food as an offering to Highland... We’re having trouble finding food for ourselves, never mind the restaurants. I haven’t eaten since yesterday.”

Suddenly a rumbling sound came from someone’s stomach. It didn’t belong to Inglis or Rafinha this time. “Oh my, how embarrassing. Do excuse me,” the innkeeper said.

“It’s okay! We—” Rafinha began.

“We’re the same!” Inglis finished.

Grrrgl!

“Aha ha ha! Healthy young ladies indeed.” The innkeeper’s expression brightened somewhat.

“That’s terrible, though. Taking so much food that you’re left like this...” Rafinha said.

“The Prism Flow increased, and a magicite beast that could have been a Prismer appeared. So they wanted more Artifacts, and if possible a hieran menace too...and made that the townspeople’s problem,” Inglis summarized, understanding the situation.

Artifacts and hieran menaces did not come without a price. In fact, they were quite difficult to obtain. Alcard would already have had them if the price wasn’t so high. As a result, someone had to shoulder the burden—they could see that clearly.

“Of course not. The Artifacts and the hieran menace would be to protect the people from magicite beasts, right? So why take the food away from the people you’re protecting? Why make them suffer?” Rafinha asked.

“You can’t give what you don’t have.”

Whether by requisitioning food in quantities large enough to starve its own people or by mobilizing its army for an attack on Karelia, Alcard had chosen the

path it saw fit for obtaining Artifacts and a hieranl menace.

Rafinha paused, thinking over Inglis's words. "I don't like that. It's not right at all."

"I thought you'd say so, Rani."

The idea would be unacceptable to Rani, young and with a firm sense of justice. She also probably didn't know how to solve this contradiction. That wasn't really a problem for her. If it became necessary, Inglis would do something about it. She loved Rafinha's rash, childlike sense of justice.

Putting her own feelings aside, they were in Alcard to get the country's leadership to change its policies and pull back its army. If things went well, Alcard would naturally break off its agreement with Highland. That would mean the need for such harsh requisitions from its people would disappear as well.

That would present no major problems, though some measures would be necessary to deal with the weakened countermeasures against magicite beasts.

The root cause was the presence of magicite beasts on a never-before-seen scale in Alcard. It was only natural that the country's leadership would feel a need to adopt new measures to deal with the new threat.

"Argh... This is just *wrong!* It's unacceptable!" Lahti grumbled. Like Rafinha, he was young and had a strong sense of what was right and wrong. Inglis considered him a friend, but he wasn't as adorable as Rafinha, so she'd leave him to the person who was his own soothing influence.

"C-Calm down. Getting worked up like this won't solve anything," Pullum said.

"But, Pullum—! What in the world is Da—uh, His Majesty doing?! I can't believe he'd put everyone in this situation!"

The innkeeper watched the group with concern. "Please do not fight. His Majesty is ill. If he were well, this never would have happened. That's what I believe."

"His Majesty is ill?! When I left Alcard, he was still in good health..." Ian said, shifting his gaze to his feet. "But I suppose his worries have taken their toll. It doesn't surprise me that he'd become ill."

"Then why did this happen? Who's making you do this?" Rafinha asked the innkeeper.

"It's that hieran menace! She came from Highland, saying we owed a debt and we'd better pay up!"

Rafinha gasped. "Huh?! A hieran menace?!"

"How could a hieran menace do something so evil?!" Leone cried.

"I... I can't believe it!" Liselotte said.

Those three were especially shocked. Being from Karelia, their only experiences with hieran menaces were with Eris and Ripple, who were noble, compassionate, and dutiful in their protection of surface dwellers from magicite beasts. Whether in terms of power or spirit, they were truly the country's guardians. Even the Steelblood Front's hieran menace, Sistia, while in a different position, had a sense of duty and a strong will like theirs.

Inglis had gotten the impression that hieran menaces were generally noble in spirit and dedicated to protecting others, but perhaps that was just how Eris, Ripple, and Sistia were. Maybe it wasn't universal.

"Hieran menaces are terrible!" the innkeeper insisted. "She came to this town, and as cute as she was, she slaughtered anyone who resisted...or at best, they were taken away. No one has returned."

"I see... So hieran menaces aren't all here to protect us, you're saying," Inglis replied.

"Exactly, young lady. I'm telling you this for your own good. Don't go against her. The knights and soldiers of this country still show some mercy, but the hieran menace and the Highlanders with her are absolutely merciless."

Rafinha's face flushed and she shook her head at the innkeeper's warning. "We understand, but they can't treat people like this! We need to do something!"

Lahti was fired up as well. "Yeah, I can't ignore this!"

"W-Wait. Who knows what will happen if you let your anger get the better of you," Ian cautioned.

"Yes, we need to be calm," Pullum said, also trying to soothe Lahti. "Inglis, help us talk some sense into him..."

Inglis shook her head. "Sorry. I can't let this go either."

"Why...?"

"I can't ignore an evil hieran menace! For the sake of justice and peace in this country! Ma'am, if you would. Does the hieran menace come here often? What kind of person is she? Do you know if she has any powerful abilities?"

"Huh? Err... I suppose she—"

"Cut it out, Chris!" Rafinha pulled on Inglis's ears.

"Oww! R-Rani?! Why are you—"

"You're not supposed to be like that! You're listening to the townspeople talk about their troubles, but you've got a happy twinkle in your eye!"

"Well, I want to enjoy myself for once... I didn't get to fight last time. You had all the fun."

"You and Yua got to beat on each other!"

"But that didn't feel like actual combat. Rani, you and the others had a real fight, didn't you? I think there's experience you can only gain while fighting seriously—"

"Ugh! *That's* your response?! That wasn't my point—"

"I mean, we *did* fight, though it didn't really come to anything..." Ian weakly said. He made a noise that was partly a sigh, partly a bitter chuckle.

"I saw that hieran menace, Tiffanyer," the innkeeper began. "She had long hair, a soft color like clear water. Big round eyes. She was really pretty. Just as much as you are. You're surprisingly pretty too." She was staring at Inglis.

"Thank you... Did anything else stand out about her?" Inglis asked.

"She had many Highlanders with her, all of them clamoring, 'Oh, Lady Tiffanyer! Oh, Lady Tiffanyer!' It honestly seemed rather silly, but they were terribly cruel. They forcibly took our food, and as I said before, they slaughtered or dragged away anyone who tried to resist... All the while, that hieran menace

watched like she was enjoying it. Some warriors saw an opening and tried to attack her directly, but she dismembered them in an instant—it was over so fast.” Her face went pale as she thought back to the scene. “Hieral menaces are supposed to protect us from magicite beasts, but she was more terrifying than the beasts themselves... Some of my own neighbors and acquaintances...”

“I see... They sound like a pretty violent bunch.”

That wasn’t bad. If Inglis encountered them, she could expect a quality fight. The hieral menaces Inglis knew never fought without a good reason.

A hieral menace who would attack without provocation was beyond Inglis’s wildest dreams. It meant she wouldn’t have to go through all the trouble of coming up with a reason for a battle. The local food situation was not good, which meant there was little hope of enjoying the local cuisine. If she couldn’t eat, then she wanted to fight—her original goal anyway—without letting the chance slip away.

“Do they come to this town often?” Inglis asked.

“The hieral menace has only come once, but her Highlander underlings visit occasionally—several times so far. And every time, someone disappears...”

“I see... One last question, ma’am. Do you know where they come from?”

“Probably Leclair. It seems that everyone they take is sent to the prison there...”

Ian raised his voice in shock. “A prison in Leclair?! I’ve never heard of such a thing!”

Since Ian hadn’t known of the prison, it must have been established after he infiltrated the Weismar troupe on his secret mission. In other words, it had to have been established quite recently.

“Leclair? Isn’t that...?” Inglis began, thinking back on the information about Alcard Ian and Lahti had provided before they’d departed.

“Yes... My hometown, which was ravaged by magicite beasts,” Ian said.

Because of the horrific damage a Prismer-like magicite beast had unleashed on Leclair, Alcard had changed its course. It deepened its dependence on

Highland in an attempt to increase its power for national defense. The town of Leclair was the starting point.

"After all that's happened, I can't believe so many innocent people are being gathered there to suffer even more..."

As Ian slumped over, Lahti placed his hand on his friend's shoulder. "You're right. I won't allow this! Why does it all have to fall on them?"

"You children... Is someone from Leclair among you?" the innkeeper asked. "I'm surprised you survived. You're lucky you escaped with your lives. Don't throw it away; that's all survivors can do. I'm telling you for your own good—don't pick a fight with the hieran menace or the Highlanders." She sounded truly distressed.

"Yes, ma'am. We're sorry for worrying you. May we rest in a room?" Inglis said. Then she turned to the rest of the group. "Come on, everyone, let's go."

Inglis walked at the front as they headed toward a room. Asking the innkeeper more questions would only bring up painful memories, and there were some things they couldn't talk about either. It wasn't wise to have a complicated conversation in the open.

Once they were alone in their room, Ian murmured with a serious look on his face, "Judging from that conversation... Since I left Alcard, things have gotten even worse. I can't believe that a hieran menace is already here, and that she's robbing people of their food."

"Maybe she's lighting a fire?" Inglis asked.

"What exactly do you mean by that, Inglis...?" Ian asked.

"Yeah, Chris, what's that mean?" Rafinha, already lying in bed, yawned in a rather undignified manner. After having been up all night, she couldn't help it.

"Okay, Rani...but pay attention. Don't just fall asleep, okay?"

"Of course." Rafinha yawned again.

Inglis fixed her a stare. Rafinha seemed ready to pass out, but everyone else was curious too, so Inglis continued. "By 'light a fire,' I mean she's pushing Alcard's army on the border to attack Karelia as soon as possible."

"So, put the other way, does that mean that Alcard's army isn't inclined to attack?" asked Liselotte, wide awake.

Just as alert, Leone followed with another question. "I thought Alcard's army would attack only after their preparations were complete. Are you saying they'll go on the offensive sooner, Inglis?"

Those two are good, serious girls. Rafinha could stand to learn something from them, Inglis thought. "I am, yes. Initially, it seemed like Alcard wouldn't be pressured to attack hastily, but I think Highland is dissatisfied with the moves that Alcard has made."

"Why attack now?" Leone asked.

"To avoid losses on their end. Venefic's army is advancing on Karelia's eastern flank. I believe Alcard has been waiting for an opportunity in which Karelia is stretched thin so that they could easily invade. If that were to happen, Alcard could get a hieran menace from Highland while taking credit for the victory with little effort and few losses."

If Inglis were the king of Alcard, that would be how she'd read the situation. Karelia had long had hostile relations with Venefic, whose army was currently approaching Karelia to the east, where Rafael, Eris, Ripple, and the Paladins had been sent to deal with them. The more the course of the war went in Venefic's favor, the more Karelia would be forced to concentrate its forces on the eastern front, making it easier for Alcard to attack from the north.

It was the way to suffer the fewest losses while attaining the greatest advantage for the country. That was the kind of decision-making leaders had to conduct. From that standpoint, it would be the natural move.

Inglis Eucus, a squire-in-training, personally wanted to be the first to plunge into the most dangerous battle. She did not care for rank—she was concerned with being the strongest version of herself. Such a thing would not be possible if she stood alongside leaders such as kings and captains. And thus, her conclusion was that she would remain a squire despite her previous leadership experience.

She continued her explanation. "I believe the attempted assassination of King Carlias was also intended to buy time. Watching what happened while the plan

proceeded. Arguing that fighting after his assassination would be more effective, in order to delay the deployment of troops.”

Ian looked taken aback. “Yeah, maybe. The assassination plan didn’t come from Archlord Evel, but from the circles around His Majesty...”

“In the end, Highland grew tired of Alcard’s behavior,” Inglis said. “This change may have been a result of Evel’s death, but they then sent a hieran menace to seize food from the populace. This would be unbearable to Alcard’s army, which would be forced to attack Karelia at once to seize land and plunder their food. Alcard cannot stand up to Highland.”

Leone understood where Inglis was going. “Maybe things aren’t going well for Venefic, so they’re getting impatient.”

“That may be the case,” Liselotte said.

“That’s right. Highland’s communications are probably far faster than ours,” Leone said.

Brow furrowed, Rafinha suddenly chimed in. “Anyway, we can’t let either the people of Alcard be deprived of food or the people of Karelia be drawn into a war. This has to be stopped!”

“Rani...I don’t really mind, but that’s not the kind of thing you say while lying down and hugging a pillow,” Inglis said as she stared at Rafinha saying something so serious while ready to fall asleep. It was a sharp contrast to Leone, Liselotte, and Pullum, who were all sitting up like proper young ladies. It was an awkward sight, yet so adorable. *What a conflicting feeling.*

“But I’m sleepy.”

“Okay. Then I should cut to the chase. For now, what should we do? Continue to Alcard’s capital, or go directly to the prison in Leclair?” Inglis asked.

From Inglis’s observations, Alcard’s king—Lahti’s father—seemed to be trying to minimize his country’s losses and appeared to have some sort of plan. He could probably be negotiated with. It could be worthwhile to discuss the matter with him. However, that would be a waste of time if such a negotiation ended poorly. In fact, he could try to detain them, or even try to kill Inglis and her group as infiltrators from Karelia—to say nothing of what would happen to

Lahti and Pullum.

If they were to try to liberate Leclair, it would likely mean a confrontation with the hieran menace and Highlanders the innkeeper had mentioned. That would almost certainly lead to a battle. The sooner the prisoners were freed, the more lives would be saved. Although, if they were to do so without agreement from the king of Alcard, the political repercussions could be disastrous. They would be labeled external actors who were sabotaging Alcard's plans to recruit their own hieran menace to defend them from magicite beasts.

"I'm a little conflicted. What do you all think?" Inglis asked, taking the others by complete surprise.

"Well, that's unusual. I'd have thought you'd want to go straight to Leclair and fight the hieran menace," Leone said.

"Indeed. Are you feeling unwell?" Liselotte asked.

"Maybe it's the other way around. She's so hungry she can't think straight," Lahti remarked.

"Lahti, that's rude to Inglis!" Pullum chided.

"Y-Yeah. She's trying to seriously think about what's best for Alcard," Ian agreed.

Inglis giggled, and gave them an enigmatic smile.

"You all are so trusting." Rafinha glared at Inglis reproachfully. "Chris, you're just thinking, 'If we go right to the capital, but then I raise hell, I can get in a lot of fights!'"

"N-No, I'm not. Absolutely not..."

"Liar. I can see your cheeks twitching! They do that when you're lying! I know they do!" Rafinha pulled at Inglis's face.

"Iff nah hike hat! Iff nah hike hat!" Well, it was true that—since there were advantages and disadvantages to each plan—Inglis saw nothing wrong with taking her own interests into consideration as well.



Fight number one, by this plan, would be when they went directly to the capital and tried to talk things over with the king of Alcard, but he refused to hear them out and tried to have them executed.

Fight number two would be when they retraced their path back to Leclair and took down the hieran menace who was tormenting the people.

Around that point, they'd have spent too much time on a detour, and Alcard's army on the border would begin to move. They'd hurry to catch up with the army and call for it to stop its advance, but due to a miscommunication, it would refuse their request, and the battle to stop them would be fight number three.

This would be the ideal way for things to play out in terms of Inglis increasing her combat experience. If they were to go to Leclair first, there would be a high degree of political uncertainty in their later steps, but that would mainly be a task for Lahti, who was the prince of Alcard, and the fighting itself would likely be over in a single encounter.

Rafinha was not exactly wrong, but Inglis wanted to firmly make clear that her first priority was resolving this situation. She wasn't *that* much of a brute.

"Well, either way, the path to the capital or Leclair is the same for now. We can figure it out as we go," Lahti suggested.

"Agreed. We might gain more information as we proceed," Ian said.

Pullum nodded. "We need to hurry."

"Let's get some rest here and then be on our way," Leone suggested.

"Yes, Leone. That's a reasonable plan," Liselotte said.

They had almost come to an agreement, but then Rafinha, now looking quite determined, faced them all.

"Everyone, wait. I know we need to hurry, but there's something we need to do for the people of this town."



"Ha ha ha!"

“Aha ha ha ha!”

“Hee hee hee!”

Glee carried all throughout Tsira’s town square.

“Wow, this really helps!”

“Thank you so much. I don’t know how I can fully express my gratitude.”

“It’s delicious! I haven’t eaten like this in so long!”

The knights’ academy students’ field kitchen cauldron bubbled with its full assortment of ingredients. Delicious smells wafted and steamed from the cauldron in the center of the town square, drawing people closer in delight. Inglis and the others had essentially created a soup kitchen for the town.

“We can at least do this for them,” Inglis said.

Rafinha beamed. “Yeah! Everyone looks so happy. I know we have to hurry, but I can’t just ignore people in need.”

“This was a wonderful idea. They all seem overjoyed,” Leone said.

“Indeed. I’d thought we’d brought far too much food, but it turned out to have been for the best,” Liselotte agreed.

The food for the impromptu soup kitchen was, of course, supplied from the massive food stores Inglis had brought. After their nap, they’d revealed their hidden Flygear Port and brought out the food. The townspeople had been surprised to see them in such a vehicle, but warm food in their bellies cleared any doubts they’d had. The townspeople were all starving.

Lahti bowed his head to Rafinha. “I’m grateful for everything you’ve done for this town. Thanks.”

“It’s fine. I wanted to do this.” Rafinha’s smile shined, bright and pure.

Grrrggglll!

Rafinha’s stomach practically growled. Since they were sharing their own

food, they hadn't eaten any themselves yet. Rafinha hadn't had a single bite. Inglis couldn't speak for her, but she definitely had the impression that Rafinha was struggling. The girl normally had such a huge appetite.

Because Rafinha ate many times what an ordinary person would, the strain on her from abstaining must have also been many times higher. That made her actions especially noble. Inglis felt that same doting adoration she always did. She could remember Rafinha being a newborn. Her heart swelled with pride, although she couldn't deny that the girl's rumbling stomach was a bit impolite.

As admirable as Rafinha was, Inglis was enduring the best she could. The pain was severe, and it was growing with every second. She was as hungry as she could possibly be, but she could only watch enviously. This was far more painful, far more fearsome, than any attack from a powerful monster or foe.

"What's wrong, Inglis?" Lahti asked. "You're so quiet."

"Did you not want to do the soup kitchen?" Rafinha stared at her in confusion.

"No, I did... It's just that talking makes me even hungrier."

Grrrggglll!

Echoing a scene from moments before, Inglis's stomach growled. A small girl from among the townspeople turned at the noise and approached her. She was a bit younger than even Alina, whom they'd recently met and invited to Ymir. This girl appeared to be six or seven years old.

"Are you hungry? Here." The girl smiled as she held out a bowl full of stew. She was absolutely adorable—like an angel.

"Th-Thanks..." Inglis mumbled. No one could refuse a request from such a sweet little girl. Even Rafinha wouldn't have been able to argue. The portion was quite small by Inglis's standards, but she appreciated it nonetheless. She happily accepted the bowl.

But Rafinha was stricter than she'd expected. "No, Chris! Stop that!"

“Huuuh?! But it’s just a little bit...”

“Nope. If we have even a little now, we won’t be able to hold back. We’ll eat it all. That’s why we’ve gotta be patient!”

“U-Uggghhh...”

Rafinha turned back to the girl. “Thanks. We appreciate the thought, but we’re fine. Please keep it for yourself.”

Grrrgl! Grrrggg!!!

Despite what Rafinha said, their stomachs did not agree, taking the opportunity to rumble loudly.

The girl tilted her head. “But you’re hungry, aren’t you?”

“Um... Well, uhh...” Rafinha was cast adrift, looking for an excuse, but Inglis wouldn’t be sending her a lifeboat this time. After all, she wanted to partake of that proffered chalice.

“Oh, right!” Rafinha had a flash of inspiration after glancing around in a panic. “We can’t stand hot things. We prefer cold food. See, this is just the thing!” She was staring at a drift of snow on the roadside, piled up almost like walls in the square where there weren’t roads. Rafinha stuck her hand in and grabbed a handful of white snow.

In a fluid motion, she plunged the snow into her mouth.

“Wh—?!” *Just what is Rani doing all of a sudden? Does she not have any other ideas?*

“Mm, chilly and tasty! Right, Chris? You should have some too!”

“Huuuh?!”

“Come on!”

“O-Okay...” Inglis acquiesced. With some trepidation, she popped some that wasn’t dirty into her mouth. It didn’t taste like anything, but the cold ice crystals had a nice crunch. It was surprisingly pleasant.

“See? We’re fine,” Rafinha said.

“Okay...” The little girl seemed to understand.

Rafinha whispered, “Hey, Chris. That was actually halfway decent.”

“But it doesn’t taste like anything.”

“Maybe it’d be tasty with some flavor? Heeey, Ian, bring us some sugar!”

Inglis imagined Rafinha wanted to sprinkle sugar on top of the ice—truly a Rafinha-approved dish. However, snow was just frozen water. Inglis didn’t imagine that would be very satisfying, but it was better than nothing.

Inglis raised her hand. “Ian, get some for me too!”

“Uh... Are you going to sprinkle sugar on the snow and eat it? I really recommend you don’t. You’ll get a stomachache.” As typical of him, Ian brought them the sugar despite his warning.

“It’s okay! Our stomachs aren’t normal...which isn’t always convenient, but oh well!” Rafinha said.

“We’re between a rock and a hard place,” Inglis said.

Ian sighed.

Rafinha took the sugar he proffered, sprinkled it generously on the snow, then took a large handful and ate it in one bite. “Wow! This works. It’s like a dessert!”

“Hmm, so it’s good?”

“And easily available.”

“Emergency rations, then.”

The two were so hungry. Once they started eating, they couldn’t stop. They gobbled up their sugary snow.

“Aha ha ha. I’m eating and shoveling snow at the same time,” Rafinha said.

“I wonder if mother would be mad?” Inglis asked.

The children watched Inglis and Rafinha curiously.

“What in the world are they...?” Leone began.

"I can't believe them." Liselotte sighed in exasperation.

While the townspeople were puzzled by Inglis and Rafinha's odd behavior, they were overjoyed. The makeshift soup kitchen may have been a small gesture, but it was much appreciated.

It only took a short amount of time for a shadow to be cast over those peaceful moments.

Chapter II: Inglis, Age 15—The Evil Hieral Menace (2)

“This actually works pretty well. There’s plenty of snow. Enough for a feast!” Rafinha said.

“Yes, but once it melts, it’s just water. That’s not very satisfying,” Inglis commented.

“Ow...!” Rafinha suddenly stopped.

“Rani? What’s wrong?” Inglis asked.

“My tummy hurts a little...”

“It’s because you ate something so cold too fast... Ah!”

“You too, Inglis?” Leone asked in shock.

“No. Something’s coming.” Inglis had sensed it first. “Over there!” She pointed at the sky, where several Flygear silhouettes were approaching through the blowing snow. They were unmistakably headed directly for the knights’ academy students.

Rafinha gasped. “That’s—”

“Probably the Highlanders the innkeeper mentioned,” Inglis said.

“We must have drawn their attention with the soup kitchen. This is my fault, everyone!” Rafinha grimaced, but not because of her stomachache.

“Don’t put this all on yourself, Rafinha. We all wanted to do it,” Leone said.

“Indeed. They might just be making their rounds...” Liselotte pointed out.
“Regardless, what do we do about this?”

“I didn’t particularly want to give away our food stocks, but I sure do like cleaning up this kind of mess,” Inglis said. Fighting Highlanders would make up for the sorrow of having to subsist on sugared snow. Furthermore, if the Highlanders had food with them, she could requisition it to replenish the stocks they had used for the soup kitchen. Therefore, fighting would only be

beneficial.

As far as Inglis understood the situation in Alcard, the army, camped on the border, was taking a wait-and-see approach, whereas the hieran menace and Highlanders running wild across the country were attempting to push them into action. If she took down the Highlanders, Alcard's army would be less likely to attack because she would have reduced the pressure on them. Highland was using civilians as hostages, and if she dealt with that, Highland wouldn't be able to force the army to make its move.

With that in mind, her having a little fun would be okay.

"Heh heh heh. It's been a while. A real fight, heh heh heh..." Inglis smacked her fist into her open palm three times in succession.

"Don't jump to the take-no-prisoners approach, Chris. We should try to talk it out with them. They're not magicite beasts."

"Of course. I won't take them down right away. I need them to give it their all. What would be the point otherwise?"

"Don't just assume there's gonna be a fight!"

"I'll leave everything but the fighting to you, Rani. I believe in you."

"Oh, sure, you say that when it works out for you."

Meanwhile, the townspeople had taken notice of the incoming Flygears.

"It's the Highlanders! The Highlanders are coming!"

"Aaaaaah!"

"M-Mommy! I'm scared!"

Rafinha's voice clearly cut through the shrieks of terror. "Everyone, it's okay! Please stay calm! Leave this to us! Don't panic, hide inside, and stay out of harm's way!"

"B-But if we do that, you'll be in danger! Run away!" the innkeeper begged.

"Don't worry! See?" Rafinha pulled off a glove, and from her hand glistened a Rune in the shape of a bow. Then from her pack, she took out her bow Artifact, Shiny Flow, and showed it to the townspeople.

“Everyone, listen! We’re knights from Karelia! We came to stop the war between Karelia and Alcard—and to help you! So don’t worry. Leave this to us!”

She’d readily revealed their true identity. That was quite a bold move—or, more likely, Rafinha had done it out of a desire to reassure the townspeople. Inglis didn’t know for sure.

“Leone, Liselotte, Pullum, let’s go!”

“Y-Yes!”

“Understood!”

“Of course!”

They each brandished their upper-class Runes and Artifacts to the cheers of the townspeople.

“W-Wow!”

“Incredible!”

“So many of Karelia’s knights!”

“Are they here to save us?!”

Their status had quite an uplifting effect on the townspeople. Rafinha’s choice could come back to haunt them later, but Inglis would cross that bridge when she got to it.

Inglis Eucus herself was not inclined to proactively interject in the affairs of others in her second life, but she couldn’t deny that Rafinha was. The sight of her thinking of and giving her utmost for the people in front of her was as adorable as it was heartwarming.

“Now that you understand, go hide!” At Rafinha’s prompt, the townspeople scattered. Inglis’s group stayed behind, awaiting the Flygears.

Before long, they saw a young Highlander with a stigmata riding on the leading Flygear.

“So it *is* the Highlanders!” Rafinha said.

“Yeah. That’s nice,” Inglis remarked.

“No, it isn’t!”

Beside them, Pullum shrieked. “Aaaaaah!”

“Wh-What?! Pullum...?!” Rafinha stammered.

“What’s wrong?!” Inglis asked.

Pullum’s face went pale, and she trembled. “B-Big brother...”

“Whaaat?!” Rafinha yelped.

“Wait, is that...” Leone began.

“Your brother?!” Liselotte finished her sentence without missing a beat.

The revelation shocked the rest of the group. The person with the stigmata did seem to resemble Pullum in hair color and facial structure.

“There’s no mistaking him! That’s Harim!” Lahti exclaimed.

Ian recognized him as well. “It really is! But why?”

“So he didn’t used to be a Highlander?” Inglis asked.

“O-Of course not! My big brother’s no Highlander!” Pullum insisted.

“Meaning he received the stigmata and became a Highlander later.” Inglis thought back on Rahl and Fars. “Ian, was he a Highlander before you left Alcard?”

Ian fiercely shook his head. “No! Absolutely not.”

“So maybe Highland’s policy *has* changed considerably since Evel’s death.”

Evel wouldn’t have given Alcardians the power of Highlanders; he would more likely have modified their bodies, as he had with Ian and General Diego. It wasn’t a question of right or wrong, just a clear change in behavior.

“Anyway, you should probably hide, Lahti. Pullum, you too,” Inglis suggested.

“Huh?! But—!”

“But he’s my brother...!”

“She’s right. He knows your faces,” Ian said. “Especially if he sees you, Lahti, he’ll suspect you’re here on His Majesty’s orders. That could adversely affect

our position."

He'd summarized the situation well. Inglis took note of that. Perhaps he had potential as a strategist.

"What about you, Ian?!" Lahti asked.

"After all, he knows you too," Pullum said.

"Even if he sees me, he'll think I've switched sides. There's no reason for His Majesty to be suspicious of a traitor with Karelian knights. Plus, it'll be easier to get information out of him if someone he knows is there. I'm staying."

"It's as he says. It may be better for you to show yourself openly at some point, Lahti, but you should stay concealed for now. Hide among the Flygear Port's cargo. Hurry," Inglis prompted.

"O-Okay..."

"All right..."

Lahti and Pullum withdrew per Inglis's suggestion. They were gone before the Flygear with Pullum's brother on board drew close enough for them to speak.

His name's Harim, right? Inglis thought as she stared at him.

"Well, that's a face I didn't expect to see here. It's been a long time, Ian." Harim was calm as he called out to them.

Pullum was also a calm person—generally, at least. Inglis wondered if this was a trait the siblings shared.

"Sir Harim..." Ian began.

"The ladies with you... They're not from Alcard, are they? Knights with upper-class Artifacts are rare in Alcard, and I know who has them. So they must be Karelian—it appears you've sold out your country."



“I could say the same of you! I’ve heard from the townspeople of how lawless the hieran menace sent from Highland is, yet you’ve joined forces with her, Sir Harim? Why would you allow such acts?”

“Lady Tiffanyer demands her price. We must be grateful for her presence, and offer her our best. Those who can offer up food do so; those who cannot offer up their lives instead. That’s all there is to it.”

“What are you saying?! We’d hoped for a hieran menace to defend the country from magicite beasts! If she hurts people, she’s no different from those very creatures! How could that be for this country’s sake?”

“But Lady Tiffanyer will be pleased. That’s good enough for me. The rest is unimportant.”

“I can’t believe you’d say that, Sir Harim!”

“I like Lady Tiffanyer, Ian. She’s wonderful. See this? I had only a lower-class Rune, but with this stigmata, I’ve been reborn as a Highlander. And I’m not alone—she’s graced anyone who’s caught her fancy. She’s different from that stuck-up Evel, who only turned people into cold machines. It seems like you and General Diego drew the short straw. If it’d happened after Lady Tiffanyer arrived, you might have become Highlanders too.”

“But...!”

“And that’s not all. She gives us her love—the pleasure of being wrapped in her soft, sweet warmth is simply incomparable. But in your case, you’ll never feel the wondrous touch of a woman. Not with that body, will you?”

Ian took in a sharp breath. “Sir Harim! You’re not the Sir Harim I knew!”

“Indeed. Lady Tiffanyer has shaped me into someone new. In body and soul.”

“Sir Harim, that’s...! I remember when you were an administrator with a promising future!”

“Now, I can’t simply ignore a traitor who brings the enemy’s knights into our midst. I’ll be taking the supplies you have on board as well.”

“Wait! Please work with us! If the people are suffering under a hieran menace, we must stop her! For Alcard’s sake!”

"I refuse! To bring Lady Tiffanyer pleasure is all I care about. I've finally found the one to whom I am willing to offer myself up completely. It's in the best interest of this country to leave everything to her."

Ian gritted his teeth and turned his attention to the knights' academy students. "I'm sorry. I don't know if I can make him see reason..."

"No, I've seen enough to get some idea of the situation," Inglis said to Ian as she stepped forward.

From what Pullum's brother had said, this hieran menace—Tiffanyer—not only stole from the people of Alcard, but she also bestowed upon some Highlander powers and seduced those who were to be her pawns.

Tiffanyer was in no way like the hieran menaces Inglis knew—Eris, Ripple, even Sistia to a degree. They did not have the privilege of turning their chosen into Highlanders, and they had no intention of hurting people on the surface; even though they'd been sent from Highland, Eris and Ripple were especially sincere in their mission to protect others. They didn't seem to have any notion of gaining their own pawns through seduction. If they ever did develop such an inclination... They were beautiful, powerful ladies. Karelia would be in serious trouble.

Tiffanyer was a different kind of hieran menace. If she had different powers, a different disposition, then Inglis expected a battle with her would also be different. That was something to look forward to—but for now, a different battle altogether awaited her. With Ian's attempt at persuasion having failed, a fight seemed to be unavoidable.

"Leave the rest to me. What's the point in being in enemy territory without it turning out like this?" Inglis laughed. This would serve as a perfect warm-up to a fight with a hieran menace.

"Well, uh... You seem pretty happy about this, but...remember, that's Pullum's brother, and he's the son of a cabinet minister, so... At least *try* to keep him alive..." Ian cautioned.

"That goes without saying. It's better if one can repeatedly challenge strong foes. It would be a shame to defeat him only once. If he survives, I can fight him yet again."

"Well, umm... I mean, I appreciate the agreement, but I'm not quite sure about your reasoning... I...guess it'll work out?"

Ian's anxiety was obvious, so Rafinha nodded vigorously from the side in encouragement. "Don't worry, Ian. Chris is always like this."

"She is?! And the knights of Karelia allow such hostility?!"

"It's not really a good thing, but it's just how she is. It's like they say, you set a thief to catch a thief."

"Umm..."

"Well, excuse me," Inglis interjected. "Don't worry, I won't make things worse. I'm just going to have a little fun along the way."

"I hope so. Don't destroy the town like you did the theater in the capital, okay? Everyone's hiding," Rafinha warned.

"Yeah. Got it."

Inglis nodded and took measured steps toward Harim. Behind her, Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte fanned out, ready for whatever would come their way.

Harim sneered, his face oozing condescension as he watched. "Ha ha... A challenge from a Runeless? Is this some kind of joke?"

"I'm entirely serious," Inglis replied. "I can't let you do as you please with this town or our supplies. I'm here to resist."

"Ha ha ha ha! If you're opposing me, I won't hold back! Are you sure about this?"

"Yes. I would appreciate your giving it your all."

"Well, well. You're as much of a looker as Lady Tiffanyer, but it seems you're quite out of your mind. Still, we have uses for people like you—you can satisfy the other Highlanders, leaving Lady Tiffanyer all to me while they're distracted."

"Go right ahead. After you defeat me, that is."

"Ha ha ha ha ha! The hardest part will be keeping a Runeless opponent alive in a fight! But I'm sure the knights behind you can take your place—ahhh!" Harim's cackling suddenly cut off.

Inglis had closed the distance to him in no time at all, bounding to his Flygear. She gripped him by the neck and held him up. Her Aether Shell-powered movement had left him completely unable to react.

“Gah... Wh-What...?!”

“I don’t care what you say to me, but would you please stop saying untoward things to Rani? It could be detrimental to her healthy development.”

In fact, Rafinha had scoffed, “You’re the worst,” with a disgusted look on her face. Leone and Liselotte had responded much the same way. Inglis was sure that Pullum, in hiding, hadn’t appreciated her brother’s manner either—though for her, it was better to stay quiet.

“This power... This massive amount of mana?! Who are you?!” Harim choked out what words he could while grunting in pain.

Just as she had done in previous fights against powerful foes, Inglis was transforming the aether wrapped around her into mana. When she did so, those who could sense mana could finally feel her power rather than treating her as a weakling. As a Highlander now, Harim sensed it as she intended. He was utterly astonished before her. Thanks to that, Inglis concluded he would come at her with all his might without letting his guard down. After all, what was best but to persist in a hard-fought battle where she’d be pushed to her limits and come out victorious? It was the optimal growth strategy.

“I’m merely a squire. Or, since I’m on the battlefield, you may think of me as a simple soldier. You have no need to hold back or show mercy at all. Please, don’t go easy on me. Give me all you’ve got.” After reminding Harim of this, Inglis let go of his neck and jumped down from his Flygear, spinning once in the air before her feet elegantly tapped against the floor as she landed. “Now, then. Go right ahead.” Lightly poised, she beckoned with a smile.

The careless, mocking sneer that had been on Harim’s face was gone; he looked down upon her with sharp eyes. He was serious now.

My first real fight, real time on the battlefield in so long—I can’t wait. It may have happened by chance, but I’m going to enjoy it.

Harim waited patiently and silently, considering what approach to take.

But no matter what choice he made, Inglis had an idea of what to expect. Highlanders could use a magic that transported its targets to another dimension, similar to the effect of Leone's dark greatsword Artifact. Unlike Leone's, though, which simply created a dimension and then evacuated or isolated people there, the Highlanders' magic filled their created dimensions with particles that blocked the flow of mana, rendering Artifacts powerless inside.

It was likely because of this power that the Highlanders had no qualms about scattering Artifacts indiscriminately over the surface. Even if the knights of the surface countries were to turn the Artifacts' power against Highland, the Highlanders could simply neutralize those weapons by pulling them into this dimension before striking back.

Rahl's father, who went by the name Fars after becoming a Highlander, had also used such magic, so it was likely Harim could as well. The Highlanders likely considered it their last line of defense, but Inglis thought that since Harim had sensed her power, it wouldn't be surprising if he jumped straight to using it. She wouldn't mind if he did. In that dimension, she could let loose and fight without worrying about causing any harm to her surroundings. Plus, Rafinha's, Leone's, and Liselotte's Artifacts wouldn't function, so she could have the enemies all to herself.

Hurry up and pull me into that other dimension! I want to fight you all! Inglis thought, watching Harim in anticipation.

Instead, Harim waved his hand, a signal to his men. "Go!"

Is he being cautious or still underestimating me? Inglis was fine with that in either case; it would let her savor the fight for longer.

Harim's soldiers wore helmets that covered their entire faces, making it impossible to see their expressions. They reminded Inglis of the large, enslaved man whom Rahl had brought to her hometown of Ymir. They, too, were likely a Highlander's enslaved bodyguards. At any rate, two of the silent soldiers pointed the prows of their Flygears at her at Harim's signal.

Sching!

From those prows, several thick iron thorns sprang forth. They were spikes used in conjunction with a vehicle-ramming attack.

“I see... What a vicious weapon,” Inglis commented. The speed and weight of the Flygear would make those spikes skewer the target. They would leave barely a trace of their victim behind. Harim and his men must have used them to lay waste to Alcard. The thorns of the Flygears were stained red.

“Those are covered with blood! You must have killed so many innocent people with those... How dare you!” Rafinha yelled.

“You lot are terrible! If anything, I’m glad you spotted us!” Leone agreed.

“Indeed! This way we can stop you from hurting any more people!” Liselotte said.

All three of them were enraged. They deeply cared about justice, and they possessed kind hearts. They weren’t the kind of girls who would stand by and watch as the powerless were oppressed.

Inglis didn’t consider that a bad thing. Their youth could cause them to act recklessly, their misjudgments could occasionally lead them to failure—but one could not be a good knight without keeping that spirit at the core of their being. One could not protect or lead people without it.

That was also why Inglis had renounced such sentiments in her new life, but she still had a deep respect for their anger on behalf of foreigners they had no connection to. On the other hand, she didn’t want them to get involved right now. She needed all the opponents she could get! If only this fight could be taken to one of those mysterious dimensions...

Vwooom!

Her wish remained ungranted, as the engines of the two enemy Flygears roared and plunged toward her at full acceleration. Their charge took full advantage of the Flygears’ speed and mass. If she avoided them, the Flygears would surely crash into the ground or a building.

“Wh—?! If you dodge that, they’ll only hurt themselves!” Rafinha gasped.

“Rani! Everyone! Get back!”

Rafinha and the others scattered at her call. Inglis remained motionless, thinking, *This way, they’re only targeting me—meaning, they’re all mine.* She was thankful for the enemy’s reckless approach. And a desperate charge, self-destructive if avoided, was honestly the right attack to use when facing Inglis. She had absolutely no intention of avoiding it after all.

Enemy attacks are to be met head-on!

“Haaaah!”

Inglis stretched out her hands toward the ramming horns of the two approaching Flygears. With one in each hand, left and right, she brought them to an abrupt and complete stop.

Vweeeeeem!

The Flygears, forced to a standstill, practically shrieked in pain as their engines began humming even louder.

“Now this is worth it! Not bad!” she exclaimed.

It was an appropriate challenge without her using Aether Shell and while enhancing gravity on herself with magic. It would have been even better if two or three more Flygears came in. Fortunately, there were still many hovering above. Calling them down and having a contest of strength with everyone seemed like a fun idea.

“This doesn’t make sense! Where do you find such strength in your slender body?! You’re like Lady Tiffanyer...!” Harim yelled.

“Two Flygears aren’t enough.” As Inglis applied even more force, the rears of the two Flygears rose higher in the air.

Drrrggggggggg!

As if something had broken within them, the machinery began to make strange noises.

“Now why don’t you all come down and help out? I’d never say something tactless like ‘outnumbering someone is cowardice’—the more the merrier, right?” Inglis urged the enemy soldiers on with a gentle, ladylike smile.

If it were to dance or dine, anyone would be delighted with such an invitation from such a stunning beauty, but it was a different story when she was holding back two high-performance Flygears by brute force.

In fact, it was precisely because Harim found Inglis so beautiful that she now evoked unfathomable dread. “Ugh...!” It was neither by mistake nor coincidence that she’d been able to strangle him without even a hint of a struggle. Still, Harim also had a plan.

“What’s wrong, Harim? You or your men are welcome to join in,” she challenged.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Harim said, the surprise and impatience from before replaced with a calm, cold smile.

He snapped his fingers. In the two Flygears that Inglis held, the bodies of the enemy soldiers who gripped the control sticks were suddenly enveloped in a blinding light.

Inglis gasped. *This... This rapid swelling of mana!*

Not only that, but as the mana emitted from the enemy soldiers, it flowed into their Flygears and its outburst was further accelerated.

“Ngh!” Panicking, she leaped high. With the two Flygears still in her arms, she landed on the roof of a nearby building.

Booooooom!

The enemy soldiers, along with the Flygears they rode, exploded. Inglis had sensed this coming, bounding upward as quickly as she could to avoid catching

Rafinha and the others, or any buildings, in the explosion. Her three friends below screamed.

“Chris?!”

“Inglis!”

“Inglis, no!”

The close-range explosion sent Inglis’s body flying, smashing through a wall and landing inside the inn where they had recently rented lodging.

“Ha ha ha! Good reflexes! But you’re too naive, throwing away your life to save those around you!” Harim snickered.

Inglis understood now. His plan from the beginning must have been to use those under his command for a devastatingly powerful attack. If that was the case, of course his men would have charged forward so self-destructively. After all, they knew that was the plan going in.

Self-destructing at Harim’s command—that might have originally been designed as a measure to prevent rebellion, but here it was a means of attack.

Moreover, perhaps in combination with the magic that Highlander Flygears amplified and shot out, that vehicle-ramming attack had been incredibly destructive. Harim hadn’t pulled her into another dimension because he could hold the surrounding buildings and people hostage here. If Inglis had avoided their first attack, the enemy would have hurt innocent people. Seeing that, she would have been unable to bring herself to avoid the second. Such a tactic would have been unavailable had he used Highlander dimension magic.

In other words, Harim hadn’t held back, nor had he been acting cautiously. He had attacked with full force from the beginning. It was inhumane. It was a tactic Inglis couldn’t enjoy at all, as her enemies would self-destruct and be gone. She couldn’t deny its effectiveness, though.

“Oh, you poor dear! Ahhh, why did it come to this! I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!” The innkeeper rushed into the destroyed room and ran to Inglis’s side in tears.

Yet Inglis hopped lightly to her feet.

“Huuuh?!”

"Ah, sorry to damage the room, ma'am." Inglis bowed her head.

"No, no, that's fine—but wait! I had been hiding, but that was a really big, loud explosion! I can't believe you could have made it out without a scratch. How are you on your feet?!"

"Well, I work out a lot." Inglis smiled as she brushed the dust off her clothes.

In reality, she'd covered her body with Aether Shell just before the explosion. It would take an even more powerful blast to pierce her defensive wall of aether. The only problem was that, in the air without a firm footing, the collision had bounced her around.

"How dare you use such a dirty trick on Chris!" Rafinha yelled outside. Inglis could hear the rage making her voice tremble.

"Ah, that's no good—ma'am, I'll apologize properly later." Inglis cheerfully jumped back through the hole in the wall.



“Wait, Rani!” Changing direction with a midair somersault, she returned to where Rafinha and the others were. The trio was glaring at Harim, but once she landed, they gave her a big hug from behind.

“Chris! Are you okay?! You’re not hurt, are you?”

“Not at all. It’s okay, I’m fine.”

“Really? How about here?!”

“Eeek! Y-You don’t have to poke me there all of a sudden!”

“But you really are unhurt! My worrying was a waste. It’s too bad you weren’t hurt a little—I could have healed you.”

“Umm... That’s—”

“And that way you wouldn’t always be so reckless. I’m always so worried about you...”

“Aha ha ha. Sorry for scaring you like that. I hadn’t expected them to do that.” Inglis never would have guessed Harim’s men had been prepared to die in such a fashion.

“Seriously! Just commanding that out of nowhere, it’s like he doesn’t see people as people!” Rafinha shouted. “I’m sorry, but I don’t care if he is Pullum’s brother. I have nothing good to say about him! There are a lot of Highlanders that really rub me the wrong way!”

“It’s an effective tactic—it took me off guard, after all—but I agree, Rani. It’s a waste, and it doesn’t impress me,” Inglis said, turning toward Harim.

He couldn’t conceal his surprise. “Impossible! After all that, you’re still unhurt?! But even so...”

He was up to something again. Inglis was grateful that he hadn’t lost his will to fight yet, but she had reasons to be suspicious.

“Listen,” Harim said. “You saw that explosion. One signal from me, and my men crash straight into those buildings and explode. And you know what that means, don’t you?”

“That the townspeople hiding inside are your hostages?” Inglis replied,

catching on.

Harim smirked. "Correct! I'm glad you're so perceptive."

"Wh—?! That's so underhanded! Can't you fight fair?!" Rafinha shouted.

"Hmph. What value is there in fairness? This is all for Lady Tiffanyer! Any tactics are justified if they're for her sake! Besides, were she to see this, she'd be delighted by how amusing it is!" Harim boasted.

"Just what kind of hieran menace is she?" Rafinha spat.

"I don't want to believe it, but it seems not all hieran menaces care about the surface," Leone said.

"We're fortunate to be protected by Lady Eris and Lady Ripple..." Liselotte remarked.

Each made their distaste for Tiffanyer clear, but one person felt differently.

"I can't wait to meet her," Inglis said with a laugh. That was how it was for her.

"You'll never meet Lady Tiffanyer, because I'm going to finish you off here! Now, come on. You know what you have to do to save those townspeople," Harim taunted.

"Ugh... This is bad, Chris!"

"We can't just run away!" Leone said.

"But we can't mount a counterattack either!" Liselotte said.

Whether they fled or counterattacked, Harim would have his men explode themselves along with the townspeople. They could abandon the idea of protecting the nearby people, but that wouldn't be an easy decision for Rafinha and the others to come to. If it came to that, it would probably leave scars on their hearts. That left Inglis with one choice.

"Yes, I understand. Meaning..." Inglis held her empty palms to the sky, stepping forward. "We take you out before you can do a thing, right?"

"Huh...?" everyone muttered.

Inglis focused on one thing: *Aether Strike!*

Blammmmmmm!

A gigantic blast of blue light roared forth, racing from the ground to the sky. Swallowed in its massive destructive power, two of Harim's men vanished in an instant, Flygears and all.

But only two of them. There were still plenty more.

"What?! You've got a lot of nerve! Men, show her what happens when you cross us!" Harim glared at Inglis—who was no longer there. "Wh—?! Where are you?! No, that doesn't matter! Do it!"

"You'll have to stop me first! Haaaaah!" Inglis's voice rang out from different directions. It followed the trajectory of her Aether Strike, which she was bouncing around with kicks to swallow the various enemy soldiers. Wrapped in the glow of Aether Shell, she was already winding up another kick.

Blammmmmmm!

Inglis swung her leg through the air, and the Aether Strike changed direction, swallowing another soldier in its path and his Flygear along with him.

"D-Don't falter! Spread out and charge!" Harim ordered. However, Inglis moved far faster than his words.

Blammmmmmm!

As the sound of blows echoed, the Aether Strike twisted again and again, taking out a soldier each time.

Slam! Slam! Slam! Slam! Slam!

Each time the Aether Strike changed its trajectory, the number of enemies

decreased. And finally...

“Haaaaah!”

Blammmmm!

“Aaagh!” The last impact of the Aether Strike shot straight up, grazing Harim’s face as it shot off into the sky and disappeared.

At that moment, each of Harim’s men had been swallowed by the light and vanished. Inglis could, of course, have hit Harim with it as well—but she chose to respect Ian’s request.

“Y-You really did settle that quickly,” Leone said in dismay.

“A-Amazing, Chris!”

“It was so bright that I could hardly keep my eyes open!” Liselotte gasped.

“I’d wanted to take my time fighting them, but with circumstances how they were...” Inglis said.

It’d been the opportunity for a real fight. She wanted to face a challenge, no matter the circumstances. She didn’t like to use overwhelming force and kill her opponents in the blink of an eye at all. She couldn’t help but feel pity for Harim’s men. If they’d lived, maybe she could have fought them again, but it had been the only way to stop them from hurting everyone around at Harim’s will.

Ignoring the humanitarian issues of that tactic, Inglis deemed it a powerful attack with huge costs. While she was well aware that Harim wasn’t an admirable human being, she could tell he had a brilliant mind.

“Well, I also got to try out a new technique, so I guess I have to say it turned out well.”

Strictly speaking, it wasn’t a new technique, but rather a new application of Aether Strike and Aether Breaker. If a foe was likely to self-destruct along with their surroundings when attacked, it was best to unhesitatingly use Aether Strike to obliterate them.

Inglis's aether endurance wasn't sufficient to handle multiple uses of Aether Strike to take out several foes across a great distance. Therefore, she had to use a single Aether Strike to vanquish multiple foes. Rather than direct fire, she needed a guided projectile that chased the enemy.

However, aether was a difficult power to handle, and Inglis didn't yet possess that kind of precise control. She couldn't even curve its path.

With his control, the black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front might be able to, but...

Inglis couldn't guide the trajectory of her Aether Strike, but she could do what she'd just done—get ahead of the projectile, then forcibly alter its path with a blow under the effect of Aether Shell, allowing her to simulate the effect of a guided projectile.

"I guess that was the direct approach—kicking the blast of light to force it to change trajectory," Inglis assessed.

"But very like you, Inglis. Very, very like you," Leone said.

"Indeed," Liselotte agreed.

"Yeah. You have such a sweet face, Chris, but your solution to every problem involves brute force."

"That's not very nice. I'm just trying to experience as many battles as possible, not solve problems."

"Isn't that even worse?" Rafinha asked.

"Besides, that was actually a pretty complex maneuver," Inglis insisted. It may have seemed like brute force, but it had required delicate control. If Inglis had simply smashed Aether Shell into Aether Strike, their interaction would have caused an explosion at that point of several times their individual destructive power. That was Aether Breaker, the technique she'd used against the larval Prismers. In order for the blow to change the Aether Strike's trajectory, she needed to consciously adjust the aether's wavelength.

It was only recently that Inglis had become able to do such a thing at all. As a result of assisting the Weismar Troupe with their recent performance, and both

sparring with Yua and observing her control of her powers up close, Inglis had gained a deeper awareness of that power's wavelength and flow.

Yua seemed to have grown stronger by absorbing the Prism's power rather than being absorbed by it, and Inglis looked forward to a rematch. Although Yua didn't want to spar without a reason, so Inglis would need to find a good excuse.

"And, with that out of the way..." Inglis turned her gaze back to Harim, who was left alone.

"Grrr...! H-How'd you take them out so fast?! Are you some kind of monster?!"

As Harim shuddered, Inglis smiled at him. "Now run along back to Leclair, and tell Tiffanyer this: 'I'll be visiting soon, and I'd like to spar,' if you would."

"Ugh...! So you're letting me go? You'll regret this!"

With that, Harim's form twisted, and he and his Flygear disappeared. Inglis assumed he'd finally used his dimension-shifting magic, but to escape.

"I guess that's about all for today." Inglis still felt a bit let down, but she'd been able to try out a technique she'd just learned in a real battle, so on the balance she was pleased.

However, there were people who were struggling with what they'd just witnessed.

"Sir Harim... I can't believe you'd..." Ian muttered, slumping his shoulders.

"Ah...! Wait, Pullum! You can't go out yet!" Lahti yelled as he chased after Pullum, both of them appearing from the cargo aboard the Flygear Port.

"Stupid Harim! Why are you doing such terrible things?! If this is how you are now, I don't ever want to see you again!" Pullum cried. Harim was already gone, though. He could not give her an answer.

"Oww... She got so violent! I had a hard time holding her back!" Lahti grumbled. He'd been holding Pullum back the whole time as she was about to jump out and confront Harim. It was a humble, but important, job.

"Thank you for that, Lahti," Inglis said.

“No worries. But really, dammit, Harim!”

The events of the day had left a heavy weight on the three Alcardians.

Chapter III: Inglis, Age 15—The Evil Hieral Menace

(3)

After the encounter at Tsira, Inglis and her group headed north out of town via their Flygear Port. They had departed quickly while discussing whether to travel directly to the capital or to visit Leclair first. They could gather information from towns along their path before they reached the point where the paths split.

Five days of recon later, they reached the town where the roads diverged. However, something wasn't quite right. Watching from aboard the Flygear Port, they got the vague unease that the place was strangely quiet. There was absolutely no sign of human activity; something had to be amiss. They hurried to get a closer look, steering the Flygear Port directly into town instead of hiding it on the outskirts.

Grrrggg! Grrrggg!

As they alighted from the ship, Inglis and Rafinha's stomachs rumbled loudly. The two were starving. Both exhaled loudly while rubbing their bellies.

"That was really loud... Are you two okay?" Leone asked.

"That was rather unladylike," Liselotte said.

"Oh man, so much for this tense moment," Lahti joked.

"W-Well, it's probably been hard for Inglis and Rafinha while they've been eating less food than what they're used to..." Pullum replied in their defense.

"Pullum's right," Ian said, further defusing the situation. "It's thanks to their sacrifice that we've given so many people a respite from their hunger. Let's just pretend we didn't hear their stomachs."

Grrrgggl! Grrrgggl!

“It’s not like happy thoughts are gonna fill their stomachs, though, Ian...” Lahti grumbled.

“Ha ha ha!” Everyone shared a laugh at the scene.

“Still, we’re all young noblewomen. It’s not really ladylike, is it?” Leone commented.

“It’s fine. This was something we had to do. We definitely made the right decision,” Rafinha stated firmly.

Every town and village their group had stopped at was in dire straits. Everywhere they went, they found starving inhabitants enduring the same indiscriminate requisitioning as Tsira had. In some cases, it was even worse.

Rafinha couldn’t turn a blind eye to this, and shared their stocks of food with everyone they encountered. By doing so, they’d run through even the excessive quantities of food they’d prepared, and were now in a constant state of hunger.

Rafinha was such a sweet young girl. Inglis thought it was very noble of her granddaughter-like friend, so she went along with it, but...it was still quite the painful experience.

“This is more than us being noblewomen—it was the *human* thing to do. If we didn’t help those people, what would have happened to them? I’m not embarrassed at all. It’s just proof we did the right thing,” Rafinha asserted.

Grrrgggl!

Even as her stomach groaned, Rafinha puffed out her chest proudly.

“Rani...”

Rafinha was stubborn at times like this. She had a solid core and never wavered on her sense of justice or her beliefs, which was one of her best qualities as a member of a ruling family and a leader of knights and subjects. Rafael, her older brother, was always on his best behavior, while Rafinha was

usually a little undisciplined and sometimes even spoiled by Inglis, but the two shared this underlying trait. They were very much alike, and Inglis considered that quality necessary for a good ruler.

“If you don’t want your stomach rumbling, eat this. It’ll take your mind off of it for a little while. Here you go, here’s some sugar,” Inglis offered.

“More snow? I guess... It doesn’t really fill my stomach, but...” Rafinha sprinkled the sugar on one of the many clean clumps of snow nearby before she brought it to her mouth.

“We don’t really have any other options. And there’s plenty of snow to go around,” Inglis said.

“I guess...”

“A-Anyway, why don’t you stay here for a while? We’ll go on ahead and check out the town,” Leone suggested.

Leone and the rest of the group left Inglis and Rafinha behind to enter the town first. Inglis and Rafinha watched them go as they pushed sugary snow into their mouths. It was almost like a dessert, but it wasn’t filling at all.

“Hey, Rani. Worst-case scenario, we can catch a magicite beast and eat it, maybe?”

Rafinha paused, actually giving that some thought. “It’s probably something we should consider as emergency rations...but I haven’t seen the Prism Flow around here.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

The Prism Flow rarely fell on Alcard, which also meant there were few magicite beasts in the region. Yet, something like a Prismer had appeared and destroyed Leclair. Inglis had suspected that indicated an increase in the Prism Flow in Alcard, but she hadn’t seen evidence of that during their travels so far.

So, what could have happened...?

“If this were Karelia, it would be easy to spot the Prism Flow just by scouting from the sky with a Flygear,” Rafinha said. They hadn’t seen a single sign of the Prism Flow off in the distance from aboard the Flygear Port in Alcard.

"That's right. I don't know if this is just a coincidence, but even if the Prism Flow has increased here, it's still nothing compared to its intensity in Karelia. I don't understand what's been happening here."

"Ugh, the one time we *do* want to see magicite beasts! Anyway, all we have for now is snow. At least that won't betray us!"

Inglis sighed. "I guess. I'm getting a little tired of the taste, so maybe I'll try salt instead of sugar..."

"Oooh, me too."

They added salt from their provisions rather than sugar, and they each took a bite of their new dish. Of course, it tasted only of salt—quite salty, in fact.

Inglis sighed again. "I want some meat..."

"Don't say that, Chris. It just makes it worse."

"Yeah, sorry."

"Anyway, speaking of things that show up only when they're unwanted... Where's the Steelblood Front? You'd think with the Highlanders running wild here, they'd be first in line to wipe them out, instead of attacking Cyrene or the palace in Chiral." Rafinha took a break to munch on some snow. "Well, I guess maybe they only operate in Karelia? But they have that huge flying battleship, so why not come here?"

"You have a point. I think they could definitely travel here—if they wanted to, that is."

"If they're so anti-Highlander, then why haven't they?"

"We didn't know what things were like here until we arrived, so it's possible they don't know either."

That said, Inglis figured the Steelblood Front should possess a wider informant network than their group did. She wouldn't have been surprised if they'd moved first, but there had been no sign of them since entering Alcard.

"I think they're unlikely to make a move here," Inglis said.

"But why?"

“I’ve been watching their movements, and...well, that’s my intuition.”

To be precise, Inglis was concerned with the results and consequences of the Steelblood Front’s moves. They’d raised their banner against Highland and publicly made moves to oppose individual Highlanders, but...she had to look at what had resulted from their operations, specifically the changes in people’s positions and influence. When she took that into account, it seemed almost like they had some deeper principle behind them. While it was true they attacked Highlanders who were causing harm to the surface, it didn’t seem like these were simply attacks of opportunity. The identity of their targets may have been connected to the true identity of the black-masked man.

But this was all just a possibility. Nothing more than a guess, and if wrong, it could lead her astray, so Inglis was still waiting to see what the Steelbloods’ next move would be. If they didn’t show themselves during her Alcard trip, then perhaps her guess was more likely to be true.

“And that’s what you’re hoping for, Chris? So you can fight the evil Highlanders yourself?”

“No, I’d welcome the Steelblood Front joining. I’d have more people to fight that way. Wasn’t it fun when they attacked the palace?”

“That was awful! You were the only one that enjoyed it.”

“Huh, I thought everyone was having a great time. Wouldn’t the world be more peaceful if everyone fought just for fun?”

“What?! No, that’s silly.”

“No, it isn’t. If people fought solely for enjoyment, they wouldn’t care about their differences in ideals. They wouldn’t fight for their own gain or to push those ideals on others. They wouldn’t treat combat as a way of solving problems. People would be at least a little more at peace with one another.” It was hard to think of it in any other way, having lived one life as a king leading his people and another as a young squire girl seeking to master the blade.

Rafinha shot her a disapproving look and grabbed her by the cheeks. “Don’t! Joke! Around! C’mon, be serious!”

“Whff? Wfh vhu vhu mmhm? Ehvem heen heriuf!” Inglis mumbled. Few other

than Rafinha would have understood what she was saying.

“No, I don’t want to hear it! That would mean everyone was like you, Chris! And we can’t have more of you! We only even get to have one because I’m keeping an eye on you. If there were more I wouldn’t be able to keep up!”

“Haafh haafh haafh...” Inglis gave a funny-sounding laugh, her cheeks still being pulled in different directions.

“Hm? What, what’s with you?”

“Well, I know it’s a lot of work, but what about just one more of me? I know what you said, but...”

“Huh?! Wh-Why?”

“If we head to Alcard’s capital, Evel’s lab might still be there—you know, where he made all those lans? I want to use it to make another me.”

“What?! Wait, is that the real reason you want to go to the capital?”

“It’s not the only reason, but it is one factor among many.”

Inglis was sure that if there were two of her, they’d see eye to eye and view each other as the perfect partner to continually spar with. That was how they’d both polish their skills. With that, there’d be no need to look for strong foes—or rather, less of a need. She’d still want to fight a variety of foes, but at least she wouldn’t have to endure the boredom of having no one to fight.

Life was short. Being unable to find a foe, no matter how much you longed for one, was regrettable. Having someone to fill that void was indispensable.

“No way. We need to free the people from the Leclair prison!” Rafinha insisted.

“Well, that’s kind of—” Inglis began.

“Aaahhhhhhhh!” Someone shrieked in sorrow from afar.

“What was that?!” Rafinha asked.

“It sounded like Pullum,” Inglis said.

“Let’s go see what happened, Chris!”

“Yeah!”

Inglis and Rafinha dropped the snow and ran in the direction of the scream until they came across a stone church in a secluded part of town. As they entered, they saw no one, but they could hear Pullum’s sobs.

“Pullum...?! Where are you?!”

“We’re in the basement! Go to the back room on the right as you enter!” Liselotte answered.

The others had clearly made their way here first and stumbled upon something. Following her directions, Inglis and Rafinha found the entrance to the hidden staircase leading to the basement. It had been left open. Running down the dimly lit stairs, they found Leone, Lahti, and Ian. It was the entire rest of the group, but it wasn’t just them.

The bodies of several children were huddled together on the floor in a pile, unmoving.

“Ugh!” Inglis grunted on reflex.

“That’s terrible!” Rafinha cried.

The children were all unnaturally thin, obviously malnourished. With no visible injuries, they had likely died of starvation.

“They were probably hiding here away from the Highlander attack...but then no one came to help them... And...” Rafinha trailed off, heartbroken.

They didn’t even look to be ten years old yet. The adults of the town must have desperately been trying to protect them. Sadly, that heartfelt hope hadn’t come true.

“We didn’t see any adults around... Where could they be?” Ian asked.

“Probably taken to Leclair, or left fallen out there, buried in the snow...” Inglis replied. If they dug through the snow, they could have possibly found some corpses. “The closer we get to Leclair, the worse off the villages and towns are. If this keeps going, eventually, those we’ve already visited will...”

“We need to hurry! We can’t let this keep happening!” Rafinha’s eyes were filled with an intense determination.

"M-My brother... Harim did this... I-I don't know what to say to you... I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" As his younger sister, Pullum was hurting immensely, seeing the harm he'd caused up close. She'd collapsed to the ground, unable to rise. Her voice shook, and tears were streaming down her face.

"Pullum!" Rafinha was about to say something to her, but someone stopped her.

This wasn't Inglis's place to speak, but one person knew how it felt. Leone glanced at the others, her eyes seeming to tell them to leave it to her.

Leone sat down next to Pullum. "Pullum... I understand it hurts. I'm certain you're feeling like drowning in your sorrow. You feel responsible for what your own family—your own brother—did, right? You think maybe you could have done something before, but now you can't, and you're powerless..."

Pullum choked words through her sobs. "Y-Yes... I...I don't know what to do now that he's done this...!"

"I know how you feel. My brother was a holy knight before he betrayed his country to join the Steelblood Front. Everyone around us said we were a family of traitors. I felt sad and remorseful. I couldn't do anything but cry. When I could think again, I found myself all alone with nothing...but I don't regret that pain! It taught me that I'm *me*, not him. I'm going to capture him with my own hands and redeem my family's name... You're the same. No matter what your brother did, you're *you*, not him."



Leone's eyes burned as she held the shaking Pullum by her shoulders and helped her to her feet.

Pullum continued to sob. "L-Leone..."

"Crying won't change anything. It can't fix what's happened. So let's cry today, and tomorrow we'll do what we can. We'll put an end to this as soon as possible. We won't let your brother fall deeper into treachery. You'll be okay. You're not alone. There's someone who can support you right by your side."

Leone turned to Lahti.

"Uh... Huh...?" he mumbled.

"What are you waiting for? Someone you deeply care for is hurting. You should be by her side to embrace her."

"No, wait, I—"

"This is no time for complaining! Get to it!" Leone's voice rumbled like thunder. It was rare for her to raise her voice in such a manner.

"Y-Yes...!" Lahti tentatively wrapped his arms around Pullum. "I-It's okay. I'm here for you..."

"Wahhhh! Lahti! I... I... Waaaaah!" Relieved, Pullum cried loudly as she clung to Lahti.

"Let's give them some space while we find somewhere in town where we can rest. We're spending the night here, right?" Leone said, leading everyone except Pullum and Lahti back upstairs. She always carried herself in an upright and dignified fashion, but today her back seemed a bit straighter than usual, her pace a little faster.

As the others followed, Rafinha murmured quietly. "Leone's strong... She was powerful. Persuasive too."

"Agreed," Liselotte said after a heavy silence.

"I never could have done that... I've never experienced anything like this with Rafael being my brother. Nothing I could have said would have helped."

Indeed, Rafael was a holy knight, respected by one and all in Karelia. He was

the pinnacle of the country's knights. Gentle in nature, irreproachable in conduct, utterly impeccable—Rafinha could imagine him no other way. Comparing Harim to him was like comparing muck to the clouds. She could never understand the feeling of a sister whose fate was cast adrift by her brother's deeds. Rafael had never caused her any trouble.

Meanwhile, Inglis didn't consider Leon a bad person, but there was no doubt that he had hurt his family, primarily his sister, Leone. She was the one who could understand Pullum's feelings the best.

"Compared to Leone, I'm still just a little kid..." Rafinha continued.

Inglis clapped a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay. Just understanding that means you've grown up enough."

This was a matter for the future, but Inglis thought that, in a way, Rafinha might end up being the one who suffered the most. However, as long as Inglis was around, she had every intention of crushing anyone or anything that might make Rafinha cry.

"Why are you trying to act like a big sister? You're the one who does whatever you want and doesn't have any trouble, Chris." There was a slight sulk in Rafinha's smile.

Inglis chuckled. "Yeah, I guess." She walked faster, pretending to run away from Rafinha, and caught up with Leone. Then, as she passed, she subtly took out a handkerchief and pressed it into Leone's hand.

"Thank you. You pick the oddest times to be considerate, Inglis."

Inglis hadn't looked at Leone's face, but she heard her voice catch for a moment. Rafinha might have seen her as more mature, but Leone was still just a fifteen-year-old girl. Speaking of her own memories of her painful past would surely have reawakened them in herself. She had to be feeling emotionally vulnerable after such a talk. Showing such deep empathy for Pullum, and trying to cheer her up, meant showing her own wounds that she'd prefer not to touch on.

She must have desperately held back her own tears for Pullum's sake.

"You're welcome. C'mon, Rani. We'll look over there. Let's go."

"Ah, wait, Chris!"

As Leone had suggested, the group found an abandoned house in the town. They reconvened and spent the night there after a long day.



Morning came, and before Inglis's eyes was an absolutely stunning figure. One might even say this girl was the most beautiful in the world.

Inglis was still dressed in the thin underwear in which she had slept. The exposed skin of her glamorous, perfect curves was a pale pink from the cold. Then there was the girl's beautiful, lovely face.

Inglis couldn't keep her eyes off her. She wanted to see her from every angle.

The room was cold enough that Inglis could see her breath, so she really ought to have dressed quickly, but it had been a long time since she had last seen her reflection in a mirror. She hummed as she stared. She couldn't stop. Having chosen a room with a large mirror was dangerous.

She bent forward to take a closer look at herself, then turned around to appreciate the curve of her back meeting her hips.

She considered this a somewhat mature way to enjoy oneself. From every angle, she was, as always, beautiful—no flattery or bias involved. She already had the allure of an adult woman.

Her thoughts on having been reborn in a woman's body hadn't changed. She didn't consider it a bad thing. After all, she never got tired of looking at herself, and she could appreciate her appearance as much as she wanted without upsetting anyone. It wasn't like she was ogling anyone but herself. Precisely because of her past life as a man—her tastes having remained the same even now—female beauty was a captivating force. Perhaps she was the best in the world at enjoying her own.

Whoosh!

Something quickly poked under Inglis's arms—the smooth, soft fingers of a

girl—and latched onto Inglis's chest mercilessly.

“Eek! Stop it, Rani! You always—”

“That’s my line. You always get distracted in front of a mirror and leave yourself wide open. It’s like you’re asking for a sneak attack!”

“I am not! Stop it, that tickles!”

“Hey, I’m jealous of what I don’t have, so I wanna touch them! You’re my squire, so what’s yours is mine. It’s okay, right?”

“It is *not* okay!”

“It’s so chilly in here. My hands are freezing. Let me warm them up! ♪”
Rafinha shoved her hands into Inglis’s cleavage.

“Eeeeek?!” Inglis felt her body seize. Rafinha’s hands were not only cold—they were icy.

“Mmm, so warm, so squishy and bouncy... I see why Rin enjoys getting comfy in there. Right, Rin?”

The tiny magicite beast, who’d been perched on Rafinha’s shoulder, tried to assert her own claim as she climbed into Inglis’s cleavage. Between Rafinha’s hands and Rin’s scurrying, there was a traffic jam around Inglis’s chest.

“Ugh...! Just one of you is more than enough!” Inglis complained.

The commotion woke Leone and Liselotte from their slumbers. Having left Lahti to be with Pullum, the four had slept in this room.

Liselotte yawned. “Please, you two are raising quite the ruckus...”

“And so early in the morning... What’s going on?” Leone asked.

“Ah, save me, Leone!” Inglis turned to the two fighting over her cleavage. “See, look! Hers are even bigger! Go over there!” she pleaded.

“All right, Rin! Let’s go!” Rafinha announced, moments before they pounced on their new target.

“Eeek! You’re cold... And it tickles! Ah! Stop it! Not there!” Leone protested.

“Phew, saved by Leone’s noble sacrifice...” Inglis said.

The four were still making a commotion without having changed for the day when a sudden noise interrupted.

Slam!

The door swung open violently, and Lahti entered without knocking. “Listen, we’ve got trouble—aaagh!”

“Eeeeeek!” Naturally, Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte screamed. It was a natural reaction for girls their age.

“S-Sor—oof!” Lahti began, just for Inglis to grab him by the neck and pin him to the ground.



“Lahti, no matter how friendly we are, you can’t peek at Rani in her underwear. After Duke Bilford asked me to take care of her, I can’t overlook something so rude.”

“I can’t even see her! All I see is you! Up close! They’re poking me! I’ll leave right away, I swear! Just let me go!” Lahti shouted at what he must have considered to be an unexpected turn of events.

Flustered, he left the room. Inglis and the others began to change, but Lahti was getting impatient. He called out to them from outside. “Hey, have you seen Pullum and Ian?”

“No, not since yesterday,” Rafinha said.

“Did something happen?” Inglis asked.

“Th-They’re gone! Both of them!” Lahti answered.

“What?!”

“I hope they’re just taking a walk, but...” Lahti trailed off.

Inglis could understand why he didn’t want to finish that sentence. Ian had been their enemy not too long ago. However, he was a good person at heart, and his love for his country and its people was stronger than anyone’s. Inglis hadn’t let her guard down around him, but she did trust him to a degree, and Lahti didn’t want to admit that his trust had been betrayed.

“I’m sorry, but could you help me find them?” he asked.

“That’s terrible! Of course we’ll help! Be right there!” Rafinha replied.

Inglis hurriedly stopped her as she was about to rush out the door. “Wait, Rani! You’re not even dressed yet!” She had been about to leave without a shirt. If she had, all of Inglis’s constant vigilance against bad influences would have been in vain. It would be unforgivable for a man to see her defenseless, underwear-clad form—it would be *reprehensible*. And Inglis would be strictly enforcing this.

“Huh...? Oh, right. I was in such a hurry that I forgot!”

“You must take greater care. Going out in your underwear is unladylike. Girls

should live their daily lives with modesty and demureness—as my aunt always says.”

“I’m not sure you have room to talk, having just tackled a boy by the neck in your underwear.”

“I don’t care! It was to protect you, Rani!”

“Sure, sure. Sometimes you really do nag too much, Chris.”

“Why are you two playing around? I’m going on ahead!” Leone, who had finished changing first, rushed out of the room.

“Ah, wait...! We need to hurry!” Rafinha said.

After waiting for Rafinha to finish dressing, they joined back up and searched the city, but Pullum and Ian were nowhere to be found.



“How about you?” Rafinha asked.

Leone shook her head. “No luck over here. Nothing that could give us some kind of clue.”

“I also didn’t see anything out of the ordinary,” Liselotte said.

“Our supplies seem undisturbed. It doesn’t look like they took a Flygear either,” Inglis said. As far as she could tell, there was nothing out of place about the Flygear Port’s cargo or the Flygears it carried. Furthermore, she hadn’t seen any sign of footprints leading out of town.

“Meaning... They’ve disappeared?!” Lahti shouted, panicking.

If they left neither on foot nor by Flygear... Inglis thought.

“The only thing I can think of is that someone may have taken them away via a different method of transportation,” Leone offered.

Inglis couldn’t say for sure, but she had a feeling that Leone’s suspicion was correct. However, it was still unclear whether Ian was a victim as well. He could have assisted an external actor.

“And the person coming from outside to do that would be...” Inglis murmured.

“In that case, there’s one obvious suspect,” Liselotte said.

“Harim...!” Lahti exclaimed.

He was naturally someone they needed to be wary of. Given the current situation in Alcard, he was a member of the only hostile force present. The Steelbloods hadn’t shown themselves yet, and Alcard’s armed forces were mobilizing on the Karelian border. Tiffanyer’s faction, based in Leclair, was the only group within Alcard that clearly recognized the knights’ academy students as an enemy.

“But Harim hadn’t seen Pullum...” Lahti said.

He raised a good point. Pullum had stayed hidden when they’d faced Harim.

“Meaning...” Inglis trailed off into her own thoughts. There was the possibility that Ian, who was now missing, had guided him.

“We don’t know that for sure,” Rafinha said. “He may have seen her from far away, or maybe heard from other Highlanders we fought since leaving Tsira that she’s with us. We don’t know enough yet. What if Ian tried to protect Pullum and was taken prisoner with her?” Despite the circumstances, she still wanted to believe in Ian.

Leone nodded. “I agree with Rafinha. What we need to focus on now is finding Pullum and saving her.”

“From what we’ve heard so far, there’s only one place she could be,” Inglis said.

In fact, the operational base for Tiffanyer’s faction was one of the places they’d been considering traveling to.

“Leclair. It’s gotta be Leclair,” Lahti declared.

“We hadn’t come to a decision on whether to go to the capital or Leclair, but it seems that choice has been made for us,” Leone said.

“Yes! Let’s hurry to Leclair!” Liselotte agreed.

“Yes! Let’s leave right away!” Rafinha announced.

Inglis had been patiently waiting for their thoughts, but she needed to step in

now. "Wait a minute. We have to think this through, or—"

"*Chriis*. Do you really still want to go to the capital first while our friends are in danger? If you say something lame, like 'I want to fight a lot' or 'I want to play around in Evel's lab,' I'm going to be mad," Rafinha said, her fierce eyes focused on Inglis.

"I don't think those are silly matters, but beyond that, there's something that needs to be considered here and now—by Lahti." Inglis turned her gaze to him.

"Huh? Me?"

"If we seek out the enemy in Leclair, there's definitely going to be a fight on our hands. If we wipe out our foes, save Pullum, and stop the scorched-earth requisitioning... That's going to be a big deal, right?"

Rafinha tilted her head. "That sounds like a good thing to me. What's the problem?"

"If we—that is, Karelian knights—do something so significant, it will have major repercussions. From the perspective of the civilians, it will seem like Karelia helped them in their time of need, and Alcard itself will be discredited. Consequently, on the Karelian side, it wouldn't be surprising for some to want to bite off some land—they'll believe they'll be welcomed as liberators."

"That isn't what we'd be trying to do, though," Rafinha replied.

"But Inglis is right. That might happen," Leone said.

"That could happen from any of our plans, though, right? No matter when we show ourselves..." Rafinha commented.

"Exactly. That's why Lahti will need to operate in the open. If Lahti cooperates with Karelian knights to capture Leclair, it will be seen as his own effort, and the people's sympathies won't drift from Alcard," Inglis pointed out.

If Alcard's prince himself liberated Alcard, the populace would be unlikely to support Karelia. But even if this solved the larger geopolitical problem, it would create personal problems for Lahti himself.

"So that should be fine, then. What's the problem with that?" Rafinha asked.

"If Lahti does so, everyone will thank him for it," Inglis explained. "They'll

consider him the hero who saved Alcard. From there... That would propel Lahti in a specific direction. The people will be sure to support his immediate succession too. If he wanted to avoid that, we could talk to his father, the king, and ask him to name a figurehead. Regardless, if we do this, Lahti will have no choice but to take a leading role in politics."

If they were to proceed without talking with the king of Alcard, all credit would go to Lahti, which would place the king's own position in jeopardy. He'd be seen as having done nothing during a time of crisis. Even if Lahti himself had no intention of taking power immediately, radicals could lead a coup to install him on the throne.

Inglis understood that Lahti's heart was telling him to save Pullum, but it was also important to lay political groundwork. They stood at a crossroads that would have a major impact on Lahti's future.

"Are you okay with that, Lahti? Are you prepared to take power?" Inglis asked. "There will be no turning back."

"I..." Lahti hesitated.

"If they took Pullum specifically, they no doubt have plans for her, so we need to make haste...but I'm also sure she'll be safe for the time being. I don't think we'll be too late if we speak with the king in the capital first... Do you still wish to go to Leclair first? If you do, I'll be with you, but..."

This was especially relevant because Lahti had left his country to study in Karelia. If he wanted to stay there rather than to inherit the crown, charging into Leclair would make that no longer possible. He needed to be prepared for all outcomes. It was better to recognize the significance of the choice which lay before you, rather than to simply let your momentum carry you down an unknown but irreversible path.

King Inglis had been first a hero, then a hero-king, prioritizing the people's hopes and dreams. Before long, those choices had sealed the hero-king's path in life. It was because she'd had those experiences that she was able to recognize the crossroads Lahti now stood at. And, being aware of it, it was only kind to point it out to him. After all, Lahti was her friend.

"You still have time to think. Consider it well before you decide." Then Inglis

turned to Rafinha. “Are you angry with me?”

Rafinha had said moments before she’d be mad if Inglis had said something stupid. She wondered if Rafinha was displeased with her.

But for some reason, Rafinha hesitantly said, “I’m sorry...”

“You don’t have to apologize.”

“Inglis, you really do come out of nowhere with the sharpest thinking... I wonder how your train of thought works...” Leone said. She was equally impressed as she was surprised.

“Indeed. She usually seems like she’s only concerned with eating and fighting, but that isn’t the whole story,” Liselotte said with a smile.

They seemed to have seriously valued her argument.

“I suppose it’s just life experience that’s taught me a lot.” Inglis was being honest, but of course Rafinha and the others looked at her in obvious confusion, not sure what she meant.

Lahti had made up his mind. He looked determined, resolute. “We can’t wait that long! I’m going to Leclair!”

“You’re sure? No regrets?” Inglis asked.

“I’m certain! This isn’t just about Pullum. There are people like those children who are starving to death. Can *they* wait? We need to take back the food hoarded in Leclair and distribute it!”

“Agreed. That much is true.”

“And, honestly... There were times when I didn’t want to succeed my father. I have an older brother, but he’s not my father’s biological son—he’s technically my cousin, but my uncle died young—so they always told me I was the crown prince. The thing is, I’m Runeless, and my brother isn’t. He’s talented too. I figured with me gone, he’d inherit the throne, and Alcard would do well... Much of the court felt the same, including Harim. He was good friends with my brother.”

Inglis was familiar with some of the details. Pullum and Ian had filled her in on some of the history while Lahti wasn’t around, since it had been information

relevant to their mission in Alcard.

Lahti continued. “But... What you just said strengthened my resolve. I’ll go to Leclair, save Pullum and the people who are suffering, and if that means becoming king, so be it. If I do that, and then I...”

“And then?” Inglis asked.

“Ah, er... Whatever. Just forget about it.”

“No, tell me what you meant. That way we can all help.”

“R-Really? Then... With what Harim’s doing, he’s bringing dishonor to his family, isn’t he?”

“Their family is a part of the king’s retinue, right?”

“Yeah. They’ve been well-known for generations, but I don’t know what will happen to them because of Harim. If I become king, though, I can protect Pullum no matter what happens.”

“I see. If you’re king and Pullum is queen, no one will be able to object. It might be the best way to protect her. Is that what you meant?”

Lahti gulped. “I... I think it’s a bit soon to go there...but yeah. Everything else aside, even though I’m Runeless, she’s protected me. Now I want to protect *her*! It might seem like a weak excuse for becoming king, but it’s how I feel! If it’s for her sake, I’ll do anything, even become king!”

Inglis chuckled. “I see.” It was immature reasoning, but Inglis didn’t mind that. She had been not much different, finding herself on a path she couldn’t turn back from without having thought it through. She had also become king without a second thought. No matter Lahti’s reasons, they were acceptable so long as he behaved like a proper king afterward.

Most importantly, he was making a conscious decision, which would help him avoid any regrets. And as immature as it may have been, his reasoning fit his age—plus, it pleased the similarly immature sensibilities of the girls around him.

“I like that!” Rafinha agreed. “So you save Pullum, and then propose to her on the spot! I’m getting fired up!”

“Being able to make people happy through our actions really makes it feel like

we're doing something worthwhile," Leone added.

"I'd love to see it for my own future reference! You two finding happiness like that!" Liselotte said.

Rafinha's, Leone's, and Liselotte's eyes gleamed.

"Wait, why are you assuming you'll see?" Lahti protested. "There's no way I could do that in front of other people!"

"It's fine! We wanna watch!" Rafinha exclaimed. "We're going to do our best to save Pullum, so let us in on the treat! It's every girl's dream! C'mon, Chris, you want to watch too, right?"

"I'm not that interested. Fighting a hieran menace will be enough for me. In any case, we're all motivated, right?"

"Yes, extremely!" Leone announced.

Liselotte pumped her fist in the air passionately. "We'll do our best! Let's break into Leclair and save Pullum!"

"Yeah!" Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte were all on the same page. Actually, Inglis was a little annoyed at their enthusiasm; it would mean fewer foes for her.



“Ugh... If only I were strong, if I had a Rune, I could say something cool like, ‘I’m going to save Pullum with my own hands!’” Lahti groaned.

“It’ll be fine,” Inglis reassured him. “Once you’re king, you won’t need martial prowess. A king has his own role to fulfill, and pure strength isn’t necessary.”

If that weren’t true, King Inglis wouldn’t have made such a request to the goddess Alistia.

Thinking back on it, Inglis wondered whether Alistia would have reincarnated her as a man again if she’d thought to ask it of her. It had never occurred to her to ask, and thus she’d been reborn as the daughter of a knight captain... Nonetheless, she didn’t mind how things had turned out. She’d learned the upsides of living as a woman as well. She had no regrets, and she was sure she’d continue to enjoy living as Inglis Eucus.

“A king doesn’t need martial prowess, huh... Sure, my old man isn’t that strong either, but...”

“See? You needn’t worry. If you were strong, then what would I do with myself?”

“What are you even doing here...? No, wait, I don’t need to ask.”

Needless to say, Inglis was there both to gain real-world experience against powerful foes and to enjoy the delicious cuisine of Alcard. In the end, both Lahti’s country Alcard and Karelia would benefit, so it was okay to have some fun with such a good excuse. She chuckled. “Just leave it to me. I’ll be good.”

“I wish we could leave it at that, but...my brother’s strong...”

“How strong? Do you think he’ll fight me after we go to Leclair?”

“K-Knock it off! That’ll just mean big trouble later!”

“But the more experience I can get, the better.”

Inglis’s stomach rumbled a loud *grrrg!* Her hunger had been so constant in Alcard that such a sound was now merely a normal part of the background noise.

“Anyway,” she began, not outright addressing her grumbling stomach, “first

things first—Leclair. I'll be able to fight, and with all the food they have hoarded, there'll be plenty to eat."

"That's right, Chris! After Leclair falls, we'll finally be able to feast on some Alcardian cooking! We need to do our best. For our bellies!"

"Yeah, we'll finally be able to try some of the famous spicy food."

"I can't wait! I'm just gonna eat, and eat, and eat..."

"We've been holding out so long..."

"Hey, hey, wait, don't eat too much!" Lahti objected. "That food was stolen from the country's people! We need to give it back! Are you even listening?!"

At any rate, they had a destination. First, they would narrow their focus to the battle against the hieran menace. Inglis hoped delicious food and more battles lay ahead.

"All right, let's get going." The group hurriedly made their preparations, then set out for Leclair.

Chapter IV: Inglis, Age 15—The Evil Hieral Menace

(4)

Three days into their march to Leclair, Inglis's group was making good time. Unfortunately, it wasn't for a pleasant reason.

The towns and villages along their path were already long gone. Because there were no remaining inhabitants in the various places they flew past, Inglis's group had no need to distribute food. Fortunately, because everything was deserted, it was also easier for them to find places to comfortably rest, making for a much better experience than camping.

And thus, they advanced.

Attacks from Tiffanyer's Highlanders had ceased, leaving a lull, but passing by ruined settlement after ruined settlement was hard on Rafinha and the others.

The gloomy clouds matched the melancholy air surrounding them. Lahti pointed to the overcast sky ahead from the deck of the moving Flygear Port. "If the weather weren't like this, we'd almost be able to see Leclair."

With such dense clouds, visibility was limited even from a Flygear Port.

Rafinha bit her lip and tightened her grip on the handrail. "I hope we get there soon... I hate seeing nothing but ruined towns."

"Rani, if you get yourself worked up now, you'll have nothing left when the time comes. It's okay. I'm sure plenty of the people are alive in Leclair," Inglis insisted.

When Inglis had soberly assessed the devastation in each town, they had seen surprisingly few bodies compared to the scale of the damage. From that, Inglis had concluded the inhabitants had been taken—probably to Leclair, which had become a prison—rather than killed on the spot.

What purpose there could be for forcibly relocating so many people, Inglis still didn't understand, but if the raids had solely been for acquiring food, the

people could have been left behind to starve. If Highlanders had abducted them, it was for a purpose, and Inglis assumed their safety was guaranteed so long as that purpose was incomplete.

“But—” Rafinha began.

Rruuummmble!

The sound of something shaking echoed from afar.

“Wh-What was that noise? Was it thunder?” Rafinha asked.

“That was oddly loud,” Leone said.

“Maybe it was an earthquake?” Lahti guessed. “I think the ground shook.”

“It’s hard to know for sure when we’re in the air,” Liselotte said.

Everyone was chattering uneasily around Inglis when she suddenly interrupted. “No... Look over there, in Leclair’s direction! Something’s happening!” She could sense a huge swell of unnatural mana from Leclair. Despite the distance between the Flygear Port and the city, the strange mana was of such a large scale that she could sense it even from so far away.

“Huh...? What is it, Chris?” Rafinha asked, worried.

“I’m not sure...but it’s definitely not normal.”

“For you to say so, it must be something serious,” Leone said.

“But in this weather, we can’t see anything...” Liselotte said.

“No, wait! It’s clearing up!” Lahti announced.

He was right. The clouds before them suddenly parted, as if to give Inglis and the others a glimpse of what was to come.

It took Inglis’s breath away.

Rafinha was just as shocked. “Wh-What’s going on?!”

“Th-That’s Leclair?!” Leone said.

“How is that possible?!” Liselotte cried.

Lahti gaped at the sight, horrified. “No way... Is that what they were after the whole time?!”

The city of Leclair was not what it should have been. To be precise, it was not *where* it should have been.

It had broken its earthly bounds and was floating upward toward the sky, held in place only by huge chains.

“This must be the Floating Circle...” Inglis said.

“The thing Cyrene told us about in Nova? Would the same have happened there if it had activated?!” Rafinha asked.

“Yes, but...”

In Nova, the Steelblood Front had turned Cyrene into a magicite beast, and the black-masked man had destroyed the Floating Circle. Had things gone differently, Nova also would have lifted into the sky. Rafinha was right about that.

However, a Floating Circle required enormous amounts of mana. In Cyrene’s Nova, that had still required more time due to Cyrene’s unwillingness to hasten the pace. She hadn’t seemed in any hurry to accumulate it, and she’d wanted to take the residents along to Highland and give them favorable treatment there even if the circle did activate. In comparison, its activation in Leclair seemed too fast. How did they gather that much mana?

Thinking on that, Inglis felt it was best not to tell Rafinha what lay ahead of them. A Floating Circle collected mana from people on the surface, and when it gathered enough, the land rose into the air to become a new part of Highland. Humans generated mana just by being alive, but the greatest surge of mana came when it left the body—upon death. The quickest way to activate a Floating Circle was to gather a large number of people and execute them within its area.

Inglis couldn’t help but wonder if that was the case in the now-floating Leclair. Nonetheless, she was afraid to let Rafinha and the others hear of this theory.

“Never mind. It’s nothing. You’re probably right, Rani,” she said after they had waited for her to continue.

“Guys, this is really bad! At this rate, it’s going to be taken away to Highland! That’s the whole point of that circle!” Rafinha cried.

“Then we need to hurry before we’re too late!” Leone urged.

“Pullum might be in there too!” Liselotte said.

“I think we can reach it with our Flygears! Should we take them?” Lahti asked.

Rafinha nodded. “Yes. They’re the fastest—”

An unfamiliar woman’s voice interrupted. It was calm and pleasant to listen to, like the gentle ringing of a bell. “That would be quite inconvenient. I’d rather you didn’t.”

Out of nowhere, a girl was standing among them, her long, light-blue hair bound up in pigtails. Her face was refined, and a large floral ornament in her hair further accentuated her beauty. Her hands, legs, and neck were pale and delicate, and her skin was soft and translucent, yet her outfit drew the eye to the curves of her body. She was both lovely and bewitching—a frighteningly attractive combination. Even Inglis’s first impression was one of awe; the girl possessed a level of beauty that rivaled her own.

She was staring at them on their Flygear Port, her hands gripping Leone’s dark greatsword Artifact.

“Sh-She’s cute... As cute as you are, Chris...but who is she?!” Rafinha asked.

Leone gasped, noticing her Artifact was no longer on her back. “Ah! That’s mine! When did you—?!” This mysterious girl had taken it from her without her even noticing.

The blue-haired intruder kept an unhesitating soft smile. At first glance she’d just been a beauty, but the flow of power around her, her poise... There was no mistaking it.

“Good day to you. I’ll be borrowing this for a moment. With that, I bid you adieu,” she said before plunging the greatsword into the deck at her feet.

Thunk!

Its blade pierced through the deck, but it did not stop there.

Rrriiip! Krrraaak!

The Artifact's Gift activated, the blade expanding and tearing through the ship.

"Wh—?! Stop! What are you doing?!" Leone shouted.

"The Flygear Port...?!" Lahti gasped.

"The hull is gonna break apart! Stop it!" Rafinha yelled.

The blue-haired girl answered Rafinha with a smile and a giggle. "I don't want to." She tightened her grip, and the dark blade embedded in the Flygear Port began to slice through it.

Rrriiip! Krrraaak!

The frightful strength of her slender arms would surely have cleaved the ship completely in two if not for a resistant force compelling the creaking of the hull to go silent.

"With such strength, you must be a hieran menace..." Inglis murmured.

She had quickly created a blade of ice and blocked the greatsword, holding it back. With Aether Shell inactive, that girl's power would be strong enough to push Inglis out of the way if she wasn't careful—*wonderful!* She couldn't help but feel glee at the physical strain put upon her.

Inglis giggled. "You must be Tiffanyer, then. Good day to you."

"And to you. May I have your name?" Tiffanyer responded with her most inviting and ladylike smile. Interspersed between their fierce clashing blades was casual small talk.

"Ah, I beg your pardon. Inglis Eucus. First-year at the Chiral Knights' Academy."

“A student, then? Yet so powerful... You’re quite promising—and adorable as well. I’m a bit jealous.”

“That’s kind of you to say, but I don’t measure up to you.”

“You flatter me.”

Liselotte interrupted, shouting as she gripped the Flygear Port’s controls, “It’s dangerous for us to remain at this altitude when the hull’s damaged... I’m going to land!”

“Chris! Keep holding her off!”

“Yeah! Got it!” Inglis replied to Rafinha without turning her head. Tiffanyer may have cultivated a gentle appearance of a sweet thing who’d never hurt a fly, but her phenomenal strength left no room for distraction.

“So *she*’s the enemy hieran menace! I had no idea she’d come after us directly—I didn’t even notice her taking my Artifact!” Leone’s disappointment in herself was palpable.

“Chris, you’ve taught me that people aren’t always what they seem...but I can’t believe a girl this cute is the boss of the bad guys who’ve done such terrible things!” Rafinha said.

“Oh? Did I give you a surprise? I’m simply accelerating the plans of my predecessor following his untimely demise,” Tiffanyer replied.

“By that, do you mean Evel?! So taking Leclair was his plan all along?!” Inglis asked.

“Yes, yes it was. Inglis, yes? Did you perhaps meet Archlord Evel?”

“I did. I was present at his passing. I’m terribly sorry for your loss.” Leaving aside the problem of Evel’s personality, Inglis truly regretted his death. His aggressive, short-tempered nature had made him a perfect foe. Given his title of archlord, he was quite an effective one as well. If only he hadn’t died then... He would have been the ideal opponent, one who could be relied on to fight with all his might every time.

“But it wasn’t our fault he died! Don’t blame us!” Rafinha insisted.

Tiffanyer chuckled with amusement in response, the cutest smile in the world

on her face. “Ah, but I’m quite pleased that that snotty little brat is dead! You’ve met him—you should know what he was like.”

After an awkward pause, Rafinha mumbled, “I can’t really argue with that.”

“I’d rather not speak ill of the dead. The loss of a fighter with his ability is to be regretted—it’s a shame,” Inglis said.

Tiffanyer tilted her head. “You’re a strange one, aren’t you, Inglis? Perhaps you should see things from a different perspective.”

“Many people say that about me, but I don’t need to worry on that front.”

“In any case, I should be grateful you had something to do with his death. Thanks to you, I had the opportunity to take over as his successor. He hated me. He was a child at heart, so it was very difficult for me to curry favor with him.”

What she meant by that wasn’t that hard to imagine. Perhaps this was the root of the bewitching charm behind her innocent beauty.

“With your womanly charms, I assume,” Inglis fired back.

“Hee hee hee! Highlanders aren’t all gods or angels. There are many driven by their desires.” That must have been how she gained authority quite differently from Eris and Ripple. “Not that I’m one to talk. I may be a hieran menace, but I’m no saint. I’ll do what I must for my own ambitions.”

“I see—from what Harim said, I’m getting a better sense of what you’re like.”

“Oh, don’t tease him too much! He may be weak in a fight, but he’s quite energetic. He’s my favorite. I wouldn’t want to see him lose his confidence.”

“Personally, I’d rather someone stronger.”

“Oh my. If you’d like, I could lend you him, and you could see how good it is.”

“N-No thanks!” That was a terrifying thing to hear. For Inglis, it would be a quite-unwelcome favor.

Tiffanyer chuckled. “You’re so cute, though. You should enjoy yourself more.”

“I’ll pass. This is enough fun for me.”

Inglis and Tiffanyer were at completely opposing ends on how to find pleasure while working up a sweat.

"Your position and your thinking seem to be completely different from the others—from that of the hieran menaces I know," Inglis commented.

"I suppose. I *am* second-in-command to an archlord, and thus a Highland official, so perhaps castaway tools thrown down to the surface are different."

"Castaway—?! Don't talk about Eris and Ripple like that! They try their hardest to protect us!" Rafinha protested angrily. "Just look at what you've done here in Alcard! You hurt people and steal their food! That isn't what hieran menaces do! They're far better people than you are!"

"The hieran menaces you surface people revere as guardians may have found a purpose when they had nowhere left to turn, but seen from above they're simply tools fulfilling their purpose. Nothing changes, and Highland continues to rise above. They're just playing house. I suppose it's nice that they enjoy their little game."

"Th-They're not just playing! They're trying their hardest! Don't make fun of them!"

"Aha ha ha. And what are you going to do about it? Defeat me? As if you could," Tiffanyer taunted. "What of that town breaking free from the earth? Can you stop that? By the way, to activate the Floating Circle so quickly, we executed the majority of those captured to release their mana. What will you do about that? Bring them back to life? If I crush your legs here, you won't even be able to get close to them."

"N-No! Is that how the Floating Circle works?!" Rafinha cried.

It seemed that Inglis's assumptions about the Floating Circle had been accurate. She hadn't wanted to say anything for fear of upsetting Rafinha, but Tiffanyer had let it slip. It was unfortunate, Inglis thought—but even though Rafinha was clearly shocked, she snapped out of it with a shake of her head.

"We can save the survivors! We won't let you hurt them all!" Rafinha insisted.

"What about Pullum?! Where is she?! Did you order Ian to kidnap her?!" Lahti demanded.

Tiffanyer answered him casually, without ostentation. "Oh, Harim's sister? Don't worry. He's keeping her safe. I don't know about this 'Ian,' though."

What did that mean? What was going on with Ian? Was Tiffanyer hiding something, or did she really not know? Inglis was curious, but she didn't have time to worry about that right now.

"You really don't need to worry. I wouldn't call her a hostage. Doing so would undermine the trust of my subordinates. I still want to take good care of my friends and attract the best and brightest. I'd welcome you, since you were able to fight my subordinates off. What do you think?" Tiffanyer proposed, her voice and face completely calm.

"How can you ask that so casually? After all you've done!"

Rafinha's mutterings aside, Inglis thought that Harim and the other Highlanders did have an unusually passionate admiration of Tiffanyer. Perhaps she really did take a lenient hand with her pets. On the other hand, she seemed to have no mercy for her enemies or the people of the surface.

"If you'd like to be a Highlander, I can make you one," Tiffanyer offered. "If you want, you could even try to be a hieran menace yourself—once you drop all of that nonsense about 'missions' and 'obligations,' it might not be a bad way to grasp power."

"You think I could be a hieran menace?" Inglis asked.

Tiffanyer nodded. "I think it's possible. No one's *born* a hieran menace. They become one after a procedure in Highland. I used to be a normal girl myself. The other hieran menaces were the same. Inglis, if you were to successfully become a hieran menace, I think you could even surpass me. After all, even Runelss, you're able to cross swords with me."

Even through their long conversation, their clash of blades continued. Tiffanyer kept pressuring Inglis with superhuman power. The resistance against Inglis's blade made of ice felt sublime. Inglis wanted to enjoy it as long as she could.

"Don't give me that! Those missions and obligations are what make a hieran menace a hieran menace! That's why they're so noble! That's why they're our guardians!" Rafinha fired back. "You don't understand anything. You might be a hieran menace, but you're not like the ones I know! There's no way we could work with you! Don't insult us."

“Yes! That’s right!” Leone agreed.

Liselotte nodded as well. “Indeed!”

Inglis’s heart surged seeing Rafinha care so strongly. She smiled like a proud guardian. That was why she also felt a pit in her stomach.

“Sorry...” Inglis quietly said, apologizing for having been a bit intrigued by the idea of becoming a hieran menace. She’d been interested in it solely because increasing her power would be fun. She figured she could try it, and if anything strange happened, she wouldn’t be put off by it, just like how there had been no way for her to get a Rune at her baptism. It was pure intellectual curiosity to think the procedure was worth a try.

Rafinha fixed a long stare at Inglis. “Chris? Were you just thinking something weird?”

“N-No, I wasn’t! I just think Eris and Ripple are amazing, so...”

Watching Inglis flounder, Tiffanyer began to chuckle. “Ah, yes, you with the dark hair. What’s your name?”

“Rafinha! Rafinha Bilford!”

“Mm-hm. Rafinha, you’re a good girl, aren’t you? A very good girl. Pure, proper, and beautiful. I love that kind of girl—love to see where they break and how far they fall.”

Rafinha flinched as she gasped.

“Do you prefer physical or psychological pain? I have a game we can play—I’ll take you back with me, and I’ll pull off your fingernails one by one and kill a hostage in front of you if you scream. You can be my little present. Won’t that be fun?”

“Sh-Shut up! You think that’ll make me bow down to you?”

Tiffanyer chuckled again. “I saw you flinch. And you, Inglis—how about you? You certainly seemed interested.”

“No, that’s a misperception. I have absolutely no room for negotiation with you.”

“Hmm? Oh dear, you’re so cold all of a sudden.”

“I’m Rani’s squire, so I will not tolerate anyone who seeks to harm her. They must be eliminated.”

Those who would hurt Rafinha. Those who would make her cry. And the vermin who sought to steal her away even though she was still young. Inglis would absolutely not forgive them. *Eliminate, eliminate, absolutely eliminate them!*

“Oh my. Such strength, and yet you follow a child with such a shallow sense of justice? Is that really what you want? Isn’t that a waste?” Tiffanyer asked.

“Power doesn’t solve everything. That’s what love and bonds mean in human society, right? Rani and I have that, and that’s all that matters,” Inglis responded emphatically.

“That sounds off-putting coming from someone who’s usually all about power,” Rafinha said.

“Rani! I’m being serious here!”

Rafinha chuckled. “I was just kidding. Thanks. That makes me happy—though it’s a little embarrassing.”

Tiffanyer sighed. “That was a pleasant conversation, but it seems the time for talk is over. Then, as I was saying—I’ll crush your legs. I need to bring Leclair back to Highland and show the higher-ups I’m different from Evel. For that, I need you out of my way.”

“That’s what I love to hear!” Inglis replied. “Show me your true power.”



Tiffanyer was using Leone's Artifact. Hieral menaces, in their normal forms as women, summoned and used the weapons they could transform into. Ripple summoned guns, and in her weapon form, she became a gun. The Steelblood Front's hieral menace was a spear. Inglis had never seen Eris as a weapon, but she'd summoned twin blades back when they had fought, so she probably became twin blades as well.

In that case, what was Tiffanyer? She hadn't summoned any sort of weapon yet. It was a fascinating question, one Inglis wanted to see answered as soon as possible—and one she wanted to fight against to her utmost.

Tiffanyer laughed. "Well, that's up to you, isn't it? Here I come!" The greatsword grew even longer in Tiffanyer's hands, thrusting all the way down to the ground and vaulting her aloft. In an instant, she was so high up that Inglis needed to crane her neck to see her opponent.

Inglis gasped as she watched the greatsword suddenly shrink to its original size. It had practically propelled Tiffanyer in the air. Brandishing the sword with a giggle, Tiffanyer swung it through the air. It expanded again. The shadow which fell over Inglis and the others' heads told the story of its gigantic size.

Leone's eyes went wide. "Th-That's far more impressive than when I use it!"

Indeed, in Tiffanyer's hands the Artifact's Gift was faster, larger, and scarier. "Now... How about this?!"

Whoosh!

The gigantic dark blade roared downward. Its force, its mass—if left alone, it would cut the Flygear Port in two. Inglis would love to take a strike of that magnitude head-on, but if she were to block it with an ice blade she created, the momentum would carry through to the Flygear Port and send it crashing to the ground.

That would obviously be bad. So...! Inglis decided what needed to be done and leaped into the path of Tiffanyer's slash.

"Wh—?!" Tiffanyer's expression suddenly twisted in surprise. That made

sense. It looked as if Inglis was jumping to meet the attack herself. But in a situation where it was necessary to protect the Flygear Port, it was the best solution.

Inglis twisted in the air, preparing herself before screaming out, “Haaaah!”

Claaang!

Metal clashed against metal as Inglis swung a kick into the side of the gigantic blade with great force. The direction of Tiffanyer’s slash was swung wildly by the sudden impact from the side. The blade’s trajectory missed the Flygear Port and headed for the ground below, where it dug into the snowpack, kicking it up.

Tiffanyer’s eyes went wide. “Oh my, I can’t believe you deflected that.”

A slash could be blocked with brute force. A slash could be evaded by using one’s skill to predict its path. However, parrying a slash took both strength and skill. To see the path of the oncoming blade, choose the right moment, and then strike its side forcefully—that was what Inglis had done. It was something none of Tiffanyer’s underlings could have done. Even Inglis was doubtful she could repeat the feat if asked to do so. She wouldn’t put herself in the situation again to begin with, though.

Still, that Runeless girl is exceptional, Tiffanyer thought. She has no Rune. She has no Artifact. She doesn’t use mana. Yet she can shrug off a hieran menace’s full-force attack like that...

Tiffanyer couldn’t come up with a logical explanation for how Inglis had done such a thing. In other words, she must be a sort of entity about which even Tiffanyer didn’t know. *And there’s no letting my guard down against an opponent like that. Failures don’t rise to the top in Highland. This isn’t just a simple matter of destroying a Flygear Port anymore. I need to stay on my toes, focus, and take Inglis down.*

Tiffanyer turned her focus to Inglis, who was in the air now. She had made an impressive counterattack, but it must have been difficult for her to control her stance as she was thrown into the air.

I need to take this chance to follow up.

But Inglis was no longer there.

“Wh—?!” *She must have taken advantage of my distraction to disappear somewhere...*

“I’m over here!”

“Ah!”

Inglis ran up the blade of the dark sword. Thrust into the ground, it made the perfect foothold—in fact, it was practically a path for her. Inglis had controlled her orientation in the air, landed on the sword, run up the side of it, and plunged into close-quarters combat with Tiffanyer.

“That’s Leone’s!” Inglis yelled, determined to return the Artifact.

Slam!

Inglis’s spinning kick plunged directly into Tiffanyer’s back.

“Eeeek!” Tiffanyer fell toward the ground.

Inglis used Tiffanyer’s shocked reaction as an opportunity to use the hieran menace as a launch point, pushing up into the air and landing back on the Flygear Port. Inglis gripped Leone’s greatsword Artifact, which had slipped from Tiffanyer’s hand and returned to its original size.

“Here, Leone. You can have this back.” She returned the blade to its owner.

“Th-Thanks... Those were some outrageous moves in the air, though. Weren’t you scared?” Leone asked.

“Nope. It’s exciting fighting so high up,” Inglis answered. In King Inglis’s time, there had been no such things as Flygears or Flygear Ports; battle had been a strictly terrestrial affair. Aerial combat was something she could experience only by being reborn as Inglis Eucus. It made for fresh, fascinating fights—not a bad battlefield at all.

“Ha ha ha...” Leone laughed nervously.

“What’s up, Chris? Did you beat her just now?”

“Of course not. A blow like that wouldn’t do much to a hieran menace. So I’m going to finish her off!” Inglis said, leaping from the handrail on the edge of the Flygear Port’s deck.

“Ah, at least take a Flygear!”

“I can’t wait for that!” Inglis plunged toward the ground and activated Aether Shell shortly before landing. Without that, the fall might have injured her severely, but between Liselotte managing to bring the Flygear Port down significantly and Aether Shell increasing Inglis’s physical strength, she was fine.

If anything, her only problem was that she’d landed in a snowdrift, and large amounts of the snow had gotten in her clothes and were making her cold.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Tiffanyer—let’s get back to it!” Inglis called out, but there was no response. She saw the nearby patch of snow where Tiffanyer had landed, but there was no sign of the girl herself. “Hmm? Where are you hiding...?”

With a smack, something roughly grabbed Inglis’s leg and lifted her into the air upside down.

“Eeep!” Inglis’s hands reflexively shot to the hem of her skirt as it threatened to slip down toward her head. It was embarrassing how this had become a reflex for her. *Keeping your skirt in place is probably a natural reaction for a girl to have—but I’m not sure if it’s right for me to act this way. Just how comfortable am I becoming the new me? And in battle, no less...*

“Oh, you’re surprisingly shy, aren’t you? And after you were so rude earlier,” Tiffanyer said, dangling Inglis upside down. She must have hidden herself in the snow.

“No, it’s not that I’m shy about my body. It’s that I’m embarrassed by my reaction—it’s complicated.”

“I see. I don’t really understand, but I hope this next part hurts!”

Tiffanyer tucked Inglis’s legs under her arms and spun around. Her smile was terrifyingly adorable, but her strength was real. In terms of pure physical power,

she might beat Eris, Ripple, and Sistia.

“Yaaaah!” Then, with the centrifugal force built up, she threw Inglis toward a nearby stand of trees.

Inglis grimaced as she flew away, sweeping down thin tree after thin tree, each with considerable shock and pain.

This...is good, in its own way.

In her path, a huge, thick-trunked tree appeared.

Now here is an opportunity. It would make a good foothold, unlike the thin trees that were destroyed by her impact. She twisted herself in the air and planted a foot on the giant tree’s trunk. It fractured, but it somehow managed to withstand her momentum. “Haaah!” Bounding off the trunk, she headed straight back for Tiffanyer.

But Tiffanyer was also closing in on her.

“Ngh?!”

“Yaaaah!”

They each were unarmed, using their bare fists.

“That’s what I was hoping for!”

Thudd!

Their fists slammed against each other. Inglis could feel her hand go numb and delighted in it.

“I don’t understand,” Tiffanyer said after a pause.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re Runeless. You’re not a hieran menace, so how do you have such power? It seemed like you were using mana before, but I no longer sense that.”

“Well, I work out a lot.”

“That...doesn’t really answer my question. I’ll simply have to beat an answer

out of you!"

"Yes! Throw every bit of force you've got at me! I love it!"

Tiffanyer chuckled. "You have strange kinks." She pulled her fist back, only to attack with the other as she swung her torso into the blow.

The punch was powerful, sharp, perfect—but not so perfect that Inglis couldn't react. Raising her left arm to block, she counterattacked with a quick kick with her right leg.

However, Tiffanyer was equally swift. Her left arm feinted a block before thrusting toward Inglis's abdomen.

Bam! Slam!

Inglis's kick struck Tiffanyer's side; Tiffanyer's punch struck Inglis in the gut.

"Gwah?!"

"Agh!"

But neither was enough to stop the other. They immediately attacked again, this time each with blows aimed at the other's jaw.

"Haaaa!"

"Yaaaah!"

The rumbling of their flurries of punches filled the air. They both aimed a kick at each other, and as their strikes met, the impact pushed them apart for a moment.

"I see... This is a fun way to fight!" Inglis had fought hieran menaces hand to hand before—Eris and Ripple while sparring, Sistia in a real fight—but Tiffanyer was different from the rest. The others' attacks were powerful, but she'd been able to parry them and use their momentum against them.

However, Tiffanyer's attacks kept catching her. *Why?* Inglis thought. *Because Tiffanyer has no desire to avoid or defend against me.*

In a fight, one normally tried to avoid the opponent while finding an

opportunity to strike. The other hieran menaces fought that way, as did Yua, who was especially skilled in concealing her own intentions while attacking. She could fight while completely evading her foe.

Tiffanyer was another story. She ignored her opponent's attacks and went on the aggressive, paying no heed to anything else. She abandoned defense to specialize in landing her own blows. Such a thing was risky; the moment an opponent attacked could be an opening for a counter. That resulted in taking a lot of strikes head-on, so she needed the endurance to stay on her feet through it.

A hieran menace had superhuman endurance—superhuman physical capabilities in general—but was she really that confident in her own stamina? Either way, it was an extremely crude way of fighting that didn't match her dainty, elegant appearance.

"So you focus on attacking rather than avoiding or blocking your opponent's attacks?"

Tiffanyer chuckled. "Now you get the idea. Still, what are you going to do about it? Run away? After all, a black eye would really ruin your look."

"Of course I'm not running away! I'll go along with it!" Inglis especially wasn't going to run from any opportunity at becoming a stronger version of herself. If Tiffanyer was challenging her to a slugfest, she'd take it.

Take it, beat her, and win! "Let's go!" Inglis went to lunge toward Tiffanyer again, but the introduction of several new voices stopped her.

"Lady Tiffanyer!"

"A-Are you okay?!"

"I-I cannot bear to see you hurt!"

Several Highlanders loomed into view aboard Flygears. Harim didn't seem to be among them, but they were all handsome young men. Tiffanyer's tastes were obvious.

She was only slightly hurt, but they were making a very big deal about it.

"Oh, it's you all. Didn't I tell you to stay at home? Leclair is already starting its

journey into the sky. You need to keep an eye on—”

“B-But you’re fighting alone, Lady Tiffanyer!”

“Let us fight too!”

“This time, I’ll take that silver-haired girl down!”

“You mustn’t. You’re no match for her. I can’t have you throw your lives away. You’re still important to me. Endure it for now, and make me feel better later.”

“Y-Yes! Leave that to me!”

“No, I’ll handle it!”

“I—!”

Tiffanyer giggled. “Don’t worry, you’ll all get your turn. I’m not running away. And if we manage to bring Leclair up to Highland, you’ll be rewarded. Once our mission is complete, we can have some fun. So just cheer me on from there. That’s what will help me.”

Inglis was beginning to feel like the villain here—but she wasn’t alone.

“Chris! Are you okay?” Rafinha’s voice came down from above. The *Star Princess* had launched from the Flygear Port, and she and Lahti were aboard, Lahti handling the controls.

Inglis couldn’t see Leone or Liselotte—they were probably protecting the Flygear Port. “Yeah, I’m all good, Rani!” she called back.

“We’re going on ahead! Take care of this!” Lahti yelled.

“Do your best, Chris!”

Leaving these words behind, the *Star Princess* soared off toward Leclair. Its acceleration was far faster than that of a standard Flygear thanks to the modifications Inglis and Lahti had made.

“W-Wow! It’s fast!” one of the Highlanders exclaimed.

“What’s with that Flygear?!” another shouted.

“Chase it,” Tiffanyer ordered. “Leclair’s our own gift to the higher-ups—if anything happens to it, things won’t look good for our standing.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Nodding, the Highlanders chased after the *Star Princess*.

But Rafinha turned and gripped her bow Artifact, Shiny Flow. “Not so fast!” She loosed a blast of white light which split into a rain of arrows that circled the Highlanders.

“Whoa?!”

“Guh! I can’t see!”

Then a voice rang out from another direction. “Hyaaah!” It was Leone’s voice. At the same time, the dark blade of her Artifact sword swung up from the ground, sweeping the Highlanders’ Flygears away.

“What?!”

“An ambush?!”

Operating at a low altitude, the Highlanders managed to land safely, but they wouldn’t be acting as pursuers anytime soon. They couldn’t easily catch up to Rafinha and Lahti without Flygears of their own.

“Not bad,” Inglis remarked. First Rafinha had distracted the enemy, then Leone had taken advantage of the opening to remove their mobility. It was a decently planned turning of the tables on Tiffanyer. Inglis wondered who had thought of it. She’d be proud if Rafinha had, but Leone or Liselotte—who both excelled in their lessons at the knights’ academy—seemed more likely.

“Inglis! We’re going too!” Leone announced.

“We leave the rest to you!” Liselotte followed. They also took a Flygear from the Flygear Port and followed Rafinha and Lahti. They were prioritizing getting to Leclair and rescuing Pullum and the survivors.

“Got it!” Inglis yelled back.

Tiffanyer sighed. “Well, that’s not good. Now I can’t take my time and enjoy this.”

“It seems that way.”

“Now, if you’ll forgive me, I’m in a hurry!” Tiffanyer charged straight in.

Inglis braced herself to counter. Tiffanyer’s momentum was intense, but it

wasn't much different from before. Inglis hadn't yet grasped what she meant by "hurry," but something was different.

Tiffanyer beamed at her. "Yes, take it head-on—thank you. I'm cheating a little, but you know how it has to be!"

Tiffanyer began to glow brightly, but that didn't stop Inglis from landing a punch on her.

Claaaang!

"Wh—?!" It made no sense, but Inglis's fist had collided with something hard.

Blammmmm!

The force of the kick Inglis took in return was a far cry from the previous ones as well. "Gah!" Though the impact pushed her back, she somehow kept her footing. "Your body...?!"

When the light faded, Tiffanyer's transformation was finished, revealing platinum armor with glittering decorations. The beauty of the craftsmanship gave it the appearance of a work of art rather than a tool of battle. The armor ensconced her body, making her beauty even more mysterious and noble.

Tiffanyer laughed. "You wanted to see my true power? Allow me."

"Now I understand—you're an armor hieranl menace!"

It was only with the protection of that armor that her purely offensive fighting style became truly effective. Inglis figured Tiffanyer must have been confident that she could leave it all to the armor. From that perspective, her seemingly reckless tactics were actually quite effective. The hieranl menace was ready to fight seriously now.

"That's right! Now, are you prepared to look death in the eye?!" A look of triumphant pride on her face, Tiffanyer launched a follow-up attack. She was far faster than before, despite how heavy her armor had to be. The armor probably

boosted her physical capabilities.

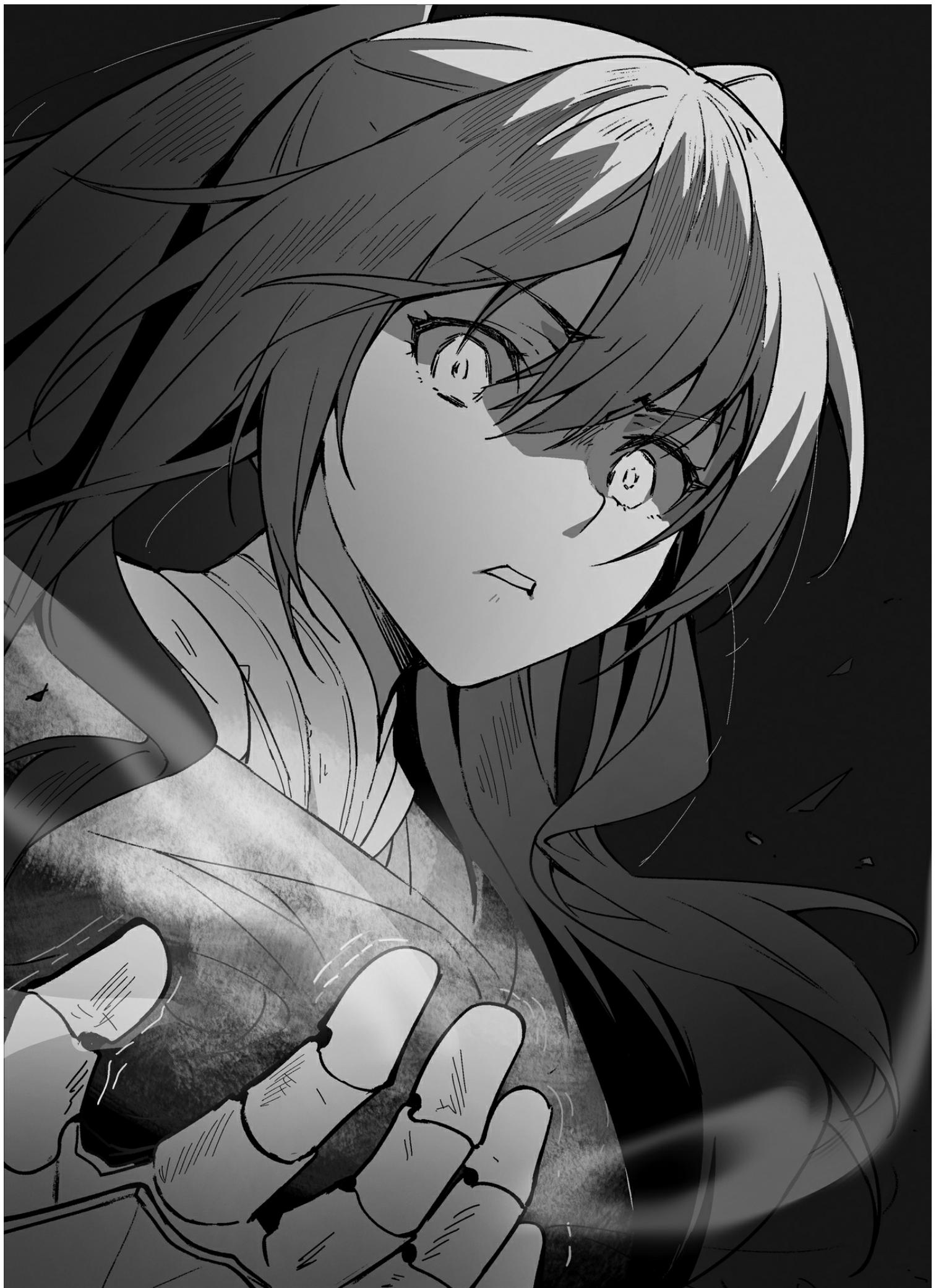
Her fist audibly sliced through the air, before connecting with Inglis's face—and stopped neatly in place.

"Eh...?!" Tiffanyer's eyes went wide. She had wanted to finish things in one decisive strike, so she had struck with all her might, aiming to take Inglis's life. In her armor, she was unbelievably powerful and could achieve combat feats exceptional even for a hieran menace.

When I'm in my armor, I'm completely different. Inglis is strong, but she should be no match for me like this. There's no reason I shouldn't be able to take her out in an instant—yet, I can't. She took a full-force punch to the face without even flinching.

But from what I can see, what I can sense, nothing has changed about her. She doesn't look any different. The forces around her don't seem any stronger. If anything, her mana is less intense than when we fought on the Flygear Port. She's Runeless. I don't sense any power within her. Yet still...

The results were far from her expectations.



Does she have some power I don't comprehend? That much is obvious. There's no other explanation. But what does she possess? I don't understand it at all.

"Wh-What are you?!"

"I am merely a cadet squire."

"Don't lie to me! You're no mere student!" Tiffanyer attacked again, a high kick with all her might. Although it connected, Inglis still didn't flinch.

"Sorry, but I'm in a rush," Inglis said bluntly. Tiffanyer's attacks had, of course, failed because she'd activated Aether Shell and wrapped her body in aether. She hadn't wanted to, but Rafinha was on her way to Leclair. And with Harim not present here, it was obvious that the others were heading into dangerous territory in the town.

I'm worried about Rani going on ahead without me, Inglis thought. I can always do something for her if I can keep an eye on her, but that isn't the case if she's out of sight. Honestly, I'd rather she stayed here, but it wasn't an option under these circumstances.

With Tiffanyer in her armor, she was strong enough that Inglis needed Aether Shell. This girl was a true hieran menace. Taking her down one-sidedly with an even higher power would be dull, though.

There was no doubt that Tiffanyer was a strong foe, of the sort Inglis only rarely encountered. Fighting her with her divine knight abilities wouldn't really help Inglis grow. She believed that, to master her power, she had to seek the utmost personal growth in every battle. In this case, by avoiding the use of Aether Shell as much as possible and instead taking that difficult battle on a trial-and-error basis, she could expect to improve many combat-related abilities, such as her melee prowess, endurance, and tactics. This was a reckless choice to abandon that opportunity.

However, Rafinha's safety was more important. She might find other strong foes if she looked, but there was only one Rafinha. "Sorry, but I'm not going to hold back! Haaaaah!" Inglis's fist, wrapped in the glow of Aether Shell, once again struck that platinum armor.

Crrreeeak!

The hieran menace's armor twisted and groaned, making a very different sound from before.

“Wh—?! Eeep!” Last time, Tiffanyer had breezily absorbed Inglis’s punch, but this time she was sent flying. She rapidly rolled away, head over heels across the snow. Large columns of the deep snowdrifts kicked up in her wake.

“Lady Tiffanyer?!” Her underlings cried out in shock.

“Wh-What was that attack?! She wasn’t—”

“Don’t worry about that! Just stop her! We won’t let her hurt Lady Tiffanyer any further!”

“Got it! Wait, she’s gone?! She disappeared!”

By then, Inglis was already to where Tiffanyer had come to a stop. Not through any special ability. She’d just moved so fast that they couldn’t see.

“And here’s more! Haaaah!” Before Tiffanyer could get up, Inglis unleashed a flurry of punches.

Bam-bam-bam-bam-bam!

“Aaaaaah!” Tiffanyer moaned. The hail of blows fell not just on Tiffanyer, but also on the ground around her. In an instant, the earth had caved in, creating a large crater.

“Lady Tiffanyer! We can’t let this happen!”

“We’ll save you even if it costs us our lives!”

“Grahhhh!”

The Highlanders swarmed forward in desperation.

“N-No, stop! You won’t be able to hold her back!” Despite the barrage unleashed upon her, Tiffanyer was still able to restrain them with a few words. For her to do so in such circumstances meant that she really was concerned for

their safety.

Furthermore, just take a look at that... Inglis thought, stopping her assault for a moment to examine Tiffanyer closely. Her platinum armor was dented and bent, but not decisively destroyed. *It has tremendous strength. Far beyond even that of an upper-class Artifact. Like, for example, Leone's dark greatsword—if I were to have activated Aether Shell and punched that with the same amount of strength, it would've shattered by now. So this is what the armor summoned by a hieran menace is capable of.*

Inglis supposed that made sense. If Tiffanyer were to fight alongside a holy knight with a special-class Rune, it would be the armor that protected that knight from the blows of a Prism. She felt a little bit regretful that she hadn't been able to destroy it.

“Ngh... Argh...” As effective as Inglis's blows had been, Tiffanyer was still conscious thanks to her armor.

That's probably to be expected too. Inglis hopped back a little, opening a gap. As if taking their own turn, the Highlanders ignored her and helped Tiffanyer to her feet.

“Lady Tiffanyer!”

“Are you all right?!”

“Leave this to us!”

Tiffanyer shook her head. “No, you can't... You're no match for her...”

“B-But—!”

“We'll protect you, even if it costs us our lives!”

“Please, get to safety!”

Taken as a scene alone, it was a beautiful expression of loyalty. However, Tiffanyer had been committing atrocities across Alcard. If Rafinha were here to see it, would she have wavered? Or would she have held firm in her judgment of the hieran menace?

Rafinha was the kind of person who saw people in a positive light and tried to find the good in everyone, so she might have wavered. Inglis would do no such

thing. She didn't believe in innate goodness—not that she believed in innate evil either. There were things more important than good or evil.

"Let's end this here. Release Pullum and the survivors in Leclair, and discard the Floating Circle. If you do so and return to Highland without the town, I won't pursue you any further." Inglis had really wanted to take this fight with Tiffanyer slow and enjoy it, but she'd ended it quickly to ensure Rafinha's safety; its aftermath also needed to be resolved quickly. Rafinha's wishes and safety were Inglis's top priority.

"L-Lady Tiffanyer?"

"What shall we do?"

The Highlanders looked at the hieran menace. Their reaction revealed that they were willing to take those terms. That made sense, in a way. Inglis, despite her overwhelming advantage, was essentially saying that she'd let bygones be bygones if they left now. She wasn't asking for any atonement or compensation.

Many might be outraged by that leniency. But even though the offer would be her salvation, Tiffanyer was hesitant to agree. "And if I do...what becomes of me?"

"You return to Highland and try to make a fresh start?" Inglis offered.

Tiffanyer laughed bitterly. "Maybe that would work on someone who'd be given a second chance."

"You're saying you wouldn't be?"

"Yes. I'm not a favorite of our rightful ruler, the Pontifex, like Lord Evel was. I'm a hieran menace. No matter how powerful we are, the rulers of Highland see us as nothing more than tools to be dispensed to the surface... If we fail and return to Highland, we're treated as the tools we are."

"I'd be happy to fight you again if we get the chance, if you're safely sent back down to the surface."

"And what value does that hold? As long as a hieran menace is a hieran menace, we can't truly defend the surface. We won't change anything; we can't

change anything. I don't want to fight for such nonsense." Tiffanyer seemed to be very displeased with her role and position as a hieran menace.

Inglis could tell that there were reasons for it, but she had a different outlook. "Fighting doesn't need a meaning or a purpose. We fight because we want to fight, and enjoy becoming stronger—isn't that enough? Anyway, if you promise me that the next time we meet you'll try to take me down for real—"

"I said, what's the point of that?! Are you some kind of beast?!"

"All I wish is to reach my ultimate potential. I'd like to secure as many chances for combat experience as possible."

Tiffanyer stared at her. "I'm not going along with that! What even are you?! You already have the power to take down a hieran menace without breaking a sweat! You're just making fun of me!"

"I'm not trying to make fun of you—" Thinking back, Inglis vaguely remembered Sistia, the black-masked man, and Evel feeling similarly insulted. Tiffanyer's response was tinged a bit differently, but she was angry too. It seemed there were few foes generous enough to break things off with "Understood! Next time we meet will be your death!" and train up to challenge her again.

It was reinforcing her previous impression that she'd need to find Evel's abandoned lab and try to duplicate herself. After all, she knew herself best. After matters were settled here, she'd need to go looking.

"But looking at the circumstances, I don't think you have any option but to accept... And I hate to say this, but we could consider those people around you hostages," Inglis said.

"Ugh...?"

"Gah! This girl—?!"

"She's using us as bait to get to Lady Tiffanyer!"

The Highlanders were agitated by Inglis's words. This was a natural reaction, having just seen her overpower Tiffanyer.

But Tiffanyer was different. "Looking at the circumstances? I see—so you're

still a bit naive in your own perceptions.”

“Oh! You still have a trick up your sleeve?!” Inglis exclaimed in excitement. She wanted to finish things quickly, but it wouldn’t hurt to see just what it was.

“Look at you smile! I can’t wait to see how I can twist that expression!” Tiffanyer shouted, sweeping aside the Highlanders and rushing at Inglis.

“Ah!”

Yet her charge lacked the speed and force it had once had. Tiffanyer couldn’t hide the impact Inglis’s punches had left on her. “Yaaaaah!”

There was no strength in Tiffanyer’s blow. *Why is she still fighting in this state? What reason does she have?* Inglis thought. She moved to brush Tiffanyer’s fist away.

With a high-pitched, penetrating sound, Tiffanyer’s body began to glow from within. *This—I think I’ve seen this light before.*

“Huh?!” As Inglis caught her opponent’s fist, the shine grew more intense still, swelling to a tremendous size. Inglis couldn’t keep herself from squinting. It was too bright to keep her eyes open.

Skreeeeeeeeech!

A distinctive high-pitched sound filled her ears. *There’s no mistaking it—! It’s like that fight on the flying battleship over the palace!* “You’re transforming into your weapon form?!”

Within the light, Tiffanyer’s voice, coming not from a human but from armor, echoed in Inglis’s head. *That’s right! I can still do this! Now, taste it! The true meaning of a hieran menace! That cursed power!*”

As the light faded, a new sight came into view—Inglis in a suit of platinum armor that looked as good as new.

Chapter V: Inglis, Age 15—The Evil Hieral Menace (5)

“Wow...”

The armor was beautiful, but that wasn’t all. The aether—which always surrounded Inglis as a divine knight—flowed into the armor that Tiffanyer had transformed into. It then returned to Inglis, enhanced and amplified tremendously. She could feel it on her skin. Her sturdiness, her strength, her speed—all of her combat capabilities were far more powerful. The feeling was akin to being under the effect of Aether Shell, but Inglis hadn’t activated it.

“This power is magnificent.” More than anything, its amplification of her aether was truly magnificent. Other Artifacts simply shattered under the strain of aether, but this transformed armor showed no indication of doing so.

“Ah! Lady Tiffanyer?!”

“Th-That girl’s wearing her?!”

“H-How could this have happened?”

It was something those Highlanders had probably never seen. They couldn’t hide their confusion. No doubt, they had not prepared for the event of their master transforming into armor that was then worn by their enemy.

“You should probably just watch for now. She definitely attacked,” Inglis warned them.

Tiffanyer hadn’t attached herself to Inglis out of the goodness of her heart. The fight wasn’t over yet. That said, Inglis didn’t have any idea what Tiffanyer was up to.

“*That’s right!*” Tiffanyer’s voice echoed in Inglis’s head. Her legs involuntarily pushed at the ground as if something else had moved them.

Stomp!

The force was enough to cause the ground underneath her to shudder. It was the full power of Aether Shell, further amplified by the hieran menace. With a speed beyond her ability to control, Inglis suddenly plunged through the forest, knocking down huge trees as she passed.

Crr-crk-crr-craaaack!

“Ngh! I can’t control—!” It wasn’t just that she was moving too fast to keep control—it was like her body wasn’t listening to her. She hadn’t wanted to rush into the forest in the first place. She didn’t even recall activating Aether Shell. The power was being drawn out and unleashed of its own accord.

“Ugh... This is... It’s—!” At the same time, a dizzying wave of weakness washed over her, and her vision dimmed for a moment. This wasn’t a normal effect from Aether Shell, which meant it had to be from the hieran menace.

“Now, give up your power!”

As Tiffanyer’s voice echoed in her head, Inglis exited the forest and stopped, facing Leclair. “Ugh...!” she grunted.

Her right hand thrust forward on its own, and aether converged in it. A pale blue spark formed, focusing into a ball of light. It was far larger and more powerful than usual.

“I-Incredible...!” An Aether Strike of a scale that astounded even her, power she never could have produced on her own—the sight took her breath away.

“Such impressive power. A strike from this would obliterate even me.”

“What are you doing?!” Inglis demanded.

“Hmmm. I suppose I’m taking the chance to try this out.”

The Aether Strike flew forth.

Booooooooooom!

The gigantic blast of aether, far more powerful than usual, shot toward the

crater left where Leclair had lifted. It carved a terribly deep trench in its path before making impact, where a pillar of light shot into the sky, further digging away at the earth and doubling the crater's size. It could only be called a larger scar on what was already a scar of destruction. If a town had been there, it would have been obliterated in one shot.

"Wow..." Inglis gasped in surprise. It was an awe-inspiring power. The fact that it was borrowed from the hieran menace rather than solely her own came as a disappointment, but she wondered if—with enough practice—she could eventually reach that level on her own. She burned this sight, this power, into her mind, and would use it as a goal in her training.

However, the feeling of emptiness she'd just experienced washed over her again but with more ferocity than before. She lost consciousness for a moment, only awakened by the impact of her body falling to the ground. It was definitely not just the exhaustion of firing Aether Strike. It had only been used once and then amplified by the hieran menace, so the burden on herself should only have been that of one shot.

Tiffanyer's laugh echoed in her head. *"How are you feeling? Did that take a lot out of you? This is the true form of a hieran menace. Do you understand what's happening to you?"* Her words were like barbs.

"Y-Yes... Hieran menaces absorb what you could call their wielder's life force and dispose of it..." Inglis responded, unable to stand.

"*Oh, so you knew?*"

"I've seen other hieran menaces transform into weapons before."

Inglis had witnessed Silva, the third-year student at the knights' academy she had worked with before, briefly transform Ripple into a golden gun, overwhelmingly enhancing Silva's power, but the process had also drawn out Silva's essence—his life force—before releasing it.

Even from a distance, Inglis had sensed it. If Silva had fought alongside Ripple for a long time, he'd probably have lost his life. That's why she had hastily stopped him and fought in his stead. Inglis hadn't done so out of a selfish desire to fight—well, at least not entirely.

That was when she'd realized hieran menaces could overwhelmingly increase their wielder's power at the cost of shaving away their life in proportion to the power consumed. The two seemed inextricably, unavoidably linked, but they actually weren't; they were two separate processes. Inglis didn't know the technical details yet, but she thought avoiding such a thing was in the realm of possibility. It was as if a hieran menace's transformation had been deliberately engineered with that defect.

It had become clear to her then: a hieran menace was both a goddess who overwhelmingly enhanced the power of a holy knight and a reaper who took that knight's life.

As for why Highland would do such a thing—Inglis theorized it was to prevent the power of a holy knight and a hieran menace from being turned against Highland.

Their combined strength was mighty enough to destroy even Prismers, the most powerful magicite beasts. At present, it was the single most powerful force on the surface. If the pair rebelled and took up arms against Highland, it would spell danger. Therefore, Highland sent down the hieran menaces with the intention of sapping the life of holy knights. That way, even if a holy knight and hieran menace rebelled, the wielder would burn away their own life as they fought, and the threat would naturally disappear.

The combination protected the surface while eliminating threats. Even if a holy knight fell in battle with a Prism, another holy knight could be brought in, and it suited the Highlanders well to keep the surface on the knife's edge between life and death. It was an obvious contradiction: to grant power without changing the power structure. A hieran menace was the answer to that. Tiffanyer's distaste for their mission was understandable.

"I wasn't sure it was the case, but you've convinced me. I apologize for Rani's rudeness earlier. Sorry," Inglis stated as she rose slowly. Rafinha had spoken harshly only because she had an incomplete picture of what a hieran menace was. Her opinion was born from her direct and pure heart and sense of justice, not from any malice.

"Such a silly girl you are," Tiffanyer said.

“How so? It’s a squire’s duty to apologize for their master’s rudeness.”

“As if you have time to be worried about that! Don’t you understand the situation you’re in?! How could you be aware of the dangers of a hieran menace yet not struggle to remove me?!”

“Well, I have my reasons.”

“I don’t know what those reasons are, but they’re meaningless! It won’t matter once I’ve drained your life force. You’re going to make your grave here!”

“I...” Inglis trailed off. Right—this was Tiffanyer’s last resort. Attaching herself to Inglis, forcibly drawing out her strength, and at the same time taking her life. Inglis felt herself getting weaker. Was this what it meant to have one’s life force stolen away?

“Inglis!”

“Oh no, Inglis!”

Voices came from above, and Inglis saw Leone and Liselotte in a Flygear. Inglis must have caught up to them when she had been forced to rush through the forest.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?! What was that light?!” Leone asked.

“Just look at you! And it seems you’ve collapsed?” Liselotte followed.

Inglis tried her best to answer them with a smile. “I’m fine. Don’t worry, go on a—”

Stomp!

Even as she answered them, Inglis’s legs pushed at the ground. It began to crack, practically groaning under the pressure she was exerting. This was not her own will, but Tiffanyer’s control over her body. Again, there was an overwhelming momentum she couldn’t stop. This time, it carried her not forward, but downward with a force that colliding with the earth itself couldn’t stop. She pierced the surface and gouged a path forward.

Rrrrrumble!

Her body tore through the dirt as the sounds of carving through layers of earth echoed in her ears. “Agh!” she cried as she continued to tunnel underground. Then she surfaced, again and again, in a serpentine motion.

Tiffanyer’s laugh echoed again. “*How does dirt taste? Oh, wait, I suppose you’re too busy to answer.*”

“It’s not very pleasant! Being underground is getting my hair dirty.”

“*Oh, dear. But I can tell you’re just putting on a brave face while your life gets sucked dry! You’re staggeringly powerful, but that just saps your life force faster!*”

“I see! This is how so many holy knights have died in the past—knowing that is why you reject the hieran menaces’ mission...”

Tiffanyer couldn’t have been the only one who knew. Eris and Ripple must have known as well.

Inglis thought back three years, to when she was twelve and first met Eris. The hieran menace had been angry with Leon for introducing her to Inglis and Rafinha, blood relatives of Rafael. Her anger at that time must have been due to a worry of Rafael’s strength possibly ebbing while fighting a Prismen; Eris would have been unable to face the two. That was why it seemed almost like Eris feared them and was keeping her distance at the time, looking for an excuse to escape.

In hindsight, that attitude was very like Eris. She was sensitive and kind even if she seemed to be brusque. Because of that very attitude, she got herself involved in Inglis’s business with Rahl, even trying to protect her. Inglis was sure that even now, whenever Eris looked at her and Rafinha, guilt gnawed at her insides over the worry that someday Rafael could die wielding her. Her subtle attempts to keep her distance told the story.

Holy knights must have known it as well. That was why Leon had said what he had before joining the Steelblood Front—that he was, after all, a holy knight. He had accepted the idea of laying down his life to protect the country and its

people. That wasn't puffery or idealism; it was an active choice he was making.

To fulfill the duty of a holy knight—that is, to fulfill the duty of repulsing an attacking Prism— that holy knight must fall, their life sucked away by a hieran menace. So naturally he'd question the justice of such a duty. Was it really worth it? What would be left behind after his life ebbed away? Such quandaries must have weighed on him.

And from there, he thought of Karelia unchanging under Highland's yoke. He must have wanted to find the value of his life in something else—even if it meant that the rest of his family would be denounced as kin to a traitor. He'd said it was for a greater cause.

That feeling was understandable. Eris, Rafael, and the others seemed to realize his intentions as well. Eris was angry in the moment, but her resentment faded over time. Ripple and Rafael hadn't spoken ill of Leon at all; they understood why he left.

The same line of thinking especially went for Ripple. The pain on her normally affable face when Silva told her that he cherished the memory of her saving his life long ago, that it drove his aspiration to become a holy knight. What happiness she could have felt was overwhelmed by pity. If Silva became a holy knight as he hoped and fulfilled his mission, it would cost him his life.

For Ripple, it must have been unbearable. She'd have to take the life of the boy who adored her so much that he worked his hardest at becoming a holy knight with her own hands. Silva didn't seem to know yet, but when he was officially knighted, he'd learn. Ripple had said so.

From the perspective of those who governed, there was no benefit in publicizing that effect of the relationship between the holy knights and hieran menaces. After all, it could result in skilled people becoming reluctant to pursue holy knighthood. The honorable image of hieran menaces might fade, possibly making it harder to unite the people on that basis. That information needed to be kept private.

Nonetheless, Silva would probably accept that condition and still choose to become a holy knight, believing he would protect Ripple. She would surely understand that...but it would also trouble her.

“Hieral menaces are tools! We don’t change anything! We can’t change anything! We only maintain Highland’s rule. However, that costly power can be effective in another way!”

“If used to kill me, your enemy?”

“That’s right! I can’t lose! Not until I rise to command, not until I grasp freedom, not until the world is mine, like the Triumvirate who were allowed their own remit because of their achievements!”

“I see, so that’s why you fight.”

“Correct. Selfish or no, it’s more meaningful to have my own will than to be a mere tool! Your friends don’t seem to agree, but I don’t care!”

Thunk!

Inglis suddenly stopped in her tracks, still under Tiffanyer’s control. With the armor on, she had reached the former site of Leclair as she stared into the even deeper crater.

“Chris?! What are you wearing?! Are you okay?” Rafinha’s voice echoed down from the *Star Princess* above.

“Inglis?! Did you make that hole? What are you doing?!” Lahti followed.

Then another voice called out. “That armor you’re wearing—is that Lady Tiffanyer?! What did you do to her?!” Harim seemed to have sortied from Leclair up in the sky to intercept Rafinha and Lahti.

What a relief it was that she’d caught up with Rafinha before the girl had ended up in any kind of danger. Normally, Inglis could relax and enjoy a leisurely fight knowing that Rafinha was nearby, but now was not a good time. Inglis still didn’t have full control of her body.

“Rani! Lahti! Get out of here! It’s dangerous to be near me!” she yelled.

Tiffanyer’s gleeful laugh echoed in her head. *“I have a nice idea. You see, I’m the type to hold grudges.”*

“N-No, stop!” Inglis protested. Her right hand thrust forward. The intense pale

blue glow grew larger and larger. It was an Aether Strike as gigantic as the previous one.

“I-It’s so bright! But I can’t sense any power! What is this?!” Harim gasped.

“A-Amazing! It’s way bigger than usual!” Rafinha said.

“Th-This must be what blew up this area earlier...” Lahti said. Everyone was stunned as they watched the light of aether converge in Inglis’s hand.

“Don’t just watch! Hurry! Run away! It’s really dangerous!” The larger the ball of light grew, the more nervous Inglis became. She could tell what Tiffanyer had planned. Inglis needed to avoid it at all costs.

“Wh-What do you mean?” Rafinha asked. She tilted her head in confusion.

Similarly puzzled, Lahti said, “Yeah, with that much power you can just—”

“Please, hurry! I can’t control myself! This might go flying at you!” Inglis warned.

“What?!” Rafinha gasped.

“A-All right! I’m getting us out of here!” Lahti announced.

“It’s too late! There’s no way they can avoid such a powerful attack from this close!”

“I said stop! If you don’t, consider your life forfeit! I’ll never show you a moment of mercy or pity again!” Inglis threatened.

“Aha ha ha! I’m not listening to someone who can’t so much as lift a finger to stop me. Besides, with this strike, your life too will be sucked away! I can feel you wasting away. No matter how you resist, your life is running out! Now, take your precious friends’ lives with your own hand, and die yourself! After all, I’m sparing you from a life of loneliness!” Tiffanyer laughed.

“Damn you!” The Aether Strike left Inglis’s hand.

Boooooooooom!

A gigantic blast of aether shot forth.



Again, it landed in the crater where Leclair had been. A pillar of light rocketed skyward. Large amounts of ground crumbled away, carving an even more definitive and deep imprint of destruction into the earth.

“Wh—?! I missed?! How’d you break my control so quickly?!” Tiffanyer’s voice filled Inglis’s head before the backdrop of the pillar of light.

Inglis fell to her knees, her hands on the ground, as she gasped for air.

“Even still... With that attack, your life is burnt through! I can tell you’re dried up!”

Inglis’s body shone brightly, just like when Tiffanyer had equipped herself to Inglis in her armor form. This time, however, the armor left Inglis’s body and reverted to human form.

“Ah!” Inglis gasped as the armor-clad Tiffanyer appeared right next to her.

“Ahhhh! Lady Tiffanyer! You’re safe!” Harim exclaimed joyfully when he saw her.

Ignoring him, Tiffanyer formed her hand into a point and leveled it at Inglis. “I’ll put an end to you!”

Inglis inhaled sharply as she saw Tiffanyer’s piercing hand getting nearer, but she acted quickly in response. With a loud “Haaaaah!” as she activated Aether Shell, she sidestepped Tiffanyer and, without a moment of hesitation or restraint, kicked her in the torso as hard as she could.

Crassssshhh!

This time, Tiffanyer’s armor shattered as she went flying into the air with a screech. “Aaaah!”

“Oh no! L-Lady Tiffanyer!”

Tiffanyer shot into the air like a bullet, bouncing off the bottom of the floating town of Leclair before falling into the twice-deepened scar it had left behind. Without a moment’s hesitation, Inglis closed in on where she’d fallen.

"U-Ugh... How are you so strong? Even with your life drained away..."
Tiffanyer herself finally seemed drained.

"That was merely your perception of what happened."

Tiffanyer had felt Inglis's flow of life come to a stop and had thus assumed that Inglis was about to die. As a hieran menace, she'd no doubt experienced the same stoppage when a holy knight's power had been exhausted.

That was certainly not the case here.

That flow had stopped because Inglis had used aether to interfere with the functions of the hieran menace and disable her ability to suck out her life force and release it. Tiffanyer had misunderstood the situation.

This was what the black-masked leader of the Steelblood Front had done. When he'd wielded Sistia, there was no ominous flow of power as if his life force was being dispersed. Inglis concluded that he had used his finely controlled aether to block Sistia's side effect as a hieran menace. That was the only difference Inglis could identify between then and when Silva had wielded Ripple.

That must be why Sistia was absolutely obedient to, and absolutely trusting of, the black-masked man as she lent him her power. No matter how long he wielded her for, he didn't die. That must have engendered a great deal of relief and trust. As a hieran menace, she probably considered him a savior, relieving her of the burden of her own cursed power.

And if he could accomplish it with aether, Inglis reasoned that she could as well. She lacked his high level of control of aether, but her experience with Yua had improved her skills in that department. That was why, even though it was a dangerous challenge, she hadn't rejected using Tiffanyer's armor form.

Inglis needed to reach his ability, which required experience, and what she had just gone through was definitely valuable in that regard. However, she was feeling weaker than normal; she was far too hungry ever since arriving in Alcard. Maybe that was why it had been much more challenging than she'd expected, but she'd pulled it off in the end.

The few who knew the truth behind hieran menaces—hieran menaces

themselves and the holy knights who wielded them—must have had their own perspectives on their relationship, but the closest person among them to Rafinha was no doubt her brother, Rafael. What did he think of the truth behind that partnership?

Even after Inglis and Rafinha had enrolled in the knights' academy and arrived at the capital, his expression when they'd met hadn't shown any hesitation at all. He hadn't expressed any resentment toward Leon, had been considerate to Eris and Ripple, and had been a kind and patient older brother to Rafinha and Inglis.

Perhaps he was completely prepared for his fate. That would explain why he was so relaxed, so straightforward. He accepted the contradiction that the hieran menaces embodied, even if he couldn't change the surface's subservient relation to Highland. Furthermore, if a Prism were to appear, it could not be left unchecked. Many lives would be lost; many tragedies would play out.

And if it was going to be anyone putting their life on the line, it should be him—that must have been his answer. His youth and his heart made him capable of such a decision. He was willing to sacrifice himself for the greater good. He would be a hero.

When the heroic holy knight met a holy knight's fate, what would that mean for Rafinha left behind? It would hurt her deeply. Her grief would leave her with scars that would never fade. Inglis—who adored sweet, little Rafinha—didn't want her to have to endure that. So having realized the true nature of hieran menaces' power, one of Inglis's major goals in her training was to master the technique that the Steelbloods' leader could use. She'd managed to survive putting that into practice, but she had farther to climb up that hill of mastery.

Inglis silently placed a foot on Tiffanyer's fallen form. She wouldn't let her escape. Tiffanyer had to pay. This hieran menace had tried to use her to kill Rafinha. Inglis had regained control just in time, but Tiffanyer had still had every intention of killing the person most dear to Inglis. She was going to make sure that there was no possibility of it happening again.

"I... I don't understand... What... What are you?"

"There's no point in answering the question of someone who's about to be

annihilated. I warned you that if you went ahead, your life would be forfeit.” Inglis formed her own Aether Strike in her right hand as she held it up to Tiffanyer. *I’m already very worn out. I don’t have much power left, but I’m not going to leave a single trace of her!* “Now, disappear!”

“That’s...right...” Tiffanyer sighed as she closed her eyes and relaxed her body; she was accepting her fate, Inglis assumed. Or maybe she’d lost consciousness. Inglis didn’t care either way.

A voice suddenly rang out above Inglis’s head. “Chris!” It was Rafinha, aboard the *Star Princess*, which had descended to a low altitude.

“Hold on a second, Rani. I have unfinished business to attend to.”

“W-Wait! Are you really going to—?”

“Yeah. I’m going to finish her. She’s dangerous. With all she’s done, we don’t have a choice.”

“I... I guess... But Chris, I don’t like seeing you unhappy. It’s scary seeing your eyes like this. Aren’t you always smiling when you fight? She’s definitely dangerous, but...being angry like this isn’t like you...”

A grandparent angry for their granddaughter’s sake, their granddaughter scared by their anger and crying—it was that kind of situation. Rafinha wasn’t actually crying, but Inglis still felt a bit uncomfortable. At the same time, the blood which had rushed to her head cooled down considerably. Even so, Tiffanyer couldn’t simply be let loose. She’d tried to kill Rafinha. She still had to be dealt with firmly.

“You know, Rani, when I get mad about something, I get *really* mad. And that was a very close call earlier.”

“Yeah. But... But...”

“I understand. You want me to smile?” Inglis giggled affectedly. “You’ve earned ten thousand deaths, so disappear. ♪ Is that better?”

“Not at all! That’s wrong too! Come on, if you’re going to kill her, wouldn’t it at least be better to have Alcard’s king pronounce judgment first?”

“She’ll recover in due time and go back on her rampage, won’t she? We’re the

only ones who can stop her, but we can't keep an eye on her permanently. It's better to finish her off before she can cause any more damage. Don't you think so, Lahti?" Inglis called out to him, at the controls of the *Star Princess*.

"Yeah," Lahti agreed. "If she gets loose somewhere Inglis isn't, I don't know how many people will end up dead. I think it's dangerous to try to keep her captive."

"See, Rani? Lahti agrees, so..."

"O-Okay... I understand... Do it, Chris!" Rafinha gripped her fists tightly as she spoke. She seemed conflicted, but after hearing Inglis and Lahti out, she'd made her decision. Just being gentle and sweet wasn't enough to make one a full-fledged knight. The experience of making heavy decisions was required too.

"Understood, Rani."

"Hold it right there! Get away from Lady Tiffanyer!" Harim screamed at the top of his lungs from a different direction. He was above in his Flygear, thrusting a flame he'd conjured in his hand toward Pullum, who was riding with him.

"Pullum!" Rafinha shouted.

"What are you doing?! That's your own sister!" Inglis shouted.

"How dare you, Harim! What the hell are you thinking?!" Lahti said.

Earlier on, Harim must have trapped Pullum in the magical dimension Highlanders could create, and had now pulled her out to use her as a hostage.

"Lahti! Everyone! I'm so sorry!" Pullum's face contorted in sorrow.

"Say what you will! I won't let you have Lady Tiffanyer! Now, if you value this girl's life—"

Before Harim could finish, Inglis cut him off. "You're making a mistake."

"What...?!"

"Do you really think that someone who can handle Tiffanyer can't take Pullum back before you even react? You've just saved me the trouble of searching for her. Thanks." Trying to intimidate her without showing Pullum would have been more effective. With her in sight, Inglis could rescue her by force.

“D-Don’t make fun of me! I’d like to see you try, so hurry up and—”

“All right, let me prove it.”

Inglis activated Aether Shell.

Rrrrrumble!

With huge tremors, the ground shook beneath her feet. It was an earthquake—a big one. Inglis fell to her knees as she lost her footing. Her plan was to grab Pullum in one fell swoop once the shaking stopped.

But it didn’t stop.

Instead, a faraway roar filled her ears.

“Huh?! What was that?! Did you hear that, Chris?” Rafinha asked.

“Yeah... It sounded like it was coming from beneath us!”

The shaking became more violent in the meantime.

Boooooom!

The center of the crater Inglis had gouged out was only a short distance away. Something emerged from it—almost like a tree—and split the earth.

“Whaaat?! What *is* that?! It looks like a gigantic tail!” Rafinha shouted.

“I-It’s freakin’ huge! I-Is it moving?!” Lahti stammered.

Even the tail alone towered over them. Its shape, studded with spikes, was brutality in the flesh. Its blue scales were as clear and beautiful as a mirror. Violence and beauty intertwined—even though the thing’s full body couldn’t be seen, its tail alone had a tremendous presence. No wonder Rafinha and Lahti were overwhelmed.

“Wh-What?! What is that thing?!” Even Harim hadn’t expected that.

The person most astonished was Inglis. “Wh—?! But that’s impossible! How is *he* here?!”

She remembered it. And that was not a memory of Inglis Eucus. It was a memory from who knew how many seasons ago. A memory of the king named Inglis, who had built the kingdom of Silvare in a single lifetime.

“The ancient dragon Fufailbane...”

She wasn’t sure how much time had passed between the end of King Inglis’s life and the beginning of Inglis Eucus’s. For her, it felt like thirty years had passed since encountering the dragon—it was a clear memory from when King Inglis had just reached a late age. The unique and intense surge of power it exuded couldn’t be mistaken for anything else.

It was one of the “ancient dragons”—incredibly powerful beasts that King Inglis had defeated in the final few years before death. While dragons were neither gods nor divine, their power was so fearsome that people cowered before the mightiest as such. Even small dragons were not seen in modern times, existing only in legends and fairy tales. Inglis had thought they’d been wiped out by the Prism Flow and magicite beasts.

Dragons and humans were incompatible. If their habitats overlapped, only mutual destruction resulted. That had been the prevailing assumption in King Inglis’s times, but when an ancient dragon had appeared on Silvare’s frontiers, the hero-king had attempted to communicate with it through the intercession of a diviner who spoke the draconic language.

And that assumption *had* been correct.

Therefore, everyone had taken up arms, and Silvare’s knights had suffered heavy losses. Already late in years, King Inglis’s skill with a blade had already dwindled because of the significant time taken up by kingly duties. As a result, many subordinates had to aid in the king’s vanquishing of the ancient dragon. So many young men with bright futures died that day while the king cursed that loss of life.

As a king, Inglis had regretted the sacrifice of his men. As a warrior, Inglis had regretted that his own lack of training and decline had left him unable to show such strength in the face of a powerful foe. The memories were bitter, but that meant they had left a strong impression. It was probably one of the reasons that had led to her current life as Inglis Eucus.

At any rate, with many sacrifices, King Inglis sealed the divine dragon deep beneath the volcano Mt. Clavoid. Since the ancient dragon had tremendous powers of ice, the king had used the natural mana of the volcano to counterbalance its powers and secure the seal.

Indeed, Inglis remembered sealing the ancient dragon in a volcano, so why was it here? The passing of time may have changed the names of places and countries, but could even a gigantic volcano have disappeared? Leclair had been there until just recently. Had the ancient dragon awakened again, only to be sealed away another time? Or had it stayed in its place while the volcano had disappeared for some reason?

Either way, the deep gouges that Inglis had created now extended; if the ancient dragon was in such a shallow place, its mighty chill might flow out again into the land and make the surroundings colder. That was the very reason why King Inglis had needed to seal the ancient dragon away.

The climate of not just Leclair, but all of Alcard, might have been affected by its power. Alcard was certainly north of Karelia, but there were other lands, other countries farther north with milder climates. Much of Alcard was mountainous, tending to be cold, but the impact of the buried divine dragon may have been more significant.

And was it just a coincidence that such a thing was buried exactly under the site from which Leclair was floated? Tiffanyer had said that the plan itself was Evel's. Inglis didn't think Tiffanyer had known of the dragon. She was unconscious, but her underling Harim was shocked. In addition, it was hard to believe that Evel had possessed no knowledge of this. Had he been trying to do something secretly? Alas, he was dead, and there was no way to know.

One thing was certain, though: the world in which King Inglis had lived and the world in which Inglis Eucus now lived were one and the same. The existence of the ancient dragon had convinced her of this. Until now, there had been so few remnants of her past life that she'd had no choice but to live in doubt.

And if the ancient dragon had awakened... It was a unique opportunity to learn what had become of that world after King Inglis had passed. She could call it her first connection to the old world since she'd been reborn.

It was also a chance to meet a powerful foe that King Inglis hadn't been able to defeat himself.

There was one other important reason too.

This was a chance she absolutely couldn't overlook—couldn't let pass her by. It was one she couldn't let anyone else take from her. The situation had changed, one could say. Rafinha had initially stopped her from killing Tiffanyer, and now that Harim was threatening them, she had no choice but to change her approach.

"Chris? Do you know what that thing is?" Rafinha asked, anxious.

"Hm? I'll tell you later. Right now..." Even as she answered Rafinha, Inglis turned to Harim. "I'm still open to negotiation. Give back Pullum and the survivors over in Leclair. If you do so, I'll release Tiffanyer. If you release those people and allow them safe passage to the surface, I won't pursue you to Leclair as it keeps floating away. Will that get you enough credit in Highland?"

By what Tiffanyer had said, the plan had been to offer Leclair to Highland. It was unclear how much Evel, their former commander, had known of the ancient dragon Fufailbane, or what his intentions for the dragon had been, but the terms proposed by Inglis would fulfill their objective and they'd at least probably be able to take minimal credit for it.

"Wh-What's with the change of heart?!" Harim asked, confused. The terms were acceptable to him, but he viewed her with suspicion.

"I just decided I didn't like the idea of always doing things by force."

"Huh?!" Inglis's friends gasped.

Harim was silent.

Harim nodding to that makes sense. After all, he's an enemy. But do Rafinha, Lahti, and Pullum all have to look so confused? Inglis again focused aether in her right hand, preparing an Aether Strike. "Answer quickly. If you don't..."

Harim's face went pale. "Ah...! Lady Tiffanyer...!"

"Isn't that a threat? That's kind of doing things by force," Rafinha blurted out, but Inglis ignored her.

“What’ll it be?” Inglis challenged. “Three... Two... One...”

“O-Okay! I’ll take your deal! You can have the survivors in Leclair!” Harim acquiesced in haste.



Once the people of Leclair were released, the Alcard knights among the survivors quickly recognized Lahti’s true identity.

“Prince Lahti! Thank you for saving us!”

“It’s an honor to be saved by Your Highness!”

“Thank you so much!”

“I owe you my life! I swear I’ll repay the favor one day!”

Their enthusiasm bewildered Lahti. “Ah, no... I didn’t really do that much...” he began, but Inglis stopped him with a shake of her head. From here on, Lahti needed to be the face of the group. He had to watch what he said. A king who would stand above his people did not need modesty or humility in the wrong moments.

In any case, Inglis could leave the leadership to him. Pullum was back, safe and sound. It was time to move on.

As for how Pullum got to Leclair, it turned out that Harim hadn’t been involved. Pullum didn’t know who took her there, just that it had happened while everyone else had been asleep. In fact, Harim had been surprised to see her.

That left one likely suspect on their minds: Ian. Pullum hadn’t seen him, so she wasn’t sure what was going on with him, but she apologized profusely for causing so much worry.

In the end, Ian’s goals and where he had gone both remained unclear. Given that they hadn’t seen him in Leclair, maybe he’d left for the capital? Inglis had no way of knowing, so there was no point in focusing too hard on the matter.

After all, she had far bigger lizards to fry.

“We did a good thing, right?” Rafinha asked, looking at Leclair as it floated

away into the sky.

“Yeah. We can’t split our focus here,” Inglis said, staring at the ancient dragon’s tail, which thrust forth from the crater. She no longer had time to worry about Leclair.

Even now, the earth occasionally shook from tremors as a roar echoed up from underground. Honestly, she couldn’t determine how much time they had before the earth would crumble and the ancient dragon would rise to the surface.

“It could come to the surface and make its move at any time. If we’re going to need to fight right now, we need to save some energy,” Inglis said.

The fight with Tiffanyer had been thoroughly exhausting. It had taken more out of Inglis than she’d expected. Tiffanyer had fought in such a different manner from what Inglis was accustomed to.

Inglis had gained a lot in the process, but she’d come close to completely wearing herself out. If she had attacked hard enough to obliterate Tiffanyer then, she would’ve been unable to fight again soon after. As soon as she discovered that there was an ancient dragon beneath their feet, the option of taking Tiffanyer’s life had disappeared.

“So, just what is this thing?” Rafinha asked. “It isn’t a magicite beast, right? And it isn’t a Prismer either...”

“It’s a dragon. A very, very old one.”

“A dragon?! There are magicite beasts that kinda look like those mythical creatures... You sure it’s not one of those?”

“I’m certain. Those are lizards turned into magicite beasts, whereas this is a real dragon. One of the most powerful too—like a Prismer in comparison to magicite beasts... I’m sure that on its own it’s more powerful than a hieran menace.”

Rafinha sighed in disgust. “So once you found a stronger foe, you got rid of the previous one? Chris, you really have a one-track mind.”

“W-Well, we saved Pullum and the survivors, so it’s not that bad in this

case..." Leone offered.

"Besides, we would decisively worsen our relationship with Highland if we killed one of their commanders. This is probably the wiser choice," Liselotte said.

The idea of fighting an ancient dragon was something that definitely interested Inglis. Beyond that, she had finally found a clue as to what had happened in the world since her previous life ended. But that wasn't all...

"Well, yes, there's that to consider, but there's also something else. Do you know what it is, Rani?"

There was one specific thing that would interest her cousin.

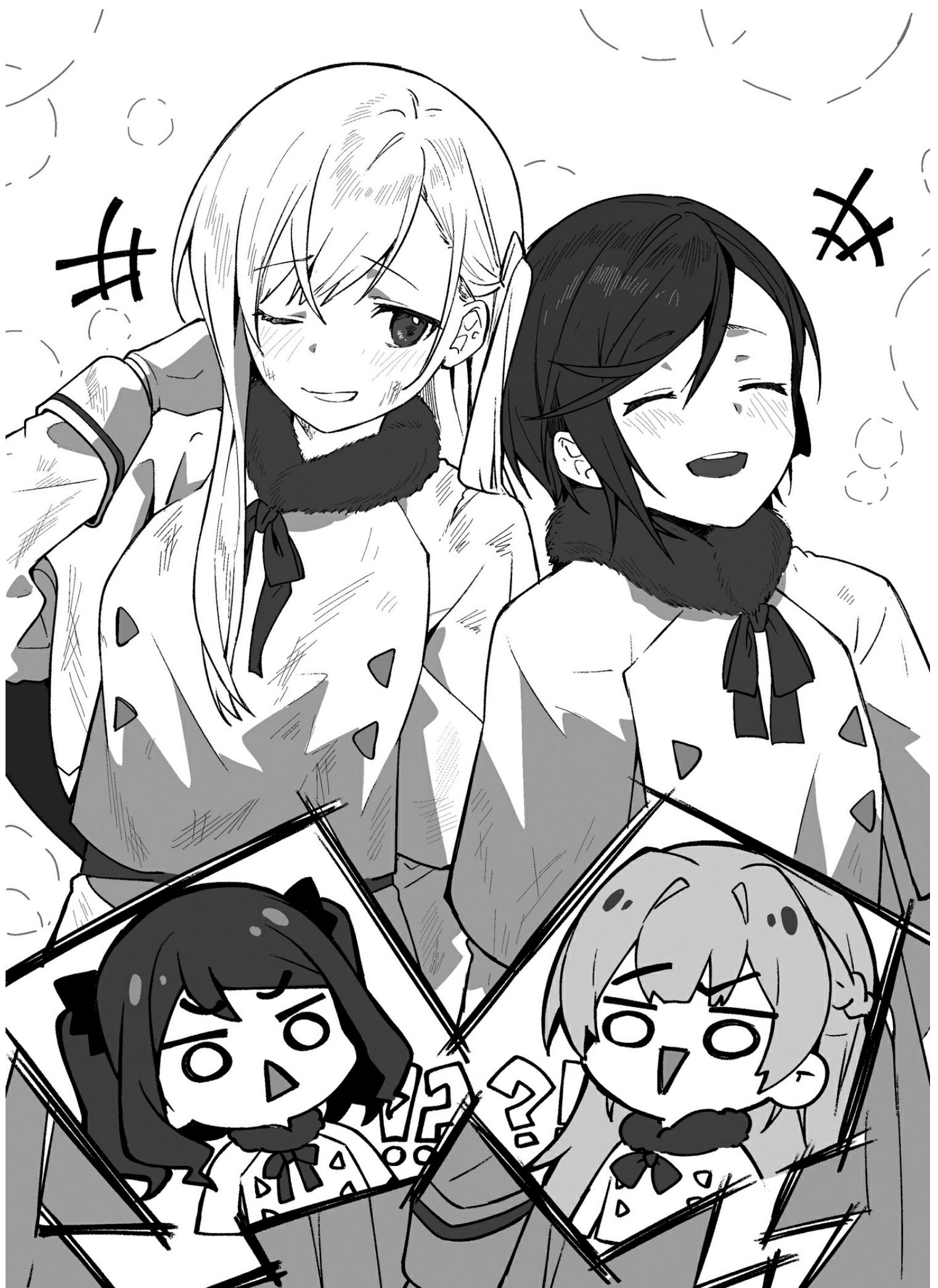
"Hm? What?"

"Dragon meat is supposed to be *really* tasty."

No sooner did the words leave Inglis's mouth than Rafinha's eyes lit up, exactly as she'd expected.

"Well then, our only option is to fight that dragon!"

"You want to *eat* it?!" Leone and Liselotte remarked in unison, with something close to terrified screams.



Extra: Inglis to the Infinite Power

After Inglis had met Harim for the first time, the knights' academy students were traveling via the Flygear Port to liberate Leclair. Their situation was tense, and they had an unavoidable fight in their future, but being uneasy all the time was exhausting. With the perpetually unflappable Inglis and the cheerful and talkative Rafinha along, the tense atmosphere didn't last. During their flight, the usual chatter kicked up.

"After we free Leclair, we're headed to the capital, right?" Rafinha asked.

"Yeah, but perhaps we should check what's happening at the border first. I expect Alcard's forces to continue eyeing the situation, but just in case..." Inglis replied.

Rafinha narrowed her eyes. "You probably just want them to get a move on, Chris."

"If we throw rocks at their camp, do you think they'll decide we're enemies and attack us?"

"C'mon, knock it off! That's dangerous!" Lahti said nervously.

"It'll be fi—" Inglis began.

"No, I mean dangerous for our army! Please don't..."

"Yeah! If you do that, there'll be no one left to protect people from magicite beasts!" Rafinha insisted.

"I see... So you weren't worried about me?" Inglis asked.

Lahti didn't miss a beat. "Why would we be?"

"Exactly," Rafinha agreed.

The two of them nodded in unison and added, "There'd be no point."

"But it'll be fine! I'll hold back. I just want a little taste of the action," Inglis pleaded.

“Absolutely not!” Matching, resounding rejection from the both of them.

Their group was trying its hardest to stop Alcard’s army, but if that was in vain and they invaded Karelia anyway, Inglis would have to stand in their path. She was actually hoping for that, but perhaps she wasn’t supposed to.

“And I assume I’m not supposed to search for that thing either?” Inglis asked.

“What thing?” Rafinha asked.

“Evel’s lab. I don’t know if it’s even in the capital, though.”

“Oh...! The one that can make Chris copies?”

“Yep.”

“Copies? What the heck?” Lahti asked.

“You know, the thing that made more Ians! Chris wants to find it and make more of herself.”

“Huh?! More of Inglis?” Leone gasped.

“You’re seriously considering that?!” Liselotte asked, taken aback.

“C’mon, what are you thinking?!” Lahti asked.

“Well, if there were two of me, we’d always be able to spar. I appreciate that efficiency,” Inglis replied.

In the course of a life spent pursuing martial prowess, it was important to secure a strong foe. Actual combat was the best kind of training—all the more so if she had a partner very close to her in ability and who was always willing to join in. If she could make a copy of herself, that other her would fulfill that role. Together, they could push the limits of their strength. The other Inglis would be a powerful partner.

“Th-That doesn’t sound like a good idea... I don’t think the academy’s cafeteria can survive another Inglis...” Leone said.

“The principal would probably faint,” Liselotte added.

“Rani, we could make another you too. That way I wouldn’t be the only one hogging the food,” Inglis offered.

"I don't want more of me! You're the only one with that crazy idea, Chris!"

"Huh? Really? Wouldn't it be convenient?" Inglis asked, confused.

Lahti nodded in agreement with Rafinha. "The idea of another me running around just gives me the creeps."

"Yes, the idea unsettles me as well. And you, Leone?" Liselotte turned to her friend.

"I'm not interested at all. If there was another me, she might have the same hard time I did..." Leone sighed.

Rafinha clapped her on the back. "Don't worry! We'll just be twice as friendly!"

"Indeed we will," Liselotte said.

Leone laughed. "Thanks."

"Now that I think about it...the idea of there being another me is quite frightening. I feel as though I wouldn't really have a sense of self anymore. Aren't you afraid of that, Inglis?" Liselotte asked.

"Well, I'm me. Even if there's someone a lot like me, if I get stronger, I'm not worried."

"So you really plan to use the facilities in Evel's lab if you find it..." Leone muttered.

"She probably does..." Rafinha answered, nodding. "Hmm... Well, what if there *were* two of Chris? And they were both, say, there at the fight with the larval Prismers we had." She held up her two index fingers. They were probably meant to represent each Inglis. While trying her best to sound like Inglis, she moved them back and forth.

"Ooh! A strong foe! All right, I'm gonna fight it!" the Inglis on the right said.

"No, I want to fight it!" the Inglis on the left said.

"No, I want to fight it too!"

"Do you really, *really* want to fight it?"

"I really, *really* do!"

“Too bad, I’m gonna get to it first!”

“No, it’s not yours! It’s mine!”

“Grrrrr!” Rafinha mimed a fight between the two.

“Wait, why don’t you fight it together? You’d win easily,” Lahti interrupted, amazed.

Rafinha’s two Inglis finger puppets answered back as if they were waiting for that very question. “Fighting cowardly like that isn’t good for training!”

“Mm-hmm. Yep,” Lahti said.

“She absolutely would say that,” Leone said, stifling a laugh.

“Aha ha... You understand her so well,” Liselotte said.

“How about we fight, and the winner gets to fight it?” Rafinha said as one Inglis.

“Let’s do that!” she followed up as the other.

“Grahhh! Smack! Smack! Smack! Slam! Slam! Slam!”

“Wait, no, I’d never do that! Even if it was a Prismer!” Inglis protested.

“Eek! No one’s stopping the Prismer! Smash! Smash! Smash!” That seemed to be the cries of the townspeople and the sound of their houses crumbling.

“Huh? Looks like the town’s gone.”

“Looks that way, yeah. I wonder why,” the two finger puppets concluded, tilting their heads in confusion.

Rafinha beamed at them with overflowing pride. “And that’s how it would end up! I’m sure of it!”

“Well, that would be no good,” Leone said.

“Terrifyingly prescient,” Liselotte remarked.

“Yeah. I guess when it comes to Inglis, it’s not one plus one equals two; it’s one plus one equals zero,” Lahti calculated.

“How rude!” Inglis interjected. “We’d be Rani’s squires, so we’d be sure to protect her if she was there! Such chaos would never happen.”

“And if I wasn’t in the capital during that scene?” Rafinha asked.

Inglis giggled with a sly expression.

“Chriiis. You can’t argue with that, can you?”

“B-But it’s still okay. I have a solution—there can be three of me. That way one is left out of the fight to handle things responsibly.”

“In that case, two would cancel each other out, and we’re left with just the remainder of one,” Liselotte said.

“No matter how many of Inglis there are, it wouldn’t make us any stronger,” Leone said.

“They’d just bicker over who gets to fight the actual enemy. It doesn’t increase our strength, just the cost of food! That doesn’t do anyone any good at all!” Rafinha insisted.

“But we wouldn’t be trying to do anything for the greater good anyway, so...” Inglis offered. Inglis Eucus was determined to live for herself alone. If she used Evel’s lab to make more of herself, the copies might have different personalities. She wouldn’t force them to join her for fights, but she hoped they would share her approach to power.

“What kind of knights’ academy student would say such a thing?! I’m certainly going to do things for the greater good, so I’d appreciate it if you’d help me!” Rafinha protested.

“Well, I’m fine with what you decide—always have been.”

“And I’m saying it now. Again. Will you go along with me in doing things for the greater good?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well then, even if we find Evel’s lab, no making more of yourself!” Rafinha crossed her forearms into an X.

“Whaaat?!”

“It’s for the greater good! No arguing!”

“Ugh...! But... But...”

And thus, thanks to Rafinha, the world was spared from the terror which threatened to wash over it...or was it?

Afterword

First, thank you very much for picking up this book! This wraps up the fifth volume of *Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire* ♀. I hope you enjoyed it.

With everything that's been happening for over a year now, how are you all getting along? I touched on this a little bit in the last volume, but with how busy my day job has become, I have less and less time to dedicate to writing. Society is in such a difficult situation, and there are so many people without work, but I've been so busy that it's like I'm in a different world. I feel like I can't get rid of the fatigue at all.

I guess moonlighting as a writer works best with a stable day job that doesn't put much pressure on you. I'm not getting any younger, and it's physically demanding to keep trying to balance my writing with my day job. For the first time in my nine years as a writer, I've been thinking that I'd like to start writing full-time. If I did, I could live my life doing what I love. However, that kind of move gives me a lot of worries too, and I'd like to find some passive income to be sure I'd be fine if anything happened. I've been sort of considering starting to invest—watching videos here and there, trying to learn about it.

I think that kind of knowledge might also be useful in writing. I'm a coder by profession, and I think my knowledge and my way of thinking show in my works. Debugging the story and setting of a novel is like debugging a program. In other words, Inglis's thinking is very buggy while I'm writing, so to speak! There's a lot in here that's planned from the beginning, but there are also parts that have to be worked out while I'm writing to make any sense.

Finally, I'd like to thank my editor N, the illustrator Nagu, and everyone else involved for their hard work and dedication. Chris looks so cute in her winter gear! I'm sorry I was late with the manuscript and asked for so much help. Additionally, volume two of Moto Kuromura's manga adaptation is out now, so check it out! It's always so good and so interesting. It inspires me to do my best.

Goodbye for now!

Author:
Hayaken
Illustrator:
Nagu

5

“Stew in
a place
like this
makes it
all the
more
deli-
cious.”

Inglis

(Chris)

The former hero-king, reborn
in the far future as a girl. She
is currently infiltrating the
northern country of Alcard.

“The setting
really
brings out
the flavor.
Agreed,
toootally! ♪”

Rafinha

(Rani)

Inglis's childhood friend and
Duke Bilford's daughter. She
is on the infiltration mission
with Inglis.

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



The infiltration mission in Alcard, of course, means the girls have a chance to live under the same roof!



“Good
day to you.
I'll be
borrowing
this for a
moment.
With that,
I bid you
adieu.”



Tiffany

A hieran menace deployed to the
northern country of Alcard.
Her beauty rivals that of Inglis.

Bonus Short Stories

Carefree Days

Principal Miriela was sitting in her office at the knights' academy. "Wow!" she exclaimed as her eyes gleamed at the ledger in front of her. On it was black ink, black ink, nothing but black ink. When was the last time that had happened?

The accountant who had brought the ledger smiled as well. "Isn't this great, Principal Miriela?" As an accountant, their favorite ink color was of course black, and their least favorite was red.

"It sure is! Ahh, I feel like I'm floating in the clouds."

"It's amazing. We've been in the red for so long..."

"Indeed. Especially last month due to the reconstruction—the pages were so soaked in red ink that they made me tremble. If the academy kept on like that, it would've hurt not only my position but also Prince Wayne's. I'm truly glad it's improved."

The knights' academy had existed for a long time, but the major change to include instruction in Flygear tactics had been under Prince Wayne's auspices. If the major budgetary concerns were accompanied by a lack of results from the students in Flygear training, even the prince wouldn't have been exempt from criticism, which would have caused its own political troubles.

Fortunately, in terms of the students' achievements, Inglis was already surpassing their wildest expectations in a number of ways—but she and Rafinha were also the leading causes of that red ink. From a fiscal standpoint, she was a mixed blessing at best.

"It's thanks to Inglis's expedition that we've been able to reduce our spending on food for the students," Miriela said, relieved.

Furthermore, if the expedition went well, Miriela could point to her students' grand accomplishments as well. In terms of both prestige and finances, it was

perhaps the ideal situation.

Miriela was naturally worried about her students, but she also had a reassuring sense that Inglis wouldn't have any trouble. Honestly, she thought that Inglis was more likely to be successful than if she herself had gone; the girl's capabilities were that impressive.

There were a few worries to be had about her character, but Rafinha's presence was a good influence on Inglis. If she was there as a chaperone, Miriela didn't need to feel so concerned about what Inglis might do.

"Ah, this tea is delicious," Miriela remarked.

"It really is," the accountant agreed as they nodded to each other—and then a knock came at the door.

"Who is it?" Miriela asked.

"Pardon me, Principal Miriela," Silva said as he entered the office. "I've returned from patrolling the city, as requested by the Royal Guard. I didn't notice anything suspicious."

"Ah, Silva. Well done. Would you care for some tea?"

"Thanks, but I'll pass. Anyway, have you heard anything from Inglis and the others sent to Alcard? I'm concerned, but their classmates are as well."

"No, they haven't sent any word to us, but I'm sure they'll be fine. We just need to fulfill our duties here—right?"

"I don't understand how you can be so relaxed. It isn't just Alcard to the north we need to be worried about, but also Venefic to the east. They need to complete their mission and return as soon as possible."

"Yes, I suppose you're right."

"You seem real happy that they're not here eating for free," murmured Yua, who had at some point gotten into the room.

"Yua?!" Silva gasped. "When did you—?! Wait, Principal Miriela, is this true?!"

"O-Of course not... Well, I guess I have been a little relieved that the food budget is back on track with Inglis and Rafinha gone, but... Aha ha ha... Anyway,

I have an important meeting to get to, so goodbye!"

And with her Artifact activated, Principal Miriela suddenly disappeared.

Cheese

As Inglis's group traveled aboard the Flygear Port in Alcard, they had stumbled upon a regular snack.

"I'm hungry. Guess I'll have a snow dumpling," Rafinha announced.

"I'll pass. I'm getting tired of them," Inglis replied.

"I still don't mind them. Unlike you, Chris, I can hold back."

"I mean, this whole thing was your idea." Still, though, Rafinha was like a granddaughter to her, and as her ersatz guardian in that respect, it was embarrassing to be the one pouting the most about an empty stomach. "Oh, hmm..."

Inglis wondered whether she could use aether to turn the snow dumplings into actual food. Theoretically, it should have been possible—extremely difficult in terms of fine control, to be sure, but Inglis's capabilities along those lines had improved. So even if she couldn't transform them completely, maybe she could alter their texture and flavor to an extent.

"All right!" Inglis plucked up a snow dumpling.

"Wait, that's—" Rafinha began to protest.

"It's just one, Rani. Hmm..." Inglis focused, and tried to control the aether as finely and precisely as she could, willing a transformation of its composition into a different food.

The first thing which came to mind was cheese. It had a relatively consistent aether composition. "Cheese, cheese," she murmured intently, and took a bite of the snow dumpling.

It tasted and felt exactly like cheese.

"Wow! It worked! Look, this snow dumpling tastes like cheese!" Inglis announced.

“I’m sure it does,” Leone said with a blank stare.

“After all, it certainly appears to *be* cheese,” Liselotte remarked.

“Wh—?!” Inglis gasped. “There’s cheese in this snowball?! Rani!”

“Tee hee, I couldn’t hold out any longer, so I stuck in a little bit...” Rafinha admitted.

“That’s no fair, Rani! Give half to me!”

“Ah, wait! You’re taking too much! Give it back—whoops?!”

“It fell?! No, I won’t let that happen!” Inglis flung herself overboard in pursuit.

“Hunger is a fearsome thing,” Leone said.

Liselotte nodded. “Indeed it is.”

Talking in Their Sleep

The Flygear Port was a mothership that carried many Flygears, and thus it served as the linchpin of operations on the squad or platoon scale. To provide combat endurance suitable for mid-to long-term operations, it had a deep hull with wide decks, allowing it to carry large amounts of supplies and for its detachment to bivouac on board. With just one member of the crew awake and at the controls, it could transform into a flying encampment. This was also a key point of Flygear Ports’ standard use.

Currently, one particular Flygear Port was on a forced night march to the town of Leclair. Leone and Liselotte were awake, while Inglis, Rafinha, and Lahti rested. Lahti’s tent was quiet—but the other was quite lively.

Rafinha was snoring and grinding her teeth as Leone and Liselotte listened, uneasy as they couldn’t help but overhear.

“Ugh!” Rafinha’s voice leaked from the tent. “What are you eating, Chris?! My tummy’s empty too! Ah, my tummy’s empty, my tummy’s empty, my tummy’s empty...”

“Wh—?!” Liselotte gasped.

“A-Are they fighting?” Leone asked.

"I'll go check on them. You take the controls."

"Sure."

Liselotte was gone for only a moment. Once she returned, she said, "It seems she's just talking in her sleep. She's famished even in her dreams."

"Ha ha ha... I knew she snored, but now she's talking in her sleep too..."

"And yet Inglis is asleep beside her... I don't think I'd be able to endure it."

"Inglis has said she's used to it."

"Well, I suppose they're cousins, and they did grow up together. I'm still in awe, nonetheless."

"Y-Yeah. But then again, it's Inglis. Common sense doesn't apply to her."

"Hmph!" Inglis's voice suddenly barked in a quite masculine tone. "How could I, a king who once lived in splendor, suffer from such hunger? Surely not even the Goddess envisioned such a future! Ah, I hunger so—even if I were to meet a powerful foe, I would not be satisfied with my strength!"

"Inglis is talking in her sleep too," Leone remarked. "And saying the strangest things."

"Something about kings and goddesses? I wonder what she means. You're right, it is quite odd," Liselotte agreed.

"The poor thing must be so hungry she's having strange dreams."

"Yes, I suppose."

"Ugh, shut up! You're being too loud, Chris! Quiet down, I can't sleep!" Rafinha suddenly yelled.

"Mmph?! Ah, Rani—sorry, I'll try to be careful."

"Okay. It's hard to fall asleep when I'm this hungry, so try to be quieter."

"Got it. All right, good night again."

"Yeah, good night."

Leone and Liselotte exchanged a glance.

"I really do feel a little sorry for them," Leone said.

“Indeed. In more ways than one,” Liselotte replied.

Before long, the snoring resumed, as did Inglis’s strange sayings.

“Ah! Goddess, save me! Give me your blessings!”

The two on watch said nothing.

Suddenly, the flap of Lahti’s tent flew open, and he went straight to Inglis and Rafinha’s tent. “Ugh! You’re too loud! Shut up! I hate to say this to girls, but your snoring and talking in your sleep would keep anyone awake!” he announced.

“Mm?!” Rafinha murmured.

“Mmph... Huh? No! I won’t forgive sneaking into Rani’s bedroom!” Inglis yelled as she woke back up.

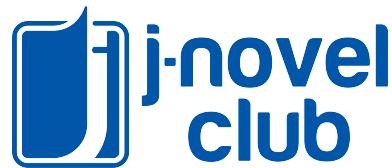
“Agh! Ow, ow, ow! Stop it!” Lahti protested.

Leone and Liselotte again looked at each other.

“I’m more than a little sorry for him too...” Leone said.

“Indeed,” Liselotte agreed. “He did nothing wrong.”

Thus, the night march continued.



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Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire ♀
Volume 5

by Hayaken

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