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Reborn to Master the Blade:

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

Author: Hayaken
Illustrator: Nagu

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*With
Inglis's help,
Arles quickly
changed into
the golden
priestess's
outfit.*

*“I-It is
a little bit
embarrassing...”*

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



*Colorful fireworks
burst over Lake Bolt.
The explosions of
light were mirrored
on the lake's surface,
making the scene
even more gorgeous
and fantastical.*



“Follow me.”

*Rafael grinned as
he led Meltina off.*

*For her, talking to
him made her heart
flutter. She didn't
recall feeling this way
about someone before.
She couldn't help but
keep staring at his
face.*

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Chapter I: Inglis, Age 16—Knights' Academy Field Day

Bang, bang, ba-ba-bang!

As the smoke of fireworks filled the clear skies over Lake Bolt's dock, Silva stood on the deck of a hovering Flygear Port which served as an impromptu stage. Surrounding him were not just other academy students, but also many citizens of Chiral. Today was Field Day at the knights' academy, where students showed off what they'd learned through their regular training. As representative of the students, Silva was there to deliver an opening greeting.

"I'd like to thank you for being here today. I'm pleased to have the opportunity—on such a beautiful day, to boot—to demonstrate what we've learned from our daily training."

It was an orthodox way to begin a speech, just as one would expect from him. Though he did seem a little nervous, perhaps from speaking to a crowd of more than just his fellow students.

A throaty, bellowing cheer rang out from Silva's brother Reddas Ayren, captain of the Royal Guard. "Silvaaaa! Relax! Your big brother's here!"

Reddas was overprotective of his brother—while he may have been a guest of honor today, he would have shown up just as surely even if uninvited.

"S-Stop it, Reddas! Quiet down!"

The audience chuckled as they watched Silva squirm.

"Ha ha ha. That must be super embarrassing," Rafinha said from her close-up view of him.

Inglis couldn't forget her own embarrassment when his cheers had followed her through her performance with the Weismar Troupe at the Royal Theatre—especially as he'd had his men join in. "Especially with how loud Reddas gets."

She and her friends were perched in their Flygears, waiting for the aerobatic demonstration slated for after Silva spoke. She, Rafinha, and Liselotte were each flying solo, while Leone and Meltina were in tandem, with Leone at the controls.

“I suppose it’s probably your turn for that next, Meltina,” Liselotte joked.

Meltina had no response. She was staring at the ground, deep in thought.

“Meltina? What’s wrong?”

“Ah! Oh, nothing! Did you say something?” Meltina stammered, as she looked up in surprise.

“You really need to relax, Meltina. Leone, maybe you could give her a shoulder rub?” Rafinha suggested. “It might help her be a bit less tense.”

Leone nodded. “That sounds right. Turn around, Meltina. It’s okay. Calm down.”

“Thank you. I’m not used to this, so I’m pretty nervous...” Meltina sighed deeply.

“I have to assume a princess would have spoken to crowds regularly... But you’re still nervous?”

“This is different! I never had to *sing* for them!”

That was why Meltina wasn’t piloting. Field Day was originally supposed to be a simple demonstration of the students’ skills, but as Principal Miriela had come up with more and more ideas for student performances, and even invited street vendors, it had gained something of a festival atmosphere. This hadn’t been done in previous years, but now, the spectacle and the entertainment were being used to justify an admission fee.

“Seems like you’re the latest victim of the principal’s bright ideas,” Rafinha teased. The idea of having a first-year sing for the crowd had come up, and a series of competitive auditions had ended with Meltina the victor.

“Well, some would say she’s *your* victim...” Meltina protested.

“Indeed,” Liselotte added. “The price of the tickets is to fill a certain gap in the academy’s budget.”

“Anyway, you won’t get many chances like this. May as well have fun with it! Broaden your horizons!”

“When you put it that way, Inglis, it makes sense...” Leone said.

“Yes,” Liselotte said. “You’ve been quite tense lately. This is a good chance to relax.” The two nodded in agreement.

“Well, I think Chris’s just looking forward to the live-fire exercise later,” Rafinha said.

Inglis chuckled. “Well, I mean, they did have to pay to get in, so it’s important we give them a show worth the price of admission.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s only happening because you twisted the principal’s arm.”

“No, of course not! It was just a suggestion for further improving the exercise!”

“I knew you’d say that.”

Watching Inglis and Rafinha squabble, Meltina laughed. “You two get along so well. Just watching you cheers me up.”

“Oh? I heard that laugh! Feeling better now?” Rafinha asked.

“Yes, a little. I feel like I’d be missing out if I didn’t relax and enjoy myself.”

“Yeah! That’s it! Okay, now that you’re feeling better, let’s get pumped up for this!” Rafinha began.

But Silva’s speech from the Flygear Port wasn’t over yet. “The duty of a knight bearing an Artifact is to protect the people from the Prism Flow—and from the magicite beasts it brings forth! We train night and day to rise to that challenge. Today, we will show you the results of the training so that you may come to know us! We will renew the oaths we have made on our Runes to become the shield which protects you!” Maybe Reddas’s encouragement had worked; Silva was really getting into it.

“Silva! You’re taking too long! Hurry it up!” Rafinha called out impatiently.

She wasn’t *wrong*, but it came off as heckling.

“Wh—?! Quiet down, Rafinha! I’m giving a very important speech!”

Their bickering set the crowd to laughing again.

“Rani, Rani. You shouldn’t interrupt him.” Inglis tugged at Rafinha’s sleeve.

“Huh? But we’re fired up, and now Meltina’s feeling better. We need to seize the moment... Oh, right, Ripple! Ripple, tell him to hurry up, please!” Rafinha called to the hial menace, who was in the seating for guests of honor.

It wasn’t just Reddas and the Royal Guard there that day; Rafael and Ripple were also there, representing the Paladins. Their duties had brought them back to the capital, conveniently in time for the event. And they were more than just guests; they’d also be participating. Prince Wayne, Ambassador Theodore, and Myce and the other Highlander refugees from Illuminas were present as well.

“Huh? Me?!” Ripple exclaimed, confused.

“C’mon, Rani, it’ll only be a little while,” Rafael said, trying to placate his sister. The Paladins pair had other duties to attend to, but Principal Miriela had requested their presence. She had wanted to capitalize on the popularity of the holy knight and hial menace duo; apparently she was quite serious about attracting a crowd.

“Hmmm, Silva. Rafinha seems pretty insistent, and I want to see what’s next too, so...”

“Of course, Lady Ripple! Then, that concludes my remarks! Let Field Day begin!”

“Wow, that was fast! It sure didn’t work that well for me!”

Rafinha’s nearby friends laughed.

It had indeed been an abrupt about-face, but Rafinha had asked Ripple to intercede for exactly that reason, so she wasn’t exactly complaining.

Principal Miriela then stepped in to take over for Silva. “Now then, first up is a demonstration of formation aerobatics by some of our youngest students, who have just entered the knights’ academy this year!”

“All right, Chris! Let’s go, everybody!”

“We’re off!” Inglis announced.

Many Flygears—not just their own—rose into the sky in an arrowhead formation. The crowd let out a gasp, even though the show hadn't properly begun yet; they were just lining up.

“Go for it, Leone!” Principal Miriela called from the Flygear Port.

At the lead of the formation was Leone's Flygear, with Meltina aboard. “Okay! Here goes!” Leone brandished her dark greatsword Artifact and activated its Gift. As she did, the world around her transformed into a dark, empty space—the alternate dimension her Artifact could create. It pulled even the audience into the new space.

“Whoa!”

“What's going on?!”

“It's nighttime all of a sudden?! Incredible!”

As the commotion rose to a fever pitch, Inglis and the others scattered and formed a cloud around Leone and Meltina's Flygear. With the duo between them, Inglis signaled to Rafinha with her eyes. It was on them to make the first move. From behind Leone on both sides, they swooped in, crossing over each other in front of her and continuing in a double helix around her. This was nothing they'd ever use when fighting magicite beasts—they'd practiced it specifically for today.

From behind them, color spotlights filled the space with beams of light following their trajectories, highlighting Inglis's and Rafinha's Flygears in blue. This was exactly as Principal Miriela had planned it.

“Chris!”

“Rani!”

Crossing paths once again just ahead of Leone, Inglis and Rafinha exchanged a high five. The crowd gasped, and Meltina, seeing her signal, began to sing beautifully.

At the same time, Liselotte and the other first-years swept back into formation and joined the show. Liselotte, following just behind Inglis, was highlighted in red, while others were in green and yellow. The darkness of the

dimension from Leone's Artifact only made the Flygears stand out more brightly. Leone, of course, was piloting the singer Meltina because the aerobatics everyone else was doing would be too difficult to pull off while maintaining the Gift's effects.

As Meltina's beautiful voice echoed through the space, brilliant colors shone every which way. The audience was so captivated that they forgot to blink. Eventually, Meltina's song ended, and Leone released her Gift.

Clap-clap-clap-clap-clap-clap!

Inglis heard thunderous applause from all around them.

"Wow, that was incredible! It was so beautiful!"

"I've never seen anything like it!"

"Worth the price of admission alone!"

Watching the crowd, Principal Miriela nodded in satisfaction. "Great work, everyone! With shows like this, Field Day will be a success—and a profitable one at that!" She laughed, waving to them with a slightly suspicious smile.

"Well, the principal's happy. She looks like she's up to no good, though," Rafinha said.

"Right. Her eyes are on the cash," Inglis replied.

"Well, I guess she does have legitimate worries on that front." Leone chuckled wryly.

"Yeah," Inglis answered. "If we want to keep eating for free, we've got to try our hardest."

"That's right, Chris! There's still plenty to do, so let's get to it!"

"And a certain someone else's eyes are on dinner, aren't they," Liselotte joked.

In any case, the show had only just begun.



“Hi! Are you hungry? We’ve got freshly grilled kebabs, or fish caught right here in Lake Bolt! Then there’s a veggie and cheese soup, or pancakes with plenty of homemade jam if you’ve got a sweet tooth! All of it handmade!” Rafinha smiled as she called out to the people passing before her.

Field Day’s main stage was a Flygear Port near the dock, but attendees were free to enter the dock itself as well, and a street market was set up for the convenience of those there to observe its workings. Students rotated in and out of staffing the stalls when they didn’t have other responsibilities, and right now, Rafinha was standing in front drumming up business. Her gumption, cheer, and kindness made her perfect for the job. In no time at all, the stall Inglis and friends were running had attracted quite a crowd.

“Wow. It’s certainly gotten rather crowded here. We’ve got to speed it up!” Liselotte quickly ladled out soup from the pot.

“It’s nice to have plenty of customers, but Rani’s going a bit far,” Leone muttered as she cooked pancakes. She was a very skilled cook—the best out of them.

“Well, Rani thinks she has to help by selling a lot, so, y’know,” Inglis explained.

It was true, as Leone observed, that the cafeteria workers had made the soup and that all they had to do was serve it. Additionally, the homemade jam wasn’t from *their* homes. But Leone was still there at the griddle, and Inglis at the grill. And they were there in hair nets and aprons to keep the oil off, exactly like commoner girls getting a little work experience as waitresses or cooks. So at least it wasn’t all a lie.

“Okay! Three orders of pancakes and kebabs! Thanks! ♪ Meltina, did you catch that? Can you bring them over?”

“O-Okay! Coming right up!”

Rafinha and Meltina were in the front taking orders. Meltina was not so used to dealing with the public directly. She didn’t have the personality that Rafinha had, but she was trying her best.

“Here’s the kebabs, Meltina,” Inglis said.

“And three orders of pancakes too. They’re pretty hot, be careful.”

“Thank you.” Meltina, her hands a little unsteady, brought the orders forth.
“Here you go!”

“Hey! You’re the girl who sang from the Flygear earlier, aren’t you?”

“Huh? Oh, yes... I’m sorry I couldn’t do better.”

“No, no, it was great!”

Other customers, hearing the conversation, also turned their heads to her.

“Oh wow! That’s the girl who sang before!”

“Oh my, she’s even prettier up close!”

“It was really good! I was so impressed!”

“That it was! That it was!”

In no time at all, a crowd had gathered around her.

“Er, um... Thank you, everyone!” Meltina said, happy but a bit awkward at the same time.

“And hey! You ever thought of singing anywhere else? I run a bar, and we’ve got a stage for singers and dancers! Maybe I can talk you into a gig?”

“I’m sure it would be an honor, but...” Meltina began, only for Rafinha to interject herself into the conversation.

“Heyyy there! ♪ You should know, we *are* a boarding school, and we need the principal’s approval to leave campus. Meltina might be interested, but you need to ask the principal first.”

“Oh, really? Got it. I’ll have to do that later.”

“Of course. Thank you.” Rafinha skillfully covered for Meltina.

“Thanks, Rafinha.” Meltina sighed.

“It’s okay. Well, going to a bar, probably not okay, but you know.”

“Yes, that’s right. It’d probably have food I don’t normally get to try, and that would make me extra hungry.”

“No, that wasn’t quite what I meant, just—” Rafinha broke off laughing.

Meltina was an honest-to-goodness imperial princess of Venefic. Inglis and Rafinha were nobles too, but Meltina's sheltered upbringing must have been on an entirely different level. Inglis and Rafinha were familiar with how commoners lived, but Meltina might have rather different conceptions of what particular jobs involved.

"I understand completely, Meltina," Inglis agreed. "Cooking sure works up an appetite too." Inglis looked down at the delicious-looking kebabs and grilled fish just in front of her. They smelled amazing, and she was practically drooling over them.

"Yeah. Chomping into them rather than giving them away is awfully tempting," Rafinha chimed in.

Inglis, Rafinha, and Meltina fell silent as they slid their eyes over the tantalizing, sizzling skewers and pancakes as one.



“H-Hey, wait! I see that look you three have!” Leone protested.

“They’re for sale! We mustn’t eat them ourselves!” Liselotte said.

The three nodded, submitting to the scolding. They would have to pay for anything they ate without permission—and they didn’t have the money for that.

“Yeah, you’re right, I guess. We’ve got to endure... Be patient, Chris!”

“Okay...but can you take over grilling for me? Doing this is making me even hungrier.”

“No way! You know I don’t want to! That’s why I’m out front! We drew straws and everything!”

“Meltina, how about—”

“I’m sorry. I hate being hungry too... And we did draw straws.”

Well, that much was true. They had drawn straws to determine jobs, and Rafinha and Meltina had won the front-of-house job.

“Ugh... I hate having delicious food in front of me that I can’t eat.” Inglis sighed.

Then Rafael appeared at the stall, a gentle smile on his face and Ripple next to him. “Hey, Rani, Chris. You were great earlier. I’m glad I got to see.”

Rafinha perked up at her brother’s presence. “Rafael!”

“And Ripple!”

“That was beautiful, guys! I never would have thought of using a Gift in that way. I just wish Eris could’ve seen it too.” Ripple was smiling, but she seemed a little disappointed.

Eris was still inside the Greyfriar sarcophagus, the device for creating hial menaces. After examining the one that Eris was within, Ambassador Theodore had determined that her treatment could continue safely. She would emerge, as originally estimated, in around a year.

“It’d be nice if she made it out sooner,” Inglis said, and Ripple nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, it’s a lot of extra work for me when she’s not around. Though I guess she could say the same thing.”

Previously, when Ripple had fallen ill and been involuntarily summoning magicite beasts, Eris had covered her responsibilities for her. They had a long history together as Karelia’s hial menaces. Now, it was Ripple’s turn to do her best until Eris returned.

“By the way, those snacks you’re selling look great,” Rafael said. “Can I get five of each?”

“Ha ha ha. So, just enough for yourself?” Ripple teased.

“Yeah. I don’t usually get the chance to eat Rani and Chris’s cooking.”

“And you *especiall*y want to try *hers*, don’t you?” Rafinha gave him a knowing smile.

“H-Hey, no, it’s not like that!”

As he protested, Inglis brought him freshly cooked skewers on a wooden tray. “Here you go. Thanks for waiting.”

“Thanks, Chris. It looks delicious.”

Rafinha whispered in Inglis’s ear. “Hey, c’mon, Chris. Why don’t you feed one to him?”

“Huh? But why?”

“Don’t worry about that! Just go ahead! Rafael, Chris is gonna feed you one!”

“Wh-What?! No, c’mon, you don’t need to make her—!”

“No, I’m fine with it. Dig in, Rafael.” Inglis smiled and lifted a kebab to his mouth. Her past life was still very much a part of her memories, so the idea of feeding another guy meat was not an exciting one, but if Rafinha wanted her to do it, then she’d do it. Plus, she’d known Rafael since he was very young, so she didn’t mind that much if it was with him.

“O-Oh! Th-Then okay!” As soon as Rafael’s teeth sunk into the skewer, his face lit up. “Wow! This is really good! I’m impressed!”

“Isn’t it! You know, we reeeallly wanna try some too, but they’re for sale, so

we can't just go and eat them. We don't have money...but we're so hungry..." Rafinha spoke like she was trying to coax a cat out from under a chair.

Inglis realized Rafinha's plan all along had been to use Inglis to put him in a good mood before asking him for something.

"Oh, I see. Then can I get another ten orders of each?"

"Aww, c'mon, Rafael! How about fifteen!"

"Huh? Okay, I guess. Are you really that hungry?"

"No, we've just got another mouth to feed!" Rafinha grinned and turned to Meltina.

Before long, there were the familiar noises of hastily chewed and slurped food. The stall's stocks of skewers, pancakes, and soup disappeared in a flash.

"Mmm, tasty!" Rafinha beamed.

"Eating really is better than cooking," Inglis agreed, smiling as well.

"Pardon our imposition," Meltina said to Rafael, "but it all really is delicious."

"I had a feeling something like this would happen..." Leone sighed.

"Don't worry," Liselotte said. "It *was* paid for, so all's well that ends well."

"Another healthy appetite came along, huh... I can see why Miriela suddenly had the idea of raising money..." Ripple laughed dryly.

"I'm surprised there's someone else who eats as much as we do. And especially that—" Rafael cut off before he finished with something like, *It's a princess from Venefic*. He had obviously heard of the situation and knew who she was.

Noticing his attention, Meltina lowered her eyes. "Y-Yes..."

Karelia and Venefic were enemies. Not just that, but Venefic's raid on Chiral was still fresh in people's memories. Some also believed that Venefic had orchestrated the rimebound Prismers' destructive attack on the city. So the populace's opinion of Venefic was by no means a good one. With that on her mind, Meltina was by no means at ease.

"But you can get along with her, right, Rafael?" Rafinha asked, smiling.

“Yeah. Yeah, I think so.”

“Even though I’m a princess of...you know?” Meltina asked.

“You’re a student at the knights’ academy too, though, right? That’s my own alma mater. And of course I’d feel like I have something in common with someone who eats like I do,” Rafael reassured her with a grin. “Try to teach Rani and Chris, and the others, as much as you can about where you’re from. Everything might not be sunshine and roses, but your time together will teach you to understand one another. That’s something of immense value.” Then he turned to the rest of them. “And all of you, treat Meltina well too.”

“Of course!” the Karelians answered as one.

“Thank you, everyone!” Meltina replied, smiling and bowing her head.

“Now, go ahead and eat as much as you want,” Rafael said. “Rani, Chris, that goes for both of you too.”

“Whoo! Three more of everything for me!” Rafinha cheered.

“Same here,” Inglis said. “It’s fun cooking when you know you’re gonna get to eat it right away.”

“Then, I’ll partake as well...” Meltina began.

“Okay. Nine of everything, then,” Leone said.

“Well, at least sales have been good,” Liselotte said. “However, may Rafael’s wallet rest in peace.”

A voice suddenly cut in. “No! This is not good at all!”

Ripple identified the speaker. “Oh, Miriela. What’s up?”

“Huh?! Principal, if it’s about the money, Rafael’s paying! We just want to eat a little more...” Rafinha began.

“Save it for later! It’s time to switch! Inglis, everyone, you have another stall to get to! I had to come get you because you weren’t there on time!”

“Oh, is it already that late? The next one’s where we get our share, right?” Inglis asked.

“Yes, of course. Now if you could get going...” Principal Miriela laughed

ominously, and the lenses of her glasses almost seemed to gleam.

“Whoa, what’s with that evil grin?” Ripple asked.

“Er, Miriela. What exactly do you have planned?” Rafael grimaced.

“I had no choice in the matter! Managing the knights’ academy is not a game! Now let’s get going, Inglis!”

“Of course.” Inglis nodded before following Principal Miriela away.



Principal Miriela stood upon the stage, which was now on ground level, having been moved from the Flygear Port. She called out to the assembled crowd.

“Now, if I may have your attention! These two beautiful young ladies are both in our squire program!”

Beside her, Inglis and Yua were seated next to each other at a long table.

“Beautiful, huh. Yay.” Yua was expressionless, yet she sounded pleased.

“Now, of course, none of our squires have Runes, but that doesn’t stop them from training night and day to protect everyone from magicite beasts! Inglis, Yua, show them your hands!”

As prompted, they showed the featureless backs of their hands to the crowd, who exclaimed in astonishment.

“She’s right, they don’t have Runes!”

“And yet they still fight magicite beasts... That’s impressive.”

“Yeah. Good for them.”

“If you didn’t know them, it might seem like this pair is selfless...” Rafinha laughed.

“Yeah,” Leone agreed. “But we know better...”

Liselotte gave a wry chuckle. “I feel like we’re playing a rather dirty trick here.”

“Quiet down over there!” Principal Miriela barked. “Ahem! These two may

not have Runes, but they do have the training we offer at the academy! And today we'd like to show you all the results!"

The crowd buzzed.

"The results?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"They don't have Runes, so they can't use Artifacts, right?"

"It all begins with a well-trained body! Physical strength! Who's willing to challenge one of these girls to an arm-wrestling match? Of course, there is an entry fee, but anyone who wins will claim a purse ten times as large!"

"T-Ten times?! Seriously?!"

"Without Artifacts, they're just normal girls, right? I mean, sure they might work out, but still."

"They don't look all that jacked... Maybe I can take them?"

As the crowd contemplated the offer, Miriela set the hook. "All right, first come, first served! Who wants to give it a shot?"

"If no one else, then I shall!" a familiar voice rang out. Unmistakably, it was Reddas, captain of the Royal Guard.

"Reddas?" Inglis gasped. He himself should know that he hadn't the faintest chance against her. Or was he a plant that Miriela had schemed to work up the crowd?

"Ooh! That's Royal Guard Captain Reddas Eyren!"

"Sir Reddas is going to take that girl on?!"

"Um, is that even fair?"

"Okay! Then Reddas, captain of the Royal Guard, will be our first challenger! Hold on to your seats, folks!" Miriela worked the crowd.

"Yeah! Then, if I may!" Reddas strode toward Inglis, expectations of triumph on his face.

"Reddas, are you sure about this?" This might be something that Miriela had

set up, but Inglis still felt like she needed to ask.

“Of course! No need to hold back, Lady Inglis!”

“I see.” If she didn’t hold back, she didn’t expect many more challengers, so she did think it would be better to go a little easy on him and make it seem like a close-fought matter.

“Then, reach out your hands, get ready, and... Go!” Miriela intoned.

“Hnnngh!” Reddas was putting everything he had into it—which, for Inglis, was not very much at all. She could win right away, but it would be better to play— “Ah... Skin as smooth as the finest silk... Holding Lady Inglis’s hand like this is heaven on earth... I don’t think I’m ever going to wash my hands again...”

Thud!

“Whuh?!”

On reflex, Inglis had slammed Reddas’s hand against the table. She could not stop him from thinking it, but hearing it out loud sent shivers down her spine.

“Ah... Sorry, are you okay?” she asked.

“I’m fine. I knew I couldn’t win against you, Lady Inglis! But it was worth it anyway!” Reddas laughed loudly as he rubbed his aching arm and stepped away from the table.

“I-Incredible...!”

“A big guy like the captain of the Royal Guard—taken down in an instant?!”

“She may look tiny and cute, but... C’mon, we don’t have a chance.”

Miriela, displeased, whispered in Inglis’s ear. “Come on, Inglis. You’ve gotta sell it a little bit, or no one else will want to challenge you. Just hold back a little.”

“S-Sorry, I just...”

“A-Anyway, is there anyone else who’d like to try?!” Miriela called to the crowd. “You don’t have to challenge Inglis. Yua is here as well!” She pointed to

the other girl, who was visibly nodding off.

“*Yawwwwwn*. Mmm...”

“Come *on*, Yua, don’t fall asleep! Rafinha! Rafinha! Help me with this!” Miriela called Rafinha up onto the stage.

“I guess... This is kind of a mess, but does anyone else want to—”

Many people took no time at all volunteering themselves.

“Me, Lady Rafinha! Me!”

“Me too!”

“Reporting for duty!”

“Myself as well!”

“Ooh! Okay then, everyone, line up here!” Rafinha said.

The line which assembled in front of Inglis turned out to be full of knights from the Royal Guard who had accompanied Reddas today.

“Lady Inglis! If I may!”

“Even just arm wrestling, it’s an honor to spar with you!”

“Show me how it’s done!”

They all seemed extremely pleased.

“Ha ha ha, Chris, looks like you’ve got a lot of fans in the Royal Guard...”

Her commission as its acting captain had been overridden but never formally revoked, of course. And some had idolized her from when they’d seen her fight off Archlord Evel or Venefic’s raid led by Rochefort.

“Of course. Then, let’s go,” Inglis greeted them as a mellow smile rose to her face.

“Come ooon, everybody! As strong as she is, she can’t keep going foreeeever!” Rafinha called out. “Who will win?! If it’s you, you get the honors of having beaten the girl even the captain of the Royal Guard couldn’t! C’mon, give it a try!”

“That’s right. If she keeps going, she’ll get tired and eventually one of us will

win.”

“And get ten times our money as a prize!”

“All right, let’s give it a shot!”

Rafinha’s plan was a great success. In no time at all, the line stretched onward.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Inglis was giving them a little bit of a reprieve this time around, but still working her way through Reddas’s subordinates. None of them were especially upset about losing, though. In fact, they were grinning.

“Well, we should’ve known we couldn’t beat Lady Inglis, ha ha ha!”

“But Captain Reddas was right. Her hands are so smooth and soft. They’re out of this world!”

“And just seeing my reflection in her ruby-red eyes makes me feel like I’m being taken up to heaven!”

“More than anything else, did you notice that just being around her, something smelled really nice? That alone is enough for me.”

“Yeah, I hear you there! Even the way she smells is amazing.”

“If I just had held on a little longer, I could have stayed close to her that much more...”

“Yeah, that’s my only disappointment.”

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Listen up, men! If you want more time with Lady Inglis, get back in line! They never said we couldn’t try again!” Reddas was already lined back up.

“Captain!”

“Don’t worry about the price! I’ve got money! So, line up!”

“Yes, sir!” The knights of the Royal Guard merrily returned to the end of the line.

Rafinha laughed awkwardly. “I think they’re kind of missing the point, but I guess it’s fine if they’re willing to pay up just to hold hands with you, Chris...”

“No, Rani, that’s not fine! Once you’ve lost, you should be out!” Inglis groaned. She’d take anyone honestly there to test their strength as many times as they’d like, but these other motivations, she wasn’t enthused about. Even if she was in full agreement that she was beautiful and that her skin was as smooth as silk. Those parts of herself were *hers*, for *her* to enjoy, not for them. Her past life had been as a man; how could the knights enjoy holding hands with a man, looking into his eyes, inhaling his scent?

“Nope!” Rafinha insisted. “We have to keep sales up! Do your best! It’s paying for our cafeteria!”

“I mean, yes, but...!”

“Look! Yua doesn’t eat like us, but she’s still trying her hardest!” Rafinha pointed over to Yua.

“Kay.”

Thud!

Yua had just taken down a large, heavyset man.

“Gwuh?! Oww! You’re really strong! You win!”

“Good try, pops,” Yua flatly congratulated her opponent.

“That’s it, Yua! All right, next!” Miriela was handling the line for Yua, who was churning through the competition as well.

“Oh, wait,” Yua said.

“Huh?”

“Here he is.” Yua looked at a boy who Morris, still a tiny magicite beast, had pulled over by the hem of his pants. He wasn’t a knights’ academy student, but he was about her age and had an attractive, almost cute, face.

“What is this thing?! Why’s it dragging me over here?”

“Welcome,” Yua bluntly greeted him.

“Huh? To what?”

“This.” Yua extended her hand, but he didn’t understand.

“No, really, what?”

“Arm wrestling. Win and you get a prize.”

“But you do have to pay to enter,” Miriela reminded.

“Huh?! I don’t have that kind of money! I need to get back to work!”

Plenty of street vendors had shown up to Field Day. He must have been one of them.

“Work?”

“Yeah, I have to work to pay for my family’s medicine...”

“That’s a good boy.” Yua patted him on the head. For Yua to initiate physical contact, she must have taken a liking to his looks. And that must have been why she’d had him brought to her.

“C-Can I go now?”

“No. Stop him, Beanpole.” As the boy stood up, Morris latched down on the hem of his pants and pulled.

“Whoa!” The boy went tumbling to the ground, his pants falling as he did.

“Ooh!” Yua appeared pleased.

“Wh-What are you doing!” The boy angrily pulled up his pants.

“Don’t worry about that. Let’s arm wrestle. No entry fee.”

“And you’ll let me go after that?! Okay, fine!”

“Okay, then, let’s get this match started!” Miriela announced.

A battle of inches ensued.

“Ughhh...! She... She isn’t giving at all!” The boy’s face flushed bright red as he strained, but Yua’s arm remained still.

“Not shabby for a kid that scrawny.”

“Yeah, even that beefy guy from before lost.”

“I dunno what kinda training they do there, but it definitely gets results.”

But as the crowd commented, the match was decided.

Thud!

The back of Yua’s hand had slammed to the table. The crowd roared in surprise.

The boy blinked in shock. “Huh? I... I won? I didn’t think I had a chance.”

“Congratulations. Take your prize,” Yua said.

“Huh? Wait, did you—”

As the boy began to put two and two together, Yua held out her hand to him. “It hurts. Rub it.”

“Huh? Oh, sorry, yeah, that sounded painful.”

Yua giggled in satisfaction as the boy massaged her hand, and Inglis realized that this wasn’t really any different than the glee Reddas’s men had exhibited upon touching hers, but Miriela was the first to respond.

“H-Hey, Yua! Did you do that intentionally? You can’t do that! Please refrain from letting people win!”

“Our take is just gonna disappear into Boobies’s belly. It’s more worthwhile to give it to him.”

“Ugh...! Th-That’s—” Miriela had no counterargument to that.

“Well, *obviously*. Yua, you did the right thing!” Inglis said.

Rafinha laughed. “Yeah...maybe you did.”

“Why are you so carefree about this?! Inglis, Rafinha, if that’s how you really feel, then you can cover those costs at the cafeteria!” Miriela insisted.

“No fair!!!” the pair cried out.

“It makes sense, doesn’t it? Just like Yua said, the money from this was

supposed to go toward the cafeteria budget!”

“Oh no, oh no...” Rafinha mumbled. “Ah, right, Reddas! Everyone from the Royal Guard! How about if...for an additional fee of three times the entry fee, you get permission to hug Chris before the arm-wrestling match?”

“Really, Lady Rafinha?! We’ll pay! We’ll pay no matter the cost!”

“Hold it, Rani! Don’t just make that up yourself! I don’t want to!”

“Deal with it! There’s no way we can afford covering that purse!”

“Easy for you to say when you don’t have to be the one served up!”

One of the knights then turned to Rafinha. “L-Lady Rafinha! I apologize for the impudence, but would that offer apply to you as well?!”

“What? Me?!”

“Yes! While I mean no disrespect to Lady Inglis’s strength nor her beauty, your lively demeanor simply dazzles me!” Rafinha, having served as the Royal Guard’s acting colonel alongside Inglis, was also a familiar face to the men of the unit.

“What? Really? I guess, if you insist.” Rafinha smiled, a bit pleased with herself.

“No! Rani, no! That’s a terrible idea!”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Plus, it’s no good to push it all on you either, right?”

“Exactly! *Neither* of us should do this!”

In the end, Inglis worked hard and managed to cover the purse with nothing but arm wrestling, but the share she’d expected for herself was gone.



Field Day had begun in the morning, but now, evening was drawing near.

“All right, everyone! It’s time for our final—and biggest—event of the day! Let’s all go watch the team Flygear race!” Miriela announced from the Flygear Port, grinning.

“Ooh!”

“I’ve been waiting for this!”

“That sounds fun! I’ve never watched anything like it!”

“Yes! Yes, it will be fun!” Miriela replied to the voice from the crowd. “And remember to bet on which team you think will win!”

The course over Lake Bolt was lit up with the same lights that had illuminated Inglis’s group during their aerobatics earlier.

“And now, let me introduce our teams! First up is the knights’ academy first-years!”

Inglis and friends were the first to be introduced. Their team of five was Inglis, Rafinha, Leone, Liselotte, and Meltina. They all stepped forth and faced the crowd.

“Oh, hey, it’s that strong girl from the arm wrestling!”

“And the one who sang at the beginning!”

“They seem pretty strong, but they’re only first-years—the youngest and least-trained of them all.”

“And now, the second-year team!” Miriela announced.

Inglis’s group stepped back, allowing a group of five second-years led by Yua to take their place.

“Yua! Yua! Get up, sleepyhead!”

“Mmh? But it’s almost bedtime... Gotta follow the rules and stay healthy...”

“C’mon, Yua, don’t fall asleep! Ugh, without Morris around...”

Yua was half-asleep onstage, much to the dismay of her classmates around her.

“She was a pretty good arm wrestler too. Just...”

“She’s always dozing off. It’s gonna be hard to race that way.”

“And next, the third-years!” Miriela announced.

Silva and four classmates comprised that group.

“I find the idea of taking bets on the results of our training to be a bit seedy...

But if we're going to do it, let's do our best." Silva pushed up his glasses as he spoke from the stage.

"Ooh, he's got a special-class Rune! Does that mean he's going to be a holy knight someday?"

"Wait, one of the first-year kids did too."

"So it's not clear which one has the advantage."

Miriela moved on to the next group of competitors. "And this is the instructors' team!"

"Phew. Being an instructor sure ain't easy work if you're even putting us up to this," Rochefort complained.

"Oh? I'm enjoying myself," Arles replied. "Wait, Ross, are you feeling all right? You look a little pale."

"Hah. I've just been too busy to sleep. Had to get all sorts of things ready."

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Everyone! Let's show them what us instructors are made of!" Marquez announced, as another instructor waited nearby.

"Huh, only four of them?"

"Is it a handicap, maybe?"

The crowd was surprised by the number.

"And I'm the fifth!" Miriela called out. "As the principal, I'm going to show you what I've got!" She herself wanted to be in the race. "And next, the Royal Guard!"

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha! We're at the stick of a Flygear every day as we make our rounds, and we don't slack on the training either! We'll hold our own this time!"

Reddas stepped forward and declared with much bravado.

"Oh, wow! Even active-duty Royal Guard members are joining in!"

"That sounds all well and good, but..."

"Didn't they just get completely wrecked at arm wrestling by the platinum

blonde first-year? I guess piloting a Flygear doesn't have much to do with that, though."

"And last but not least!" Miriela continued. "Rafael and Ripple, leading the Paladins!"

"Whoa!"

Cheers even louder than before filled the air.

"I can't believe I'm going to get to see a holy knight in action!"

Especially higher-pitched cheers.

"Ahh! Sir Rafael!"

"Look over here! Eeeeeee! We made eye contact!"

Rafael hesitantly waved to the crowd. "Ah ha ha. I-I'll do my best..."

Ripple, meanwhile, seemed to be very popular with the men.

"We'll get to see Lady Ripple in action too!"

"I can't wait. Hiera's menaces are so beautiful."

"I wish Lady Eris could have been here too, but even this is more than we ever could have expected!"

"Lady Ripple! Do your best!" several people cheered together.

"Sure thing! I'll try my hardest! Root for me, please!" Ripple, ever affable, responded with a smile.



Holy knights and hial menaces were guardians of the kingdom who protected the people from Prismers, the strongest magicite beasts. The cheers were a sign of how much people respected them, even adored them.

That was music to Miriela's ears. "That's the spirit! I'm really glad I asked you two to participate." Speaking up, she continued, "Anyway! Those are our teams... And this is the course! Look over at Lake Bolt!"

She pointed at an island in the middle of the lake: Illuminas, a part of Highland which had just recently appeared there. Although Illuminas's core—its Floating Circle—still remained, it had lost its power and was unable to return to the skies. Now, it was planted in Lake Bolt. It was there where Eris rested inside the Greyfrier sarcophagus.

Splassssshhhh!

Something huge suddenly leaped from the water around Illuminas. A trio of gigantic dragons, of which more than half of each was made up of machinery like a Flygear or Flygear Port.

The mechanical dragons were the mainstay of Illuminas's defenses, and three of them had shown themselves. They were large, impressively imposing presences, and the crowd responded.

"Ooh! What's that?!"

"Wow! It looks so cool!"

"Myce and the others are helping out," Rafinha noted. "Principal Miriela's really putting everything she can into this."

It wasn't just the entire knights' academy, but the Royal Guards, the Paladins, and even Illuminas's Highlanders were helping out.

"Yeah, it's quite the show," Inglis agreed. "And they've even gotten the mechanical dragons working now."

"Yeah. Myce is doing a great job," Rafinha said.

"If they're working that well, maybe I'll get to fight them soon. I can't wait."

“Oh, stop that. Myce finally got them running, and now you want to break them again?”

“Of course not, that would be a waste. I just think I’d be a good test subject for evaluating their performance and identifying potential areas of improvement. And it’d be good training for me, and it’d make Myce’s job easier...”

At least how Inglis pictured it, it would be a win-win situation.

Meltina had her own slightly different view of the problem. “Inglis, Rafinha, you’ve said that dragon meat is delicious...but are those ones edible too?”

“Let’s not go there, Meltina. Those ones aren’t for eating,” Rafinha said.

Leone laughed. “Especially since they *just* got repaired.”

“But what are they going to be used for, I wonder? This is supposed to be a race of Flygears,” Liselotte pondered.

With perfect timing, Miriela began to explain the rules of the race. “The mechanical dragons will be helping with today’s Flygear race! It will be a relay race, where the five members of each team each have to grab a flag carried by the dragons! Once they return with it, it’s the next member’s turn, and the first team to have all five members retrieve a flag wins!” As she spoke, the dragons showed flags held on their necks and shoulders.

I see, so we pull off one of those and then come back and hand off, Inglis thought.

“But the dragons will be flying around Lake Bolt trying to avoid the participants, and there are obstacles set up to keep them from grasping the flags as well! They’ll have to make it by those to get anywhere near the flags, so it will be a test of everything they’ve practiced!” Miriela continued.

“Sounds fun,” Inglis said. The mechanical dragons might even try to attack her. She really wanted to scrap it out with them.

“Now,” Miriela continued, “attacking the dragons themselves or the other teams is strictly forbidden! However, any other use of Artifacts is fair game, so I hope we see some clever tricks!”

“W-Will I be okay?” Meltina asked, an uneasy look on her face.

“You’ll be fine. It’s good practice, and besides, it’ll be fun, right?” Inglis said.

“Compared to fighting hordes of magicite beasts or a Prismar, sure...” Leone said.

Liselotte turned to her friend. “It might still be more enjoyable than you expect.”

The two had traveled many places and fought many battles since they’d enrolled in the knights’ academy. This was no longer enough to shake them.

“Don’t worry! You’ve practiced plenty! Go for it, Meltina!” Rafinha slapped her on the butt to get her fired up.

“Eeek?! O-Okay. I’ll do my best.”

Meltina hadn’t been chosen to compete just because of favoritism. She had an upper-class Rune just like Rafinha and Liselotte, a distinction which was rare even at the knights’ academy. She didn’t seem to have received any special training as an imperial princess in Venefic, but once at the knights’ academy, she had expressed a desire to strengthen herself in both flesh and spirit, and while her training had only just begun, she was putting her all into it. Inglis expected that Miriela appreciated this attitude and had chosen her for the race in order to bolster her self-confidence.

“And now’s when you try to predict which team will win! Don’t forget to place your bets!” Miriela reminded the crowd.

“All right! I’m all-in on the Paladins!”

“Me too! After all, they’ve got a holy knight *and* a hial menace!”

“Me too, me too! Our guardians won’t let us down!”

“Maybe I should put in a little bit on the instructors too...”

Lines quickly formed at the stalls selling the tickets. Rafael and Ripple were immensely popular, so it seemed like most people expected the Paladins to come in first.

“Wow! I knew it! Everyone loves Rafael! Right, Chris?” Rafinha asked proudly.

“You seem pretty happy about that, Rani.”

“Of course I am. He’s my brother!”

Seeing her smile, Inglis was pretty happy too.

Silva smiled and nodded deeply. “I guess that’s only proper. It’s good that everyone understands how wonderful Lady Ripple is.”

“Ha ha ha. See? He’s happy about it too.” Rafinha laughed dryly.

“Rafael and Ripple really are popular. I wonder, if Leon were still a holy knight and here with us, whether he’d receive the same cheers,” Leone pondered, as she looked at the duo, somewhat dazzled.

“Sorry, Leone. I got carried away, didn’t I?” Rafinha asked.

“No, if anything I should apologize! Don’t worry. I was just thinking, if having a holy knight makes everyone so happy, perhaps I could stand in for him...” Leone stroked the special-class Rune which gleamed from the back of her right hand and smiled faintly.

Recently, she’d been less hostile toward her brother Leon, who had abandoned his post as a holy knight of Karelia to join the Steelblood Front. She no longer seemed so anxious to track down the organization. If anything, Inglis was more concerned with finding them at this point. Perhaps Leone had shifted her focus from capturing Leon and redeeming the Olfa family’s honor to doing what he had not been able to.

“Does that mean you’re thinking of becoming a holy knight?” Liselotte asked.

“Seeing Rafael and Ripple like that, I just thought it might be for the best.”

Now that Leone had a special-class Rune, it was a realistic option for her. “Leone, if you do...” Inglis began.

...Then that would mean accepting the cruel fate that lies before holy knights and hial menaces.

Inglis shook that off of her mind. “Actually, why don’t we just have fun for now? It’s not like we have chances like this often.”

She should just enjoy Field Day. And not just today, the two more years

before her graduation from the knights' academy as well. There was a lot left for her to experience over those years, and her thoughts may change. Leone was still young. There was no need for her to rush into anything.

As they conversed, Miriela came over to them and spoke. "Everyone, let's really get into it and give it our best! As you saw, Rafael and Ripple's team is the most popular, so if anyone else wins, well, that's how we get our cut..."

In a way, she was having the most fun of them all.

Finally, all betters had finalized their picks, and preparations for the race were complete.

The starting line was on the deck of the Flygear Port being used as a stage, and the competitors had gathered there alongside their Flygears. Nearby, there was a platform to place the flags snatched from the mechanical dragons. In this relay race, members from each team needed to have a member grab a flag from the dragons circling over Lake Bolt and successfully return with it. The next member in line would do the same until all five members had completed this feat. The first team to do so would be the victor.

"Everyone! This is the moment you've been waiting for! Preparations for the Flygear race are complete!" Miriela announced to the cheers of the eagerly waiting crowd.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Fireworks filled the darkening sky, creating even more excitement. They were launched from the three mechanical dragons waiting over Lake Bolt.

"Ah ha ha! The dragons are setting off fireworks! It's so pretty!" Rafinha smiled happily.

"That was Miriela's idea!" Myce said. "She said it would help the people here adjust to them or something! When in Chiral, I guess..."

"Ah, Myce!" Inglis hadn't even noticed he was here until he came up to them.

"I thought I'd come take a look! I did have to take a little detour, though."

Myce was smiling, holding a pancake with jam from the stall Inglis and the others had worked at. The pancake was wrapped in paper to make it easy to carry.

Inglis chuckled. “Are you having a good time, Myce?”

“Yeah. This is my third pancake! I know I’m eating a bit too much, but surface food is just so delicious!”

Inglis grinned, and Myce happily smiled back. Myce and the Highlanders of Illuminas, which had become an island within Lake Bolt, were under the protection of both Ambassador Theodore and the palace as they worked to repair their home. Since the knights’ academy often went to Lake Bolt for training, she had many opportunities to talk with him, and it seemed he really did enjoy surface cuisine—especially its sweets.

“Three isn’t too much at all!” Rafinha protested. “We each had fifteen or so!”

“Ha ha ha. Well, Rafinha, it’s kind of different for you... Anyway, I’ll be cheering for you! Do your best!” Myce said.

“Sure, leave it to us! We’ll put on a show!” Rafinha pumped her fist.

“Speaking of putting on a show, I don’t suppose I could ask you to have the mechanical dragons go all out against me when it’s my turn? Please?” Inglis asked.

“Well, that would be dangerous— No, I guess it wouldn’t be for you, Inglis,” Myce quickly corrected himself. “But this is supposed to be a race. We *just* got them fixed! Please don’t break them so soon.”

Inglis laughed at that. “Of course, I wouldn’t want to waste them. If I broke them, I wouldn’t be able to fight them anymore, would I?”

“Ha ha ha...”

“But promise me, next time you’ll let me fight them. It’ll be good for you guys too. Surely, it’ll reveal ways to improve them.”

As Inglis tried to negotiate, Rafinha grabbed her by the arm and pulled her away. “Okay, okay, that’s enough! C’mon, we’re getting started!”

“And now! First pilots, mount your Flygears!” Miriela called out.

“Yes!” Leone, first for the first-years, replied. Second would be Liselotte, third Rafinha, fourth Meltina, and last but not least would be Inglis.

Each of her teammates cheered her on.

“Leone! Do your best!”

“You’ll do great, Leone.”

“I’m counting on you!”

“Please don’t get hurt!”

“Here I go!” Leone responded with a serious expression and a nod.

“Aaaaand... Go!” At Miriela’s signal, six Flygears took off from the Flygear Port at once. At the same time, the mechanical dragons spread out and began circling Lake Bolt.

“Wow! They’re so fast for how big they are!”

“Just catching up with them will be tough!”

The crowd sounded off, and Rafinha, not to be outdone, cheered for Leone.
“Leone! Do your best!”

Amid the racket, Leone’s Flygear charged toward the nearest dragon. Of the three, two soared high and fled into the distance, while the third dove and began circling just above the water’s surface. The one near the surface was nearest, hence all six Flygears swarming for it at once. But there were only four flags on it, so this would be a race in which teams could get to the mechanical creatures first. The slower teams would have to chase down dragons which were much farther away, losing significant time. The Flygears themselves were almost identical in performance, and they approached the dragon in a horizontal line, but—

Fwoosh!

With a blasting sound, one Flygear suddenly shot forward, a tail of light gleaming behind it. Its pilot had shot a blast of light backward and accelerated using the recoil. Inglis used Aether Strike sometimes to accomplish the same,

but there were only a few people who could do something similar.

“Yua?!” Inglis was in disbelief.

Yes, it was Yua. She was the first pilot for the second-years.

“Wow!”

“Amazing! What even was that!”

“I-It’s so fast!”

In the middle of the commotion, Yua broke away and, overtaking the dragon, pulled out a flag. “All right, got one.” She then quickly turned and set herself on a course back to the starting line.

“I-Is that allowed, Principal Miriela?!” Rafinha asked.

“It didn’t break the dragon, and it wasn’t an attack on another team, so it’s okay! Especially because the crowd loved it!” Miriela replied.

With Yua having charged forward to take the first flag, there were three remaining. The dragon hadn’t been able to keep up with her rapid acceleration, but it changed its own course as if to say that the same trick wouldn’t work twice. It had already been flying low, but now it dove further, so low that its feet and tail brushed the surface of the lake. As it did, water splashed up, falling on Leone and the others who pursued it.

“Eeek?! Ah, it’s trying to disrupt us!”

Should they evade and go around, cut straight through, or change their trajectory completely and try to take a flag from another dragon? Each pilot had a decision to make; Leone’s was to cut straight through. But just as she closed the distance and was about to catch up, the spray of water disappeared, as did the dragon. It had completely submerged itself.

“Aw! That’s no fair! It’s escaping underwater!” Rafinha complained.

“It lured her in on purpose!” Liselotte said.

The dragons had entered from beneath the surface to begin with. Of course it was possible for them to escape back to the depths. But this meant that Leone, who was chasing the dragon, was too late. But she unslung her dark greatsword

Artifact and aimed it at the dragon underwater. “Then... There!” Its tip extended, plunging into the water and catching only a flag before bringing it back. Leone spun her Flygear around as she grasped the soaking-wet flag.

The crowd cheered. “Oooh?! She extended her sword?!”

“Amazing! I’m glad I get to see this!”

Rafinha was just as elated and shouted, “Good job, Leone!”

“Impressive!” Liselotte said.

“Amazing! Even though the dragon ran away...” Meltina said.

The trio clapped.

Just then, Yua, who had been the first to grasp a flag, returned to the starting point. The second-years had taken first place in the first leg of the race.

“That’s it, Yua!”

“I knew you could do it!”

The second-years welcomed her back excitedly, but Yua herself yawned sleepily.

“Got it. But sorry, I’m already tired.”

“Okay. It’s fine if you sleep, we’ll wake you up at the end.”

“Works for me,” Yua bluntly replied, then sat down and dozed off, snuggling Morris the tiny magicite beast.

“All right, next up! Here I go!” The next pilot took off, shortly after which Leone returned.

“Leone! Good work!” Inglis said.

“Thanks. Sorry, I let Yua get ahead of me!” Leone said.

“Not to worry—I’m next, so you did plenty well enough! And, I’m off!” Liselotte said.

“Go for it, Liselotte!”

Second to fly for the first-years, she took off. There wasn’t much of a lead over the other teams, and they, too, handed off in sequence. As they did, the

dragons formed a tightly packed formation and flew farther over Lake Bolt. And as the second-year competitor, in the lead, approached them, one of the dragons turned and shot out lights.

Bang, bang! Baaaang!

With a thunderous roar, those colorful lights exploded into vivid, luminous puffs of smoke—fireworks. The dragon had shot off fireworks to screen itself from its pursuer. Losing its vision, the lead Flygear slowed, allowing Liselotte and the other teams in pursuit to close the gap.

“It’s too bright to go in head-on! I should circle around!” Liselotte said to herself. She tilted the Flygear’s stick control to the side and avoided the fireworks from the dragon. The Flygears following her also ballooned out to each side.

But then, the other two dragons also turned and shot off fireworks to blind the Flygears as they swerved to the side.

Although it was a beautiful display, it was only serving to obstruct her way. “Then, that leaves one other option!” She steered herself above the dragons’ heads. There, no fireworks blocked her path, and her view would clear. Circling above, she then made a sharp drop to grab a flag. She wasn’t the only one with that idea, and several other Flygears had also made it through to above the dragons.

“Fwa ha ha ha! Right there!”

“Instructor Marquez?!”

Marquez, the second pilot for the instructors’ team, overtook Liselotte. She had tried to quickly pull up before dropping her speed at the apex in order to dive, but Marquez inverted his Flygear and arced downward, aiming to grab a flag from the dragons as he passed by. Her own trajectory included deceleration, but he only accelerated; he overtook her the instant her speed dropped. The flight instructor was suitably skilled.

With Marquez in the lead, several Flygears descended all at once, closing in

on the dragons. However, the dragons, apparently having anticipated this, scattered.

“Ah! They knew we would do that?!” Inglis commented. The dragons had deliberately not shot off fireworks overhead, instead planning to quickly evade those who would dive in from above.

Liselotte heard a shout of dismay from a competitor nearby. “Agh! Too fast, too fast! I can’t stop!” The Flygear suddenly crashed into the water, sending up a huge spout.

“What?! It baited us in?!” Marquez barked. His arcing motion allowed him to avoid a splash landing, but there seemed to be no way Liselotte’s Flygear would avoid impact. Even a sudden climb wouldn’t be enough to overcome the momentum she’d built up toward the water.

“Then how about this!” Liselotte leaped upward from her Flygear, grasping her trusty halberd Artifact. In midair, she activated its Gift, and with her pale wings, she chased down the dragon and pulled away a flag.

The crowd cheered.

“Wow! She’s flying?!”

“I can’t believe it!”

“Such beautiful wings! They suit her well!”

Liselotte’s Gift meant that even if the dragon suddenly changed direction, it couldn’t escape her. She was the first of the second wave to lay her hands on a flag, and thus, she was now in first place. Returning to her Flygear, which had touched down on the water, she quickly took off again and returned to the rest of her team.

“All right! We’re in first now! Great job, Liselotte!” Rafinha said.

“You’re up next, Rafinha!” Liselotte replied, tagging her in.

“Leave it to me!” Rafinha said as she hopped in the Flygear.

“Do your best, Rani!”

“Sure thing, Chris! Here I go!” The Flygear roared as it flew off over Lake Bolt.

“I-I’m next, aren’t I?” Meltina, already awaiting her turn, seemed nervous.

“You’ll be fine. Just do your best,” Leone reassured her. “Inglis goes last, and she’ll manage somehow, right?”

“Yeah. This kind of thing gets me excited to beat the competition.” Inglis smiled serenely.

“Ha ha ha, I’m just a little worried that you might get too fired up and take down a dragon.” Leone smiled back at her, albeit in a tense manner.

As they spoke, the other teams had returned for their hand-offs. Principal Miriela was the third pilot for the instructors’ team. “All right! Here I goooo!”

Reddas was the next up for the Royal Guard’s team. “All right, good job! Leave the rest to me! Ha ha ha ha!”

Rafinha approached the dragons with the principal and Reddas on her tail. After dispersing before, the dragons had regrouped, now flying low and close near the water’s surface. They were probably planning to dive and escape, this time as a group.

“Then, before they dive!” Rafinha closed in on the dragons at full speed.

Splooosh!

Before she could catch up to them, the three dragons began spraying a tremendous amount of water at her. She recalled they had also sprayed water on Illuminas as it burned, so this must have been one of their civil defense functions. The force of the water was strong enough to hold back Rafinha’s Flygear. Even if she tried to slip around it and close in, the water pressure would hold her off again. It was like a wall of water. There was just too much of it, far beyond what they should have been able to carry; they must have been pumping it up from Lake Bolt before spraying it.

“Ugh, I can’t get close!” Rafinha herself was sopping wet at this point, and she could barely see in front of herself. It looked like no one would be able to get close to the dragons.

“Rani! You’ll catch a cold like that! You need something to dry off with!” Inglis swiftly got a large towel ready for Rafinha.

“Th-They’re so fast!” Meltina’s eyes widened.

“No one’s even going to get close to them at this rate!” Leone said.

“No, someone’s closing in from behind!” Liselotte added.

As she did, another Flygear overtook Rafinha. “If I may go first!” It was Miriela’s. She slowed down a little, but continued moving toward the dragons.

“The principal?!” Rafinha gasped. Miriela’s Flygear was enveloped in a veil of light which repelled the water the dragons sprayed. It must have been coming from the staff Artifact she was brandishing. “Ah! No fair!” If Rafinha had had an Artifact, she might have been able to counter it somehow, but her Shiny Flow had broken during the battle at Illuminas, and she did not have a replacement yet.

“This isn’t good!” Leone said.

“The principal’s overtaking her!” Liselotte said.

“Inglis, is... Is there anything Rafinha can do?! She doesn’t have an Artifact right now...” Meltina murmured, but Inglis did not answer.

For she was not there.

“H-Huh? Where did Inglis go?!” Meltina asked.

Leone looked around. “She’s gone? Where did she run off to?”

“Ah! Look, over there!” Liselotte pointed to just above Rafinha’s Flygear, which was still being held back by the jets of water. Inglis had suddenly appeared there.

“Rani!”

“Huh?! Chris?!”

“Just follow Principal Miriela closely! Use her as a shield!”

“I see! Got it! Thanks, Chris!” Rafinha immediately brought her Flygear directly behind Miriela’s.

“I-Inglis?!” the principal gasped. “You’re not allowed to pilot unless it’s your —”

“Yeah. That’s why I’m copiloting.” Inglis grinned. She wasn’t actually putting her hand on the controls, just giving some advice, so it was fine. The only reason she’d teleported in with her divine feat was so that she could advise Rafinha; her voice wouldn’t have reached her cousin otherwise. Was it worth touching upon the divine for something like that? Well, of course it was worth using it for Rafinha’s sake. Using divine feat ate up the hi-aether she had spent time refining and building up, but she didn’t mind. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.” Just before she would have plunged into Lake Bolt, Inglis disappeared. A blink of an eye later, she was back aboard the Flygear Port.

“Whoa?!” Leone gasped.

“Inglis?!” Liselotte said.

“Did you just disappear and reappear?!” Meltina asked.

“Rani was in trouble, so... Yeah. She doesn’t have Shiny Flow right now,” Inglis replied.

Rafinha, sticking tight to Miriela’s Flygear, was noticeably closing in on the dragons. However, others could do the same.

“I see! Then, I’ll follow your example, Lady Rafinha!” Reddas said.

But since they were just taking advantage of the situation in the same way as she was, she couldn’t complain.

“Ugh, you’re all just using me as a shield!”

Miriela was not a particularly talented Flygear pilot, and she was not capable of taking the complex evasive actions which would throw Rafinha and Reddas off her tail. As a result, her competitors formed a horizontal line behind her with no real gaps.

“Ah ha ha! They’re all in a line!”

“We’re this far in, and it’s still a dead heat!”

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it? More fun to watch that way!”

The crowd, already enthused, was getting more and more into it. Meanwhile, the racers, with only the narrowest of gaps between them, pulled out flags and headed back toward the Flygear Port.

Miriela was the first to return. “A-*hem*! I trust I’ve made my point, though.”

“Knew you had it! Now it’s my turn to show the students they’ve still got some learning to do!” Rochefort, taking over from her, was likewise the first to take off.

“Meltina! Sorry, they caught up a little bit! It’s your turn now!” Rafinha said.

“O-Okay! I’ll do my best!” Meltina took over from Rafinha, who was the second to return after Miriela.

“I’ll figure something out, so take it easy, okay?” Inglis sent her off with a smile.

“Thank you. Here I go!” Meltina rushed to take off, but compared to Rochefort, her control over her Flygear was questionable. She seemed a bit unsteady.

Next up for the Paladins was Ripple. “All right! This is our chance to catch up!” Rather than stepping into the Flygear, she reached for its controls from the outside, brought it up a little off the deck, and then kicked off with all her might. Using a hial menace’s leg strength to speed up was a subtle yet effective trick.

“Ripple’s fast!” Meltina gasped.

“Caught up to ya!”

Even as Ripple overtook her, Meltina remained focused on the dragons. They were closing formation and heading out farther over Lake Bolt. As the Flygears, with Rochefort in the lead, began to catch up, the dragons formed into a single file, and turned their head to face their pursuers head-on.

“Wh-What’s with that?” Rafinha gasped. “They all clumped up and faced us...”

Her confusion was soon dispelled. The nearer two dragons extended thick tubes backward and connected something. Once this was complete, the entire

body of the rearmost dragon shined brightly, and—

Vwoooooooooom!

They took off at high speed, leaving a trail of light.

“Whoa?! That’s incredibly fast!”

“They can go that fast?!” A stir arose in the crowd. The speeds involved were on an entirely different level than what they’d seen up until now—overwhelmingly faster than the knights’ academy’s Flygears being used for the race.

The dragons, still in a straight line, suddenly cut back through the Flygears piloted by Rochefort, Ripple, and the other racers, breaking through their line. The second-year racer, previously bringing up the rear, was now closest to them.

“Wow, that’s impressive!” Inglis thought that sort of acceleration was quite the sight, and Myce nodded along proudly.

“It’s a high-mobility mode that increases the power output by connecting their thrusters in series! We came up with it just for this race!”

“That’s amazing, Myce. Can you come up with a way for their combat potential to be put together too? It’d be great if you could assemble like a hundred of them and have them a hundred times as strong. I’d love to take that on, if you could.”

“Ha ha ha, I wish it were that easy... And it’s not like we have a hundred of them to begin with.”

“C’mon, Chris, don’t bother Myce!” Rafinha protested.

As she did, the dragons turned around again and rapidly flew farther and farther out over the lake. Even Rochefort and Ripple couldn’t catch the dragons in their high-mobility mode. It was a matter of the Flygears’ inherent performance limits that applied even to them.

“It doesn’t look like we’ll be able to catch them at all!” Liselotte said.

“There has to be some kind of trick,” Inglis observed.

“But what—”

As if to answer Liselotte before she could even finish her question, Rochefort and Ripple broke away from the dragons and moved toward positions on the opposite side of Lake Bolt.

“The dragons take their time turning before moving again, so they’re going to try to catch them after their next maneuver,” Inglis said. “Look at how they move. I think they can only fly that fast in a straight line.”

If the dragons could shake the pilots by the middle of the lake, even if the pilots then swooped in during the opening, the dragons would be ready to go again before they arrived. The pilots would never catch up. So their solution would have to be to lie in wait for the dragons to arrive and take advantage of the opening before they were ready again.

“I knew you’d figure it out, Inglis,” Myce said. “That’s right, it only works in a straight line. Our priority was raw speed.”

“So Mr. Rochefort and Ripple have the right idea!” Rafinha said.

“It won’t do them any good if the dragons don’t come to them, though...” Inglis pointed out.

Meanwhile, though, the other pilots hadn’t observed this and were still trying to chase down the dragons. Meltina was among them.

“Meltina! You’re going to get left behind again!” Rafinha said worriedly, as the dragons turned and connected in line again. But this time, one of the tube connections didn’t quite click. Something had gotten stuck, blocking the connection.

Small metal plates with a faint gleam—no, they were blades in the shape of a bird with spread wings. Four of them, each with an aqua-colored glow, had wedged their way into the connection.

“That’s Meltina’s Artifact!” Rafinha said. Meltina’s rune was upper class, in the shape of a whip. And when she had arrived at the knights’ academy, the Artifact she had been granted had been a whip-sword, composed of many small

blades. When Rafinha had first seen it, she had happily remarked that it was a perfect weapon for a queen. It must have been a disconnected part of that whip-sword which had interfered with the dragons' connection. Meltina was able to disconnect the whip which connected the blades at will. "Good work! She caught the dragons with her Artifact as they passed by, and now she's keeping them from flying off again!"

"And if she can stop them from doing that, staying close was the right answer!" Inglis added. It wasn't that Meltina had a worse read on the dragons than Rochefort or Ripple, it was that her read on them had led to a different approach. Her Artifact was well-suited to countering the dragons' movements, and she had realized that.

"You can do it, Meltina!" Liselotte called out.

Meltina's Flygear dove toward the dragons as they struggled to form their connection and take off again. For a moment it seemed like she could seize a flag, but the dragons reacted. Dropping low and dipping into the water, they sprayed a volley of water at her just like they had at Rafinha and Miriela. The barrage of streams flew to intercept Meltina. Even Rafinha, a practiced Flygear pilot, had been unable to escape such a deluge; it was far too much to ask of Meltina, who took it head-on.

"Eeeeeek?!"

Her Flygear swayed, and she herself, unable to hold on, was thrown off and fell into the lake.

"Meltina!" Rafinha yelled.

"Sh-She fell! Will she be okay?!" Leone gasped.

"She's at least treading water, but I'm worried!" Liselotte said.

"She ended up pretty far away from her Flygear," Inglis pointed out. Because Meltina had been thrown away from her Flygear, she was now quite a distance from it. It would take a while to swim that far.

But Meltina, unwilling to give up, swam as fast as she could, panting. "I can't be the one holding everyone else back!"

As she did, a Flygear flitted before her, and its pilot grasped her arm and pulled her from the water.

“Mr. Rochefort?!”

“It’s a teacher’s duty to keep you safe, isn’t it? I’m sure no one will have any complaints about this.” His other hand held a flag which he’d grabbed from a dragon. Rochefort carried Meltina to her distant Flygear, and then let her go. “This was just a rescue. It’s up to you what you want to do now.” He flew off toward the Flygear Port, to tag in his team’s next pilot.

“Mr. Rochefort... Thank you!” Meltina crawled up onto her Flygear and looked again toward the dragons. They had stayed close by, continuing to spray water rather than ascend. “Then, I can get to them!”

She grasped the hilt of her whip-sword. The whip which connected its blades glowed aqua as it stretched out, longer and longer. She focused her everything on avoiding the jets of water and bringing it to a dragon’s neck, and thankfully, the part of her blade which had gotten tangled in the connectors merged back even as the part glowing aqua hooked a flag. Retracting it back into arm’s reach, she took the flag into her hand.

“All right! Now I’ve got to get back!” Meltina tried to turn her Flygear and return, but she couldn’t get it to fly straight. Even trying to move forward, its trajectory twisted, snaking back and forth. “Is this from the impact when it crashed?” Her time in the water had put her in last place, and the gap was only widening. Meanwhile, the other teams were switching over to their fifth and final pilots.

“Here you go, Rafael! The rest’s up to you!” Ripple said.

“Of course, Lady Ripple! Chris, Rani! Sorry, but I’m going on ahead!”

“Arles, it’s all you!” Rochefort said.

“Of course, Ross! Leave it to me!” Arles replied.

Rafael took off, followed immediately by Arles.

“Well done! I’ll bring it all home!” Silva said, taking off a moment later.

By the time Meltina, flying unsteadily, made it back, Rafael and Arles were

already trying to grab a flag from one of the dragons. Unfortunately, she was far to the back of the pack.

“Meltina! Good job! You tried your hardest!” Rafinha still welcomed her with a smile on her face.

“I... I’m sorry that I took so long...” Meltina seemed dejected, but Inglis rested her hand on the girl’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry. Being bad at something is the first step to being pretty good at it. We can still win.”

“Huh?” was all Meltina could say to Inglis’s confidence. The first-years’ team had dropped too far behind. Besides, the Flygear was broken. It was only natural that she’d think they had no chance of winning.

“You’re still going for it, Inglis?” Leone asked.

“You know that thing can’t even fly straight,” Liselotte pointed out.

“I do. So, instead I’ll send *it* flying.” Inglis, grinning, had already deployed her dragon ice armor. She hoisted up the team’s Flygear.

“Send it flying?!”

Meltina gasped. “You don’t mean—?!”

“Go get ’em, Chris!” Rafinha pumped a fist.

“Yup! I’m off!”

Inglis fixed her sights on the dragons as she soared through the air, Flygear in hand. She calculated a trajectory and speed, and— *Aether Shell!*

Inglis’s body glowed a pale blue, characteristic of her aether. She had both the dragon ice armor and Aether Shell active at once, boosting her physical abilities to their peak.

Winding up, she flung the Flygear as hard as she could.

“Haaaah!”

Slammmmm!

Following through, she kicked off from the Flygear Port. The shock wave from her foot slamming down made the Flygear Port itself sway.

Rafinha startled. “Eeek! Ch-Chris?!”

“She really just threw the Flygear...” Leone muttered.

“And jumped on it!” Liselotte added.

Meltina looked on in horror. “Wh-Whaaaaat?!”

Rafinha, Leone, and Liselotte had built up some level of resistance to Inglis’s antics, but Meltina’s eyes were wide with astonishment at the scene unfolding before her.

“Ooooooh?!”

“She threw the Flygear?! I must be seeing things!”

“No, she really did! She threw it! And now she’s jumping on it! What’s going on?!”

The audience was just as astounded as Meltina was, and their shouts contained more surprise than enthusiasm. This was a Flygear race, so the rules were that you had to ride the Flygear.

However, in Inglis’s mind, if you were riding in it—or on it—there wasn’t anything in the rules concerning how it moved. Therefore, throwing it was fine, she thought.

Booommmmmm!

With a roar, her Flygear shot out over the lake toward the dragons. They had activated their high-mobility mode, but she met their trajectory and—
“Gotcha!”

As the dragons and her Flygear crossed paths, she reached out her hand and plucked away a flag. It would have been even quicker to crash straight into one, but destroying a dragon was against the rules. Instead, she had to overshoot it a little.

Inglis jumped forward from her Flygear and landed on the lake's surface while her leap had sent the Flygear plummeting toward the surface. She had made sure to land first and wait at the point where it would fall. Her dragon ice armor had frozen the lake at her feet, giving her a perfect foothold. "All right!" She firmly caught the Flygear as it plunged, then immediately swung it around. Once she went forward, she then had to go back. Of course.

She could see the backs of Rafael and Arles, who had already grabbed flags themselves, but they hadn't made it to the finish line yet—Silva too, even closer to her. She could still make it. She just had to be careful not to crash into anyone.

"Once more! Haaaaah!" She threw the Flygear as hard as she could, then leaped up into it.

Booommmmmm!

With another blast of sound, the Flygear returned whence it came, kicking up water along the way.

"Whoa?! I-Inglis is going so fast!" Silva gasped.

Looking from her Flygear, Inglis saw his shocked expression for just a moment. She was closing in on Rafael and Arles too.

"Inglis?!"

"Miss Arles, if you'll pardon me."

"No, not yet!" Arles jumped from her Flygear and grabbed onto the railing of Inglis's. The reflexes and decisiveness she displayed jumping over while being passed at such a speed could only have come from a hial menace.

"Ooh! But leaving your Flygear behind is against the rules."

"That won't be a problem! Look behind you!" The long tail which stretched back from the small of Arles's back had wrapped around her own Flygear and pulled it along. She hadn't abandoned her Flygear, so she was still obeying the rules.

Inglis chuckled. “Impressive.”

Arles had a modest, humble personality, but the tactics she employed in situations like this were quite bold. Inglis had to assume that it came from Arles’s earnest determination to do whatever she could, and she was honestly quite grateful that Arles was willing to take her on with everything she had.

“I am, after all, a teacher!” Arles insisted.

The Flygear they now shared closed in on Rafael from behind. The addition of Arles had slowed it down a little, but it was still catching up.

“Chris?!” Rafael gasped. “Well, I’ve got my own tricks!” He unsheathed the sword which hung at his belt—the beautiful crimson Dragon Fang, an Artifact beyond all others.

“Gwoooooohhhhn!”

As a dragon’s roar rang out, Rafael was covered head-to-toe in winged crimson armor. The armor both increased his physical capabilities and allowed him to fly. Dragon Fang was not just a sword but an Artifact which boosted its wielder’s overall capabilities. That was something Inglis had used as a reference when she wove the dragon magic which formed her dragon ice armor.

As he let out an energizing shout, Rafael let go of the controls of his Flygear and fell behind it, pushing it forward as he went.

“I’m impressed, Rafael!”

“It’s important to show off what I’ve got every once in a while!”

Inglis’s Flygear along with Arles and her own in tow were decelerating; Rafael, with the power of the Dragon Fang, was accelerating. In the end, the three fell neck-and-neck like an avalanche onto the Flygear Port. Inglis got ahead of them and caught her own Flygear, and as she did, the Port again dipped in the sky.

The crowd erupted in confused cheers.

“Woow!”

“What a finish! I can’t tell what happened!”

“Wh-Who won?!”

Rafinha laughed. “One throwing, one pulling, and one pushing.”

“And not a single one of them flying their Flygear properly,” Leone added.

“It was certainly a close fight,” Liselotte said.

Meltina stared in awe. “Karelia is an amazing place.”

The four watched, chuckling wryly.

“Principal Miriela! Who was fastest in the end?” Inglis asked eagerly, to which Miriela frowned.

“Well, err... You all came in at once, so who was first is—”

“No, Miriela,” Rafael began. “I lost.”

“Huh? What do you mean, Rafael?”

“Look.” Rafael held out the flag he’d taken from the dragons—or, more precisely, what remained of it. It had been burned to nothing more than a charred stub. It must have been an unintended consequence of using the flames of his Dragon Fang armor.

“The requirement was that I bring back a flag, and it looks like I failed to do so.”

“Ah, I see,” Miriela said. “Then Inglis must have—”

“Sorry, Principal Miriela. Mine’s much the same.” Inglis held forth the frozen, crumbled remains of a flag. She had tucked the flag inside her dragon ice armor, much like Rafael, and thus, she’d also failed to meet the conditions.

“Oh my. Then, it must be you, Miss Arles?”

“Ah, yes. Mine is...” Arles pulled forth an intact flag.

“So Miss Arles was the first to bring back a flag—the winners are the instructors! Congratulations! As instructors at the knights’ academy, myself included, we’ve shown our stuff! Now, a round of applause!” Miriela concluded, to a resonant round of cheers.

“Definitely worth the price of admission!”

“Yeah, that was amazing!”

As the crowd cheered, Inglis, her hands clasped, bowed apologetically to Rafinha and the others. “Sorry, Rani. Sorry, everyone. I failed.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Rafinha responded. “At least we had fun. Right, Meltina?”

“Yes! That was incredible! I’m glad you were able to make up for my lost ti—*Achoo!*”

“Are you okay, Meltina?” Leone asked with concern.

“It’s because she fell into the water and got wet. We need to get her dried off,” Liselotte began, only to be drowned out by Miriela.

“And that concludes this year’s knights’ academy Field Day! Thank you, everyone! Take care on your way home!” She beamed as she gave the closing remarks. Judging from her expression, Field Day had been quite the financial success.



“Chris! Over here, get this one too!”

“Yeah. That should be enough, right?”

“And this one and that one and that other one and—”

“Got it. This is good training in its own way.” Inglis carried an unusually large stock of materiel into the Flygear dock. She was helping clean up after Field Day.

“Well, having Inglis around certainly makes this a lot easier...” Leone remarked.

“It certainly does,” Liselotte said with a chuckle. Both had an awkward grin on their faces.

Meltina watched with a smile from a little bit away as she sat in her wet clothes by a bonfire on the shore, letting them dry.

A person familiar to her walked over. “Well, Your Highness, how was it? Just an ordinary festival in my opinion, but what did you think?”

“Ah, Mr. Rochefort.”

As a former general of Venefic, he was quite considerate of its former imperial princess and often checked in to see how she was doing. He’d helped her out during the Flygear race as well. “It was fun. Lots of fun. I’ve never experienced anything like it in Venefic.”

“Mm,” Rochefort began. “Well, you certainly were quite the sheltered young lady. We’d only so much as seen your face a few times. I had no idea that your appetite rivaled Inglis’s and Rafinha’s, of all people.”

“Ah ha ha ha. Well, it isn’t like I had many ways to enjoy myself other than meals.” Meltina’s smile held a hint of embarrassment.

“Well, ‘sheltered young lady’ sounds nicer, but it seems more like you were practically a prisoner in the imperial villa. If that’s the case, you should take the time to spread your wings here. You may not have the status of a princess, but instead, you’ve your freedom.”

“Of course. But more than that, I would like to become stronger. For the sake of everyone who sacrificed themselves to protect me...”

“Mm. You must be talking about that bastard Maxwell’s purge of the moderates. Or maybe, as someone else might describe it, a band of hangers-on in the palace talking up the princess in hopes of boosting their own status.”

“Well...” Meltina looked down.

In terms of sentiment within Venefic, a significant majority supported invasions of Karelia and other neighbors in order to expand its lands. Venefic’s lands were by no means rich, and it had long desired to carve more fertile fields from Karelia. In that context, moderates who sought peace with Karelia would be on the outs.

That was an unavoidable fact. Perhaps it was inevitable, given the flows of political power, that a faction on the outs like the moderates would have coalesced around someone like Meltina who was at odds with the rest of the imperial family.

Meltina was a daughter of the reigning emperor by a concubine, treated coldly by both the children of the previous empress and the family of the

current one. Consequently, she lived a life largely confined to a remote villa, with few opportunities to leave.

“Were they forced to become hangers-on because they were moderates, or forced to become moderates because they were hangers-on... Well, it’s only human to have a bit of overlap between your position and your ideology. In any case, it’s better not to worry over it any more than you have to. That’s how you get along in the world.”

“No, Mr. Rochefort. I don’t think what they had to say was wrong. After all, the people here live such happy, cheerful lives... I don’t think it’s right to ruin that, nor would I want to fight against everyone from the knights’ academy. Seeing it for myself, hearing it, I’ve only become more convinced.” Meltina clasped her hands to her chest as she spoke. She was telling the heartfelt truth. “Although, training at the academy is still quite difficult for me...” That, too, was the heartfelt truth. Having never before had any particular special training, it was hard to keep up with the other knights’ academy students just in terms of raw physical strength.

Rafinha appeared out of nowhere. “Meltina!”

“Rafinha?” Meltina began. Had she overheard their conversation?

When Rafinha hugged Meltina tightly the princess from Venefic hastily said, “Ah, don’t! You’ll get yourself wet too.” Her clothes still hadn’t dried completely.

“Don’t worry about that! Listen, Meltina. I don’t know what I can do for you, but we’ll always be friends! If there’s anything I can do to help, just ask, okay?”

“Oh! Thank you, Rafinha.” Someone who could be supportive like this, someone who could give her a hug when she needed it—perhaps that was what Meltina had really wanted the most. “Really, just hearing you say that is enough...” Meltina returned the embrace. She was sorry it would get Rafinha wet, but she needed to wrap her arms around her friend right then.

“Here you two go. Nice and clean, and dry to boot.” Inglis brought some clean, dry blankets and wrapped Rafinha and Meltina in them.

“Thanks, Chris!”

“Thank you, Inglis.”

“You get over here too!” Rafinha tugged at Inglis’s arm.

Inglis gasped. “Ack! C-Cold!”

“Sorry, Inglis, I’m getting you wet, aren’t I?” Meltina apologized.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Rafinha insisted. “It’s warmer this way, and the fire will dry us out nice and quick anyway.”

“Speak for yourself, Rani. And don’t take advantage of the confusion to put your hands in weird places!” Inglis protested after Rafinha had jammed her hands into Inglis’s cleavage.

“But it’s warm there and it feels nice. C’mon, Meltina, you try it too. Aren’t they big?”

“Wow, I already knew they were amazing to look at but they’re even more amazing to touch. I’m a bit jealous.” Impressed, Meltina lifted Inglis’s bust from below.

“I-Isn’t that enough? You can let go any time!” Inglis said.

Undeterred, Rafinha said, “We eat the same, so I wonder why yours are so different. Ah, hey, Leone, why don’t you come over here too? Leone!”

Leone was carrying supplies a little bit away. “Er, I think I’ll have to pass... I know exactly what you’re going to do.” But even though she could avoid Rafinha, there was someone far sneakier.

“Ah, Leone. Rin’s—”

Before Liselotte could finish her sentence, Rin dove into Leone’s chest.

“Eeek! S-Stop that, Rin! You’ll make me drop everything!”

Bang, bang, ba-ba-bang!

Colorful fireworks burst over Lake Bolt. The explosions of light were mirrored on the lake’s surface, making the scene even more gorgeous and fantastical.

“We’re setting off the leftover fireworks! This is your reward for working so

hard! Thanks to you, we earned quite a bit!” Miriela, in a good mood, trailed off, chuckling as she pointed toward the lake. Her smile was anything but innocent, but at least the fireworks were beautiful.

“Wow! They’re so pretty! Chris, Leone, Liselotte, Meltina! Let’s all watch them together next year too!”

To Inglis, Rafinha’s childlike smile was an even more beautiful treasure. She couldn’t help but smile as well. “That’s a great idea, Rani.”

“Of course!” Leone said.

“I simply can’t wait,” Liselotte agreed.

“Yes! It’d be wonderful for all of us to!” Meltina added.

Watching them, Rochefort shrugged his shoulders. “What a racket. Ah, to be young again.”

Arles, joining Rochefort, looked upon the scene with a twinkle in her eye. “But being with Inglis, Rafinha, and the others seems to reassure Her Highness.”

“I guess so. And that kind of makes me— *Koff! Gaggh!*” Rochefort, suddenly overtaken by a cough, fell to his knees.

“Ross?!”

The hand he’d placed over his mouth was covered with fresh blood as another cough tore through him.

“Ross! Ross?! What’s wrong?!” Pale, Arles supported him as he doubled over.



Inglis, Rafinha, and Meltina all gasped and rushed over.

“Huh?! Mr. Rochefort!”

“Are you all right?”

“What’s going on?!”

But Rochefort didn’t reply. He was taken, unconscious, to the knights’ academy nurse’s office.

Chapter II: Inglis, Age 16—Rochefort's Illness

In the nurse's office, Principal Miriela and Arles had accompanied Rochefort; Inglis and the others waited outside so as not to get in the way. They saw the attending doctor depart, and then Miriela emerged from the room.

"Could you all come in, please? Oh, but Mr. Rochefort's sleeping, so try to be quiet."

"Um... Is Mr. Rochefort going to be okay?" Rafinha asked.

Miriela responded with downcast eyes, "Well, not in the long term... The doctor says he's relapsed."

"Ah! His illness?!" Inglis began. When Rochefort had commanded Venefic's raid on Chiral, he had been in the late stages of a terminal illness and could have died at any moment. That was why the side effect of wielding a hial menace, the draining of his life force, had not affected him, and he had been able to wield Arles freely.

"Yes. Remember, you fed him some of the dragon meat, and it cured him?"

"Of course..."

Fufailbane's meat hadn't just been extremely delicious; consuming large quantities of it could result in being imbued with dragon lore, with it acting as a panacea which could cure even incurable diseases. This was because dragon lore, the power of dragons, was extremely flexible and displayed an affinity for other life. As a result, Rochefort had survived, and he'd ended up staying in Karelia as an instructor at the knights' academy with Arles.

"Hey, Chris," Rafinha prompted. "Does that mean we should feed him more dragon meat? Maybe he didn't get enough before."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Inglis replied. "But we don't have any of Fufailbane's left."

"Ugh, that's right... We wanted Rafael to have some, so we shared it all..."

“But how about in Alcard?! We left tons of it at the camp in the ruins of Leclair! There might still be some saved!” Leone suggested.

Indeed, they had distributed large amounts of Fufailbane’s meat around Leclair as caches in case of food shortages.

“So there’s a chance! Let’s go, Inglis!”

“Yes, that’s the most likely source,” Inglis agreed. “But we don’t have time.” She would have to use her divine feat. Time was of the essence.

“But you can be there in a second with your Chris warp!” Rafinha pointed out.

Inglis laughed. “C’mon, Rani, it’s called divine feat.” But the hi-aether she’d need to use divine feat on her own, she’d used up during the Flygear race. She couldn’t use it again so soon. It took time to weave together the required amount. Meaning, she would need the aid of a hial menace.

“What if I ask Miss Arles to come with me?” Inglis pondered aloud. “If I’m with her, I can make it there no problem.”

“Understood! Let’s go!” Arles proclaimed as she left the nurse’s office. She must have been listening in on their conversation. “Please, Inglis. So we... So we can save Ross!” She put forth her hand, and Inglis took it.

“Of course, Miss Arles!”

A dazzling light overflowed from their hands as they touched before swelling further.

“So this is what it’s like when a hial menace transforms?!” Meltina gasped, squinting.

“Yes, it is!” Leone answered.

“It’s beautiful,” Liselotte said. Both were also squinting.

“B-But she doesn’t have a special-class Rune, so how can she wield a hial menace?” Meltina asked.

“Huh? Well, Chris is Chris. It’s just something she does,” Rafinha explained casually as Meltina stared in awe.

“Ha ha ha, it’s almost scary how easily you accept it.”

Before their very eyes, Arles transformed into a beautiful, ornamental golden shield.

“All right, everyone, hold on to me,” Inglis instructed. With a hial menace sublimating her aether to hi-aether, she could control this divine power. There was no need for her to gradually refine it herself.

Rafinha and the others clapped their hands onto her shoulders and arms. “Good job, Chris!”

“All right, let’s go!”

Divine feat!

The world transformed around them from a warm, brightly lit room to a wind-swept nightscape. They were in Alcard, in the center of the camp in Leclair’s ruins. Leclair itself had been destroyed, then carried away by Highland with the use of a Floating Circle, so this camp was where it would one day be rebuilt.

“I-It’s so cold. So this is Alcard...” Meltina remarked, shivering.

“But it does feel a lot warmer than before,” Inglis remarked.

“Yeah,” Leone agreed. “I guess it’s just the change in seasons, but it feels different.”

“Agreed. It’s just a little chilly.”

It was definitely an improvement from when they’d been ordered to infiltrate Alcard. The area must have been so cold because Fufailbane had rested there, and with him gone, it had returned to its normal climate.

“Then, where’s the ancient dragon meat to cure Ross?!” Arles asked, having transformed back.

“Well...you think Lahti’s still here? If he is, he should be able to tell us,” Rafinha said.

“He might be in the capital, though,” Inglis pointed out.

As they looked around, Inglis heard a voice call out to them.

“Inglis! Rafinha! Leone! Liselotte!” It was someone who clearly already knew them by name. They turned to see Lewin, a knight who was a close aide to

Lahti. Likely on a night patrol, a squad of knights had accompanied him.

“Ah, Lewin. It’s been a while,” Inglis greeted him.

“Yes. When the Rangers arrived from Karelia recently, I noticed you weren’t among them. Prince Lahti and Lady Pullum were disappointed as well.”

“Lewin! Where is Lahti?!” Rafinha asked. “We need him right away!”

“Oh, of course. He’s in that cabin over there. I’m sure he’ll be glad to see you.”

“Thank you, Lewin!” Inglis said.

“Let’s go see him,” Rafinha said.

“Ah, but do knock before you—”

Lewin’s words barely reached Rafinha and the others as they ran toward the building where Lahti resided, and Rafinha slammed open the door. “Lahti! Pullum! Are you there?”

They were in plain sight as the group entered, on a sofa in the far corner and wearing light clothing, Pullum snuggled in Lahti’s arms, their bare skin touching. And it certainly wasn’t because the weather had gotten warmer.

“Whoa!”

“Eeek!”

Shocked by Rafinha’s sudden entry, the two snapped apart.



“Oh! Er, sorry to interrupt!” Rafinha said.

“No, no, just, sorry, could you wait outside for a minute?” Lahti asked.

“Ugh! This is why I wanted to turn off the lights and go upstairs!” Pullum protested.

“A-Anyway, we’ll be waiting outside! Sorry!” Rafinha, her face bright red, closed the door in a fluster. She seemed very surprised by what she’d seen. “They... They’ve grown up, those two...”

“Y-Yeah,” Leone agreed. “I can’t even imagine doing that sort of thing, but...”

“Myself as well... But I suppose, someday...” Liselotte said.

“I... I feel like we’ve done something we shouldn’t have,” Meltina said. Each of the four blushed heavily as they looked around in embarrassment.

Inglis didn’t mind as far as Leone, Liselotte, or Meltina went, but she definitely felt like this was bad for Rafinha’s upbringing. She wished the couple would have taken Pullum’s approach of making sure the lights were out and that they couldn’t be seen from the door before moving on with that kind of thing.

“It’s entirely reasonable, though. After all, they are lovers.” Arles seemed relatively unconcerned about the whole thing. Given Rochefort’s condition, she probably had no inclination of wasting thought on such trifling matters, but her calmness implied she wouldn’t have been bothered anyway.

“Miss Arles. Miss Arles, do you—” As Rafinha began to ask Arles a question, the door opened from the inside, and Lahti spoke.

“S-Sorry to keep you waiting! Come in!”

“Sorry, after you came all the way out here...” Pullum chimed in. Both looked dreadfully embarrassed.

As the group entered, Rafinha got straight to the point. “Lahti! Is there any more of the dragon meat we brought here a while back?”

“Mr. Rochefort is sick, and we need it to cure him. If there’s any left, we’d really appreciate you sharing,” Inglis explained.

In response, Lahti frowned and shook his head. “Sorry, but we’re all out. Just

went through the last of it the other day.”

Rafinha gasped. “Oh noooo! We’re too late?!”

“Then we’ll have to figure out another way.” Inglis scrunched up her face in contemplation. Nothing was coming to mind just yet.

Lahti clapped his hands. “Wait, I know! If you need dragon meat, what if I transform into a dragon and you cut off my tail?”

Lahti had eaten so much dragon meat from Fufailbane that he’d gained dragon lore, which had manifested in him through the ability to transform into a dragon. He was Runeless and couldn’t wield an Artifact, but instead he did seem to have very good compatibility with dragon lore.

“Whaaat?! Is that really okay, Lahti?!” Pullum protested.

“It doesn’t matter, Pullum. Inglis and the others have done so much more for us than we could ever repay. So if there’s anything at all I can do—!”

Inglis, though, quietly shook her head.

“Thank you, Lahti. But I think that unless the dragon is as powerful as Fufailbane himself, the meat won’t be enough to cure Mr. Rochefort.” She appreciated the thought behind Lahti’s offer, but it was unlikely to be effective.

“Oh... Sorry I can’t be of more help...”

“Hey, so what do we do now, Chris? How do we make sure Mr. Rochefort gets better?!” Rafinha asked, tugging at Inglis’s arm.

“I think we have two options.”

“Which are?”

Inglis raised a finger. “First, Fufailbane isn’t dead; Evel turned him into a mechanical dragon and took him to Highland. We could track him down and cut off his tail again.”

The ancient dragon Fufailbane, who had slept deep under Leclair, had been used by the Papal League’s Archlord Evel as the basis for a further-enhanced mechanical dragon, one similar to those employed by Illuminas but far more powerful, given the use of an ancient dragon. Its presumed combat prowess

was beyond even Inglis's imagination. Looking back on things, Evel's body had been a hi-mana coat of the type developed by Illuminas's Academician Wilkin. He seemed to be able to transfer his consciousness between bodies. So even his apparent bloody end at the hands of the Steelblood Front didn't mean he was dead.

"Evel went back to the Papal League, right? So we don't know where Mr. Dragon is in Highland, do we?" Rafinha asked.

"Maybe if we ask Ambassador Theodore or Myce, they'll have some kind of idea? If nothing else we could have Theodore get in touch with Jil, in case he knows anything," Inglis said.

"Well, that might tell us where he is, but if we storm in wherever he is, it'll probably be a lot more complex than simply cutting off his tail..." Leone said.

"Indeed," Liselotte said. "If worse came to worst, it might cause a war that involves not just the Papal League and the Triumvirate, but Karelia and Venefic as well."

"But it might not! And Mr. Rochefort's life is in danger, and I do really want to fight a mechanical dragon like that, so... It's probably the best option?" Inglis suggested.

The mechanical dragon's consciousness was not Fufailbane's, but Evel's. That was why it had refused to fight Inglis and left for Highland. She still hadn't forgotten missing out on that battle—nor would she, ever.

"How is that the best?! That should be our last resort!" Rafinha protested.

"No, well, it's just... We know the mechanical dragon does exist somewhere out there, so going after it seems to be the most practical—"

"Just out of curiosity, could you tell us the other option?" Meltina asked. "We can decide after we hear both."

"Oh, right!" Rafinha agreed. "Okay, Chris, what's the other one?"

"Finding another ancient dragon that was sealed away like Fufailbane, I guess."

"Other dragons like Mr. Dragon? They exist?"

“Well, there’s no reason for them not to.”

In King Inglis’s reign, the monarch had only crossed swords with one: Fufailbane. However, there were other legends of dragons. Fufailbane had the power to control blizzards and ice, but she had also heard of similar entities like Krublaz, who had mastered crimson flames, or Aulglora, a golden dragon which controlled trees and earth.

“Evel laid his plans based on Fufailbane’s location, so Highland may have information on where other ancient dragons are. At the very least, the Papal League might. I’m unsure about the Triumvirate, but it’s probably worth asking.”

“So in the end, either way we end up asking Myce or Ambassador Theodore, and then maybe Jil?” Rafinha asked.

Inglis nodded as she responded to Rafinha. “I suppose so. No matter which option we go with, the first steps do seem to be the same.”

“Then let’s head back and ask them!” Arles said, standing up from her chair.

“And just to be safe, we should ask where Fufailbane is too,” Inglis said.

“No way!” Rafinha insisted. “You’d just go there alone, Chris!”

“Of course I wouldn’t. I’m your squire, Rani, so I’ll stay by your side.”

“Sure, sure. Okay, Lahti, Pullum, we’re headed home now.”

“Gotcha. I wish you could spend more time here, but things seem serious,” Lahti said.

“Rafinha, everyone, please come visit us again,” Pullum added.

“Sure thing! And you two, don’t let anything get between you... Not that I really need to say that, do I...?” Thinking back, Rafinha blushed.

“Yes, of course...” Leone trailed off.

“I do suppose...” Liselotte did as well.

“It would be a bit presumptuous of us to say that...” Meltina noted after both of them. Each of them blushed and tried to find somewhere else to look.

“Let’s go, Miss Arles!” Inglis quickly took Arles’s hand.

“Ah, o-okay!”

Any more time with those lovebirds would fill Rafinha’s head with bad ideas.



Leaving Alcard by means of divine feat, Inglis’s group returned to Karelia. Their exact destination was an island in the middle of Lake Bolt—the remains of what had once been Illuminas in Highland. Myce and the other Highlanders were living there, restoring the central laboratory which had been half-destroyed. Cleanup from the knights’ academy’s field day had finished, and everyone was fast asleep, but when Inglis went to Myce, he was happy to help regardless of the time. He showed them to a room similar to Academician Wilkin’s personal laboratory.

There, Myce drowsily listened to what they had to say. “So you’re looking for a dragon, and one of the strongest ones?”

“Yeah,” Inglis said. “Do you know where we could find one, Myce?!”

“Hold on a second... Hmm, I wonder if anything will come up. Most of Illuminas’s data has been corrupted and can no longer be viewed... Hmm, it might be a bit of an old map, but...” As Myce spoke, a three-dimensional diorama of the terrain was projected on the table in front of him. “Hmm. This is where Fufailbane was sealed...” He pointed to a volcano, erupting with red lava.

“Ah—!” He was right. That was Mt. Clavoid, far beneath where King Inglis had sealed the dragon so long ago. The monarch had tried to use nature’s own power to strengthen the seal on such powerful ice. The map was one that King Inglis would have recognized.

Rafinha tilted her head in confusion. “Eh? But Mr. Dragon was in Alcard, right? There aren’t volcanoes like that there.”

“I think it’s a map from a long time ago. Like, a long, *long* time ago,” Inglis said.

“It might be,” Myce said. “I’m sorry, it was all that came up for my search. If Illuminas was in better shape, I might have been able to find something more recent.”

“No, this is good enough. But the terrain is so different now. Did something happen?” Inglis asked.

“Hmm... Mt. Clavoid? I think it became part of Highland. I remember there being an island with that name somewhere in the Papal League.”

“Oh, I see. So the volcano that was originally there became part of Highland, and then Leclair was built, and then *that* became part of Highland, and then Fufailbane popped back out.”

“So Highlanders have cut away at the surface over and over...” Leone realized.

“And not just there, I’m sure it’s happened in other places as well,” Liselotte presumed. Their expressions were ones of complete shock.

In any case, there was something Inglis was suddenly very interested in. Specifically, the Silvare Kingdom and its capital Silvaria. The land King Inglis had built, the land where he had died. Was Silvaria somewhere on this map? But asking now would just raise questions, and her priority right now was the other ancient dragons. She’d have to return alone sometime later to ask about it.

“Then, are there other ancient dragons, Myce?” Inglis asked, and Rafinha and the others waited with bated breath.

“Ah, um... Yeah. There’s only one hit, but it’s something!”

“Oh?!” Inglis wanted to fight an ancient dragon, and it didn’t particularly have to be Fufailbane. It would help Rochefort, she’d have someone new to fight, and she’d get to have some more of that delicious meat. It was good from every angle.

“S-So, where is the ancient dragon? Where do we go to save Ross?!” Arles asked again.

“It’s located...to the southeast of where Fufailbane was sealed. Here.” The projection panned to show another location.

“Where is that?” Inglis asked.

“Um, in modern terms, it looks like it’s on the frontier, near the border between Karelia and Venefic? The data says this is where the ancient dragon Aulglora was sealed.”

“On the border with Venefic means it must be around where the rimebound Prismer was brought.”

“So it’s in Karelia! That makes things easy!” Rafinha’s face suddenly lit up.

“But Rafinha, this is old data. Remember it might not still be accurate,” Myce pointed out.

“Still, it’s the only clue we have, so I think there’s value in going and investigating. The Rangers have a flying battleship, so if we can borrow that...!” Leone said.

“The problem is that the borderlands are in Chancellor Riegliv’s holdings,” Liselotte said. “It would be much simpler if it were in our Charot or your Ymir, but something as significant as waking an ancient dragon requires proper discussion and proper permissions.”

“Yes,” Inglis agreed. “They might prefer to let sleeping dragons lie... I imagine they’re probably busy with a lot of other things out east.”

Venefic’s army had just recently invaded Karelia at the same time as the rimebound Prismer’s attack. The eastern nobility had suffered great losses from these attacks and had formed a strongly anti-Venefic faction calling for retaliation. In fact, they were already mustering their forces for a punitive expedition. If negotiations with Venefic faltered by the time they were ready, they could be expected to go on the attack. Chancellor Riegliv was central to these machinations. Even if they went with the intent of digging up an ancient dragon buried in his lands, they would likely be told to take no unnecessary risks.

“Do... Do you think he won’t let us investigate the dragon? Even though Miss Arles is so worried about Mr. Rochefort?” Meltina asked, gloom written on her face.

“Well, I don’t think so. Still, let’s see how the conversation goes, okay?” Inglis clapped her hand on Meltina’s shoulder.



Early the next morning, Inglis and her friends accompanied Principal Miriela to the palace. There, they met with Prince Wayne, Ambassador Theodore, Rafael,

and Ripple.

“What?! You’re saying in exchange for Chancellor Riegliv allowing us to investigate the ancient dragon in his lands, we should offer to temporarily hand over command of the Paladins?” Prince Wayne asked, incredulous.

Inglis answered with a smile, “Yes. The army positioned against Venefic was to be composed mainly of the eastern lords’ personal retinues; the addition of the Paladins would reassure Chancellor Riegliv significantly. It would give him a powerful piece to move without any worries as to his own losses. Thus, if we agreed to those conditions, he would be likely to accept a survey of his territory.”

“W-Wait, Chris!” Rafinha protested. “That would be like telling Rafael and Ripple to go to war against Venefic!”

“That’s right,” Inglis agreed. “Which would make Chancellor Riegliv happy, and give him the impression that Prince Wayne was taking his side.”

“That’s no good! I thought we were trying to stop the war! If that happens, we wouldn’t be able to do anything about it but sit and watch!”

The others in the room seemed to agree with Rafinha’s sentiment.

“But we’re already at that point, aren’t we?” Inglis noted. “The eastern lords decided they would abandon their plans if a peaceful settlement was made with Venefic before the Karelian forces finished mustering, but Meltina, the one who may have pushed for that settlement, is here. Meaning, the moderates within Venefic have been exiled, and there is no room at this point for negotiation.”

“Unfortunately, that’s likely to be true,” Prince Wayne agreed with a grave nod.

Even though the situation was clear now, the problem was what steps to undertake. A small group of infiltrators pushing for regime change had worked in Alcard, but Venefic was deeply hostile to Karelia in a way that Alcard was not. Beyond that, Venefic’s resources and personnel were beyond anything available to the snowy nation.

Not just General Maxwell and his faceless giant, but two hial menaces would face them: both Tiffanyer and the strongest one yet, Charlotte.

Additionally, Tiffanyer's presence suggested that Evel, who had become a mechanical dragon, might decide to make his presence known. It would take time to fend things off and build toward a position where the coup would stick; if that looked likely, surely Chancellor Riegliv would begin his invasion. After all, a weakened Venefic would be a prime opportunity to carve out more territory.

Meltina's voice quivered as she avoided eye contact. "I'm sorry... If only I had done a better job, this wouldn't have happened..." She must have been blaming herself for the failures of the truce negotiation with Venefic.

Inglis attempted to comfort her. "No, it's okay. It's not right for you to frown over this. I'm grateful to you—in any other situation, I wouldn't be able to suggest this plan."

"But in this kind of situation you can...?"

"Exactly. This is the perfect timing, I think. I don't imagine we'd normally get permission to offer command of the Paladins in exchange for being allowed to dig up an ancient dragon."

Prince Wayne didn't want to actively pursue a hawkish course. On the contrary, Inglis was convinced that he would try to avoid war if possible. He was the one who had come up with the idea of the Rangers, a force without overriding loyalty to any one state. Outbreak of a full-scale war between Karelia and Venefic would go against that ideal. Even if Rochefort's life was at stake, the man was merely an instructor at the knights' academy, nowhere near as valuable as the Paladins—unless the prince could realize something very substantial in exchange, that is.

"So you mean to say there's something here that wouldn't normally be possible?" the prince asked.

"Please explain, Inglis," Theodore prompted.

"Of course. What if said dragon being excavated decided to completely collapse the mountain pass leading to Venefic? Repairs could take months, or even years."

Prince Wayne and Theodore looked at each other in shocked realization.

"What do you think, Theodore?"

“It’s not the most admirable method, but it’s certainly a clever one. Uptake of Flygears and Flygear Ports continues to progress, but Karelia’s forces are still primarily grounded in infantry, especially the lords’ retinues. If the roads were destroyed, they wouldn’t be able to invade.”

“Of course,” Inglis continued. “By pushing back the point in time at which the eastern lords are able to invade, I believe we can significantly extend the time we have to reach a negotiated peace.”

In other words, this would be a sabotage operation to expand the window for peace with Venefic, under the cover of being a search for an ancient dragon. And it was one that would be carried out by the Paladins. There was no need to actually rely on the dragon for the destruction; the Paladins could simply do it themselves while making sure to make it look like the dragon’s doing. Using a force like the Paladins, ostensibly dedicated to dealing with magicite beasts and the Prism Flow, to intervene in domestic politics was its own question, but that was one to be pondered by their commander, the prince.

Liselotte clapped her hands. “In other words, you’d use the fact that the dragon is in Chancellor Riegliv’s lands to our own advantage!”

“A physical impasse to war in the east! How do you come up with such ideas?” Leone gasped, impressed.

Without such a potential reward, Inglis thought, Prince Wayne and Ambassador Theodore would never agree to deploy the Paladins. Yet if they did not act, Chancellor Riegliv would find none of their proposals appealing, and Inglis would be left unable to examine the ancient dragon. In other words, it was a suggestion she could make precisely because of the current situation.

Rafinha’s hand loudly clapped her on the back. “Great job, Chris! You’re amazing! Isn’t this nice, Meltina? We can save Mr. Rochefort, and maybe even avoid war with Venefic!”

Inglis was happy that Rafinha was happy, but it did hurt a little.

“I hope so!” Meltina agreed, beaming. “Thank you, Inglis!”

Arles was deeply touched. “You’ve done so, so much for Ross’s sake...”

“Oh, don’t worry about it, you two. In the end it works out pretty well for me

too, right?”

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

“This means I get to keep learning from Mr. Rochefort, and I get to fight another ancient dragon, right? I can even take on General Maxwell, Tiffanyer, *and* Charlotte, *and* Evel, *and* who knows who else without having to worry about what the eastern lords are up to. It’s a great opportunity for fights.” Inglis raised fingers one by one as she counted out her list of targets.

“Ha ha ha... That’s so you, Chris,” Rafinha remarked in exasperation.

“Yes,” Leone agreed. “In many ways.”

“I suppose it’s somewhat of a relief that she’s at least consistent,” Liselotte said.

Pointedly ignoring them, Prince Wayne turned to the two Paladins present. “Rafael, Ripple... It shames me to ask for your participation in such a plot, but... Still, I must. If things continue as they have, the eastern lords’ fury will turn into war. This will at least put them on the back foot.”

Neither had any objections to Prince Wayne’s decision. “I believe Your Highness’s judgment is sound,” Rafael said. “Rather than doing harm, it will save many. It is not the most honorable method, but we have no choice. The Paladins will deploy to Chancellor Riegliv’s lands.”

“Yeah, if we can keep a war from happening, it’s fine,” Ripple agreed. “We hial menaces want to help people join together and protect themselves from the Prism Flow and magicite beasts, not to see them fight each other.”

“Again, I am sorry. I’ll personally speak with Chancellor Riegliv immediately. Make ready to depart straightaway.” Prince Wayne got to his feet; he intended to brook no delays.

“Yes!”

The others stood as well, and echoes of their assent followed Prince Wayne from the room.

Chapter III: Inglis, Age 16—The Search for the Ancient Dragon

Whirrr... Whirrr...

Inglis and Rafinha were in a large hangar filled with the sound of a Flygear's engine humming away. To be exact, Inglis had opened it up and had pushed her hands and face in to work on its internal mechanisms, and Rafinha watched her while attending to other tasks.

"Chriiis... Chriiis!"

Rafinha called Inglis's name, but Inglis couldn't exactly put down her work. "Just hold on a minute. This is a pretty difficult part—I can't put it down just yet." She was on all fours, with her hands deep inside the Flygear grasping a part she wanted to replace.

She was working on the *Star Princess*, her and Rafinha's personal Flygear. It had suffered moderate battle damage in Illuminas and had been adrift in the Shaquell Sea, but it wasn't anything elbow grease couldn't fix. Myce and the other Highlanders of Illuminas had offered to repair it, saying the damage had been their fault. They had also mentioned new parts to improve its performance, but that took time, and even though the parts themselves were finished, they still needed to be assembled together. The people of Illuminas were busy with their repairs to their central laboratory, and Principal Miriela's request for their help with the academy's Field Day had eaten into their time as well. But because the assembly was all that remained, Inglis could simply put everything together herself. And if she failed, Myce was coming along with them to Chancellor Riegliv's lands anyway, so she believed she could at least try on her own first. It was a great way to kill time as they traveled aboard the flying battleship.

"Earth. To. Chris!"

“Sorry. Just a little tiny bit more.”

Inglis was nearly finished. With this, the *Star Princess* would be able to fly again.

Fwoosh!

She suddenly felt her clothes rustle around the back of her waist, and a coolness she wasn't accustomed to. It gave her an indescribable sense of anxiety and tension. Rafinha had grabbed the back of her skirt and flipped it up.

“Eeek!” Jumping up and extricating herself from the *Star Princess*, Inglis hurriedly pulled her skirt back into place.



“I thought you said you couldn’t put what you were working on down.”

“Wh-What were you thinking, Rani?! Don’t do that!”

“I mean, even if I hadn’t done anything, your whole butt was showing with how you were bent over. I was trying to tell you to be careful, but you weren’t listening.”

Well, it was true that Inglis had gotten so engrossed in her work that she’d forgotten her surroundings.

She loved tinkering with machines—especially things like her personal Flygear.

“I mean, I’m glad the *Star Princess* will be fixed soon. And it’s fine for you to get absorbed in something you’re working on like a boy, but there are things us girls have to be careful about,” Rafinha said.

“You’re right.” Yelping when her skirt was grabbed and pulling it right back into place was exactly what a girl her age would do. Calmly thinking it through from a masculine perspective might have left her unperturbed, but she had been living as Inglis Eucus for sixteen years. It was a little embarrassing, but it was who she was now. There was no changing that.

“Anyway, I made these for you! Here, put them on!” Rafinha held out a pair of shorts for Inglis to wear under her skirt.

“Thanks, Rani. I don’t have to worry about how I’m bending over if I have these.”

“Right? Anyway, do your best. I’m almost done too.” Rafinha was working on a priestess’s outfit. Just like their encounter with Fufailbane, it would be used to show that Inglis carried no real hostility. This time, she would be going to where Aulglora, known as the gold dragon, was sealed. Thus, the outfit itself was golden in color, and the fabric Rafinha was working with glittered brightly.

They were in the hangar of a flying battleship, which was unremarkable for Inglis’s repairs but out of place for Rafinha’s sewing. Nonetheless, the girls had gotten permission to be there, so there was nothing the matter with it. This was the Paladins’ ship, and everyone knew that Rafinha was Rafael’s little sister and

Inglis his cousin. Most of them had been present for her battle with the Prismers, and they all treated the two kindly. Most importantly, they fed them just as much as they did Rafael without even having to be asked.

Both finished their work at almost exactly the same time and exclaimed, "All right! It's done!"

"Look, Rani, it's running again! Give it a try."

"Yeah. I'm done too! Try this on."

Inglis picked up the priestess's outfit that Rafinha had made, while Rafinha reached for the controls of the repaired *Star Princess*.

"Whoa! It really is running again! Our *Star Princess* is finally back!" Rafinha stood aboard the Flygear as it hovered, a satisfied smile on her face.

Meanwhile, Inglis was having trouble getting into the golden priestess's outfit by herself. "Hmm. It's a bit hard to put on." She was in a public area, so she had to keep herself covered while changing.

"Can I help you out, Inglis?" It was Arles who asked as she walked up to them.

"Miss Arles, thank you. But is it okay to leave Mr. Rochefort alone?"

"Yes. He's stabilized, and he's sleeping now." Rochefort had been brought aboard the ship so that the ancient dragon meat could be administered to him as soon as it was obtained. "And besides, Lady Meltina is watching over him so I can get some rest. So I'm left with nothing to do for now." Arles smiled.

"I see. Meltina's keeping an eye out... Then, go ahead."

Rochefort and Arles took good care of Venefic's princess, and it seemed she felt an attachment to them as well. Inglis supposed Meltina's status as royalty gave her a strong desire to help them.

"Okay. Hmm, the size is perfect. It looks great on you too. You're beautiful in it."

Inglis chuckled. "Thank you, Miss Arles. But it does leave my belly feeling a little chilly."

This outfit was a two-piece ensemble, sparing in its use of fabric, so her

stomach, and even her navel, were exposed.

“I can see how it would. It’s, er, rather bold. I don’t think I’d ever be able to pull it off.”

“What?!” Rafinha gasped. “Even though I made one for you?” She hopped down from the *Star Princess* and held out another priestess’s outfit. This one had a hole in the back for Arles’s tail to pass through, as she was a demihuman.

“Y-You want me to wear this?!”

“Yes! I’m not just making these for fun or to kill time. It’s so the wearer can talk with our new dragon friend. If we can get along, I thought you might want to talk with it too.”

“Aw, Rafinha... Yes, I’ve just been so worried about Ross that... Thank you for thinking of me.”

“So you’ll try it on, Miss Arles?!”

“Yes, of course!” Arles nodded.

With Inglis’s help, she quickly changed into the golden priestess’s outfit, and as they finished, she murmured, “I-It is a little bit embarrassing...”

“Ahh, I love that reaction! ♪ You’re so cute when you’re embarrassed! ♪”

“Come on! Don’t tease your teacher!” Arles protested.

Inglis chuckled. “You look great, Miss Arles.”

“No, it’s still better on you... You’re so pretty, like a beautiful doll. It’s hard to reconcile your appearance with what else I know of you—you’re so strong, so bloodthirsty, and have such an appetite.”

“Chris has the body of an angel but the soul of a warlord,” Rafinha remarked sagely.

“Oh? It certainly does seem that way.” Arles giggled. Her mood seemed to have improved. If so, that was good.

“Well, well, well! What a feast for the eyes we have here!” a well-built middle-aged man announced as he approached.

Inglis could practically feel his gaze slither over her like a tongue, from her

waistline to her chest. She sighed. It was an unpleasant, but not unfamiliar, feeling. She had felt it from the previous Highland ambassador, Muenthe, but never quite as bad until Chancellor Riegliv. Well, at least he was gentlemanly enough to not get excited and try to touch or hug her out of nowhere.

Flanking Chancellor Riegliv were two knights, a man and a woman, who acted as his guards. Both appeared to be in their late twenties or thirties. And from the back of each one's right hand, an upper-class Rune was visible. They were powerful, even among knights. They must have been members of some order of knights Chancellor Riegliv maintained in his own territory, like the Knights of Ymir, but it must've been powerful if it could assemble such members. It definitely demonstrated Riegliv's leading position among the lords of the east. His lineage was of enough import that he could be entrusted with the chancellorship.

"Ah, er... Chancellor Riegliv. What brings you to us?" Arles asked, stiffening up. She seemed put off by Riegliv's gaze.

"Nothing in particular. I'm only making the rounds. After all, once you've finished your ancient dragon business, you're going to be valuable allies in the war against Venefic. I thought it was a good time to meet face-to-face and exchange a few words. I myself once stood forth against the magicite beasts and the savages in Venefic, so I'm certainly not one to neglect the lower ranks."

Despite his appearance, he seemed to be mindful of those on the front lines. As Inglis had suggested, Prince Wayne had temporarily transferred command of the Paladins in exchange for permission to conduct a survey in his lands, and Chancellor Riegliv seemed to already be turning his attention toward the invasion of Venefic that he expected to follow. Fortunately, he did not seem to realize their true goals.

"An impressive thought, surely." Inglis responded with a bow.

"No, no, you're the impressive ones!" Riegliv laughed.

What exactly was impressive about them, he left unsaid, but Inglis's and Arles's skin crawled as his stare swept over them.

Inglis said nothing, but Arles grimaced. "Ugh..."

“And, well, here I was coming around to lift your spirits, but it seems like it’s worked the other way around, ha ha ha! Don’t mind me, just carry on with your work. I’ll watch for a while,” Riegliv announced, only for someone to step between them.

Rafinha had suddenly stepped between the chancellor and Arles. “I’m sorry! We need to take this Flygear out for a test flight! Let’s go, Chris, Miss Arles!”

“Ah, of course, Rafinha!” Arles said.

Inglis was quiet as she worried about a slightly different issue. Rafinha had just stepped forward to protect Arles. Arles had been obviously nervous, so it made sense, and it was good that Rafinha was kind enough to do so. That was nice—but it would have been nicer if she had protected Inglis too. How isolating.

“Ah, really? Such a shame,” Chancellor Riegliv said, disappointed that they would part.

“Your Excellency, there are other soldiers here as well. We can speak with them,” one knight suggested.

“I’m sure the others would like to hear from you as well,” the other agreed.

While Riegliv’s entourage interceded, Inglis and the others launched the *Star Princess*. It floated up and out of the hangar, then settled into a course alongside the flying battleship.

“Yeah! It’s fixed up perfect! It feels even faster than before!” Rafinha happily maneuvered the *Star Princess* around. “I’m sorry I butted in, Miss Arles, but I couldn’t think of another excuse.”

“No, I enjoy flying, and this is definitely a nice change of pace from that interaction! Besides, you were looking out for me, weren’t you? Thank you.” Arles flashed a smile.

“Chris, did you want to take a turn piloting? See how it feels?”

“Nah, I’m good.”

“Huh? What are you sulking about?”

“Not much. Just, y’know, you stepping in to help Miss Arles and leaving me

hanging.”

“You’re worried about that? I don’t think it’s a problem. There’s no reason for you to be embarrassed by someone staring at you. After all, you’re the cutest.”

“That’s not the point! I wasn’t exactly enjoying it.”

“Yeah, okay, fine. Sorry, if you’re gonna be such a delicate, little flower about it. Where’d that soul of a warlord go anyway?”

“Right here! And I am not *that* delicate!” Inglis thumped her chest.

“Ha ha ha, you two get along so well.” Arles’s grin softened as she watched Inglis and Rafinha.

“Yes! We’re cousins, and we grew up together, so thanks to that, I know how much it hurts when something happens to someone you really care about. That’s why I want to help you save the someone you really care about! Let’s do our best, Miss Arles! I know we can save Mr. Rochefort!” Rafinha gave her speech everything she could muster as she looked Arles in the eye.

“Oh, Rafinha... Yes, we will! I’m losing track of which one of us is supposed to be the teacher...” Tears welled up in Arles’s eyes as she chuckled.

Rafinha’s words had resonated with her. She drew people in and led them with her purity and directness. Inglis, who had watched over Rafinha since her infancy, was proud that she had the humanity to do so.

And Inglis, too, would do everything she could to make those words come true.

She also had a heartfelt desire to help Rochefort. After all, she wanted to spar with him again. No matter how he came off, there was no other instructor with the same enthusiasm for individual combat training. His loss would be felt keenly. So at least in that sense, Inglis and Rafinha were completely on the same page.

“Actually, yeah, Rani, let’s switch. I’ll give it a try too.”

“Hmm? Okay, here you go.” Rafinha, handing over the controls, slipped behind Inglis.

“Whoa! This feels really different; it maneuvers better, and it’s faster!” The

new parts Myce and the other Highlanders from Illuminas had come up with had done the trick.

“Hey, Chris, why don’t we see what it can put out at full power?” Rafinha hugged Inglis from behind. Her warmth felt good.

“Okay. Here goes!” Inglis nodded, and she accelerated the *Star Princess*.



The next day...

“What?! You want us to change course?!” Rafael’s voice rose to fill a stateroom aboard the flying battleship.

Chancellor Riegliv said, “I wouldn’t describe it that way, Sir Rafael. More of a detour. The roads east from our headquarters at Gritta to Fort Gliros, where our expeditionary forces are stationed, were devastated in the recent attack by the Prismers. Using the flying battleship, we could move large amounts of supplies in one trip. And we can carry letters from the townspeople to the soldiers at the fort. So if I could ask so much of you...”

The town of Gritta was east of their present position. Fort Gliros was to the northeast, near both the border and where the ancient dragon Aulglora was sealed away. Riegliv had requested they land in Gritta to load supplies for transport. Flying battleships were, of course, very convenient for logistics, and it made sense to use them to get materiel to the front line where transportation was difficult. It was a hard request for Rafael to decline.

“But that will delay our arrival to the ancient dragon,” Inglis said. The delay would not be very long—a few days, at most—but those few days could prove a matter of life or death given Rochefort’s condition.

Rafinha appealed to her brother. “R-Rafael! If we don’t hurry, Mr. Rochefort will... I mean, of course, we also need to help the people who aren’t getting their food or letters, but...”

“Yeah. Rani’s right, Mr. Rochefort is in critical condition.”

That said, the ostensible goal of this operation was to investigate the ancient dragon and make sure it would not awaken after the eastern lords’ forces had

invaded Venefic and attack them from behind. In other words, it was to ensure that no trouble arose at home during the invasion, which made prioritizing Rochefort difficult to suggest.

Inglis raised her hand to get Rafael's attention. "What if we were to go on ahead to where the ancient dragon is sealed?"

Inglis's group was not formally part of the Paladins on this mission to investigate the ancient dragon; they were only accompanied by the Paladins. Therefore, there should've been no problem if they split into separate groups and went ahead to investigate. That way, they could proceed without delays, and without rejecting Chancellor Riegliv's request.

"That way, there should be no delays on either end," she elaborated.

Although Inglis couldn't say it aloud, the true purpose of the investigation was to obtain dragon meat with which to treat Rochefort and to collapse the mountain pass leading to Venefic so that the expeditionary force could not advance. They needed to sabotage the road while making it look as if it were the dragon's fault. And that sabotage would be easier to accomplish if Chancellor Riegliv and his knights were somewhere else. In other words, his request was less a nuisance and more an opportunity. But it would mean that Inglis would have to handle the work that was supposed to be carried out by Rafael and the Paladins.

"Chris... Can I ask this of you?" Rafael's unusual gravity showed he also was thinking of what he couldn't say given his present audience.

"Yes, of course. I would, however, appreciate the use of a Flygear Port."

"That sounds reasonable to me. Will that be permissible, Chancellor Riegliv?"

"I don't mind. Just don't push yourselves too hard until the main force arrives." Chancellor Riegliv nodded, making sure to show proper concern for Inglis. He didn't seem to realize their hidden purpose.

"Of course," Inglis continued. "Thank you." She wondered what face he'd be making when it was all over—and felt a little sorry for him, thinking about it. But she kept quiet and acted graceful as she bowed.

"Chris, how about Mr. Rochefort? We can't take him with us, can we?"

Rafinha asked.

If the Flygear Port was caught up in a fight with the ancient dragon, it could spell disaster for Rochefort aboard. Inglis could understand where those worries came from.

“You’re right. Why don’t we let him rest on the flying battleship? Once we get dragon meat, we can just bring it to him.”

“Yeah, that’ll work. So I guess Miss Arles will be staying with the ship.”

Arles, though, shook her head. “No, I’ll come with you, Inglis. If a fight breaks out, it would be better if Ripple or I were there, and I’m your teacher. I can’t abandon my students to a dangerous task... I’m sure Ross would agree.”

“Miss Arles...” Rafinha began.

“Then, I’ll remain aboard the flying battleship and look after Mr. Rochefort in your absence, Miss Arles. You can go ahead without any worries,” Meltina said, a serious expression on her face.

“Lady Meltina... Thank you.”

“Then, I shall stay with Meltina aboard the flying battleship. It would be a lot for her alone,” Liselotte offered. “Leone, you should go with Inglis and Rafinha to investigate the ancient dragon. We’ll need more people over there.”

“Got it,” Leone responded.

“Inglis, Rafinha, I’ll come along too. That’s why I’m here, after all!” Next was Myce. He had come along with the expedition, and even brought a mechanical dragon along on the flying battleship. Transforming an ancient dragon into a mechanical dragon was a tall order, but perhaps if it had guardians, they could be captured for use as such. Many mechanical dragons had been lost during the collapse of Illuminas, so it would be helpful to supplement their numbers.

“Sure, Myce. Then it’s decided. Let’s get going.”

Inglis, Rafinha, Leone, and Arles would go on ahead as the landing party to investigate where the ancient dragon was sealed away, while Liselotte and Meltina would stay with the ship and look after Rochefort. They would be split up into two groups to handle the situation as it unfolded.

“Rafael, we’re going to get ready and head out,” Rafinha said.

“I’m counting on you, Rani. Chris, Leone, you two as well. Take good care of Lady Arles and Myce.”

The trio nodded in response.

Chapter IV: Inglis, Age 16—Corpse Dragon Aulglora

It had been two days since Inglis's group had split from Rafael's main force, and now they were surveying the surroundings from the deck of the Flygear Port.

Rafinha pointed to a hill. "That damaged stretch must be where the Prismer came through, huh? It's absolutely wrecked. It looks like the thing gouged half the hill away."

It was indeed a misshapen lump, its soil carved away from the middle out. The road itself had been repaired, but anything unused had been left as is.

Inglis nodded in agreement. "Yeah, you're right. This is even worse than I expected."

"We don't know when the Prism Flow will make another Prismer that can do things like this, so this is no time for people to be fighting each other. Mr. Rochefort comes first, but we need to stop the war!"

"That's right," Inglis agreed. "Let's do our best, Rani." The two nodded to each other.

But undercutting the serious moment...

Grrrrrrrgl!

Their stomachs rumbled loudly.

Leone sighed, bemused. "That doesn't match your expressions or your words at all."

"I-It's not like I can help it! In fact, I was trying to distract myself from how hungry I am by being serious!" Rafinha protested.

"They couldn't give us that much food for a group going off on their own," Inglis said.

“You still got double the amount we normally would have,” Leone pointed out.

“And it still isn’t enough!” Inglis and Rafinha insisted in unison.

Myce laughed wryly. “Ha ha ha ha... You two sure don’t have it easy at times like this.”

“We’d thought we could make up for what was missing by hunting in the mountains on the way up...” Inglis said.

“But we were wrong. There weren’t many animals at all...”

Both let out drained sighs.

“There probably weren’t that many to begin with, and those that had been there must have fled in fear from the resurrected Prismers. It might take some time before they return. Wild animals are sensitive and timid, after all,” Arles said, looking down at the mountains.

“I’m not trying to sound like Meltina here, but are you sure we can’t have some of the mechanical dragon?” Rafinha asked.

“Some of it is still flesh, right? Could we cut a little bit of that off?” Inglis pondered.

They looked back at the mechanical dragon which was flying behind the Flygear Port. Said Flygear Port was making much better speed toward its destination than usual, as a result of the mechanical dragon pushing it.

“I’d really appreciate it if you’d stop asking that...” Myce said.

The dragon seemed to grimace as Inglis and Rafinha looked at it.

“Things can’t go on like this! We need to do something, fast!” Rafinha insisted.

“That’s right, Rani!”

“Oh? Like what?” Arles asked.

“Like getting some dragon meat, for starters!” Rafinha said.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Inglis said.

And so they brought out the *Star Princess*, which had been stored aboard the Flygear Port, and climbed in. The outer sides of the Flygear Port had recessed bays for securely mooring the aircraft, which kept the Flygears charged and ready to go while stored there.

“Leone, we’re going on ahead!” Inglis announced.

“From here, we should be able to get to our destination with just a Flygear,” Rafinha explained.

Even with the mechanical dragon providing the added thrust, a Flygear would travel faster than a Flygear Port—the *Star Princess*, even more so. Any other Flygear would’ve had trouble topping its speed.

“Got it,” Leone replied. “We’re fairly close, so now would be a good time for you to go.”

“Then I’ll come along too! We don’t know if there might be a fight.” Arles hopped aboard the *Star Princess*. Since they were close to the area where the dragon was sealed, both Inglis and Arles had already changed into the gold-accented priestess outfits Rafinha had made for them.

“Be careful, you three!” Leone and Myce sent them off, and the *Star Princess* separated from the Flygear Port to fly ahead of it.

“All right, let’s go! Booster mode!” Inglis called out. Even though the *Star Princess* had been rebuilt, its boosters remained intact. It rocketed away from the Flygear Port, quickly turning into a speck in the distance.



Just as the *Star Princess*’s power reserves were running low, it arrived at its destination.

“Over there! Those four peaks! The dragon was between those on the map, right?!” Rafinha pointed to a space between four quiet mountains, each aligned in a cardinal direction. The mountains were each close enough in size and at precise enough distance from the others to seem to have been placed deliberately. The road to Venefic weaved through a steep pass on the east before snaking through another pass on the other side. The space between the passes was narrow, and blocking it would complete one of their objectives.

“Look how the mountains line up... It almost seems like someone built them there,” Arles said pensively.

“Yeah, it does,” Inglis agreed. “But even if someone did, it must have been a very long time ago. Each one is weathered differently, and the trees and grass differ as well.”

Even though the mountains were the same size, the one most exposed to the north wind was weathered and faded, while the sunny south had more greenery both at its base and on its slopes than the others. It must have taken eons for these changes to occur.

As they approached the mountains, Inglis snapped alert. “Ah! Aether...”

She could feel the flow of aether from each of the peaks. It was flowing toward the depression which lay between them, and seemed to sink from there into the earth where it acted as some sort of net or membrane. In other words, there was something underneath that it was sealing away—and if their information was correct, that something was the ancient dragon Aulglora.

“Hey, Chris, I kinda feel like there’s something breathtaking here... I mean, it just definitely doesn’t feel normal. Do you feel it too?” Rafinha asked.

“Yeah, I do. There *is* something—and it’s probably the ancient dragon.”

Inglis had heard that Rafinha had fired an aether arrow during the fighting in Illuminas. She had assumed that their being inseparable since they were infants had meant some of her own aether had rubbed off on the other girl, and now she was also able to, at least vaguely, sense the flow of aether here. If Inglis, a divine knight, was something half human and half divine, did that make Rafinha now three-quarters human and one-quarter divine?

“I don’t sense anything unusual, but I certainly hope the ancient dragon is there,” Arles said. “We can’t accomplish much without it.” Hiera’s menaces could not sense aether, so she didn’t sense anything out of the ordinary.

“In any case, let’s check it out,” Inglis said.

“Of course, but how? Shall we dig in the center?” Arles pointed to a small basin between the peaks.

“That would normally work, but... If we blast it away all at once, we would probably injure the ancient dragon if it’s there, and we don’t have the time to waste digging slowly and carefully. Preferably, I’d like it to come to us.”

“You want to draw it out? Is that possible?”

“Yes. If we remove whatever’s shackling it, I believe we can.” Inglis could see aether flowing from the four peaks, forming some kind of seal. She didn’t know if it was the work of another divine knight or one of the gods themselves, but it had to be something of that nature.

“Shackles? What do you mean by that?” Rafinha asked.

“Those peaks. The power comes from the peaks.”

The peaks could be described as akin to a holy sword or the liminal sepulcher which formed the basis of the Greyfriar sarcophagus—sacred relics in themselves. While hial menaces had the side effect of bleeding away their wielder’s life force, their endurance to aether perhaps marked them as well as something of the same sort.

Rafinha followed along. “And because it’s coming from there...”

“Yeah. We blast ’em, right?” Inglis replied with a grin. The rubble from destroying the peaks could also be used as a source of rock to block the road through the pass—two birds with one stone.

“Ha ha ha... Wow, that handles things nice and quick.”

“Doesn’t it? Then let’s get going!” Inglis released the controls and thrust her palm toward the nearest peak.

Aether Strike!

Blammmmmmm!

A gigantic blast of aether pierced straight through the mountain. Its top half, gutted by the hole left behind, collapsed in on itself, leaving only a small hill.

“That’s incredible!” Arles gasped in amazement, and Inglis leaped from the *Star Princess*.

“Rani! Take the controls!”

“Whoa! Wait, Chris?!” Rafinha hurriedly grabbed the stick.

“I have to use my power efficiently!” As she fell, Inglis activated Aether Shell.

As soon as she landed, she jumped up again, chasing after the Aether Strike blast that had pierced through the peak. Rafinha and Arles barely had time to blink before she had caught up with it.

“Haaaah!”

She changed the wavelength of her Aether Shell to one that would repel the blast, like two magnets repelling each other, then punched the Aether Strike as hard as she could. It changed direction and shot straight toward another peak, piercing it and causing its collapse just like before. When it emerged on the other side, Inglis was already waiting.

“Again!” The path of the Aether Strike suddenly twisted, and it pierced and destroyed a third peak. “And the last!”

Once again, she got ahead of the Aether Strike and struck it. One last change of course sent it bringing down the fourth peak before it faded away, its power dissipating. All that remained were the crumbled ruins of the four peaks and a scar gouged between them in one continuous stroke.

This was Aether Reflector. It was a combat technique that struck away a previous Aether Strike using a wavelength of aether which would repel it, manipulating its trajectory as desired. That way, she could make full use of the power behind an Aether Strike, which could otherwise only travel in a single straight line.

“Ha ha ha, you wiped them all out in one shot... It must have taken a lot of work to put those mountains there too.” Rafinha laughed bitterly from the *Star Princess*, which had arrived overhead.

“Yeah. Firing off too many Aether Strikes would drain my energy, so it’s more efficient to finish them off with one. I need to save some for later.”

An Aether Strike for each peak would have meant four of them, and that wasteful sort of expenditure of aether wasn’t something she could casually

overlook. Ideally, of course, she'd have been able to guide the Aether Strike itself, but when faced with the inability to exert such skilled control, she'd turned to brute force. And if it got the job done, that was good enough.

"Ah, that's what Ross couldn't beat, even wielding me. Our regular practice has given me an idea of Inglis's strength, but it's really amazing to watch from the sidelines," Arles remarked.

"You don't need to praise her like that, Miss Arles," Rafinha said. "It'll just make her cocky."

Arles chuckled in amusement. "It's okay, Rafinha. As long as you're here, at least..." She, too, jumped from the *Star Princess*. "Now, this should..."

As Arles, who had landed beside Inglis, spoke, the ground itself shook to interrupt her. "Ah! Something's happening." She wondered if this was what Inglis had planned. It would certainly be convenient if the dragon came to them. "There's something under us!" Her expression became tense.

"Chris! Miss Arles!"

"Rani! Handle the *Star Princess*!" Inglis said.

"We'll be in trouble without a vehicle!" Arles agreed.

Just then, something leaped up out of the ground.

Booom!

The earth beneath their feet cracked, sending up clumps of dirt and clouds of dust, and the tip of a jaw lined with exceedingly sharp bladelike fangs emerged.

Arles gasped. "A gigantic mouth right under us?!"

Upper and lower jaws emerged from below on either side of them, then began to swing shut, threatening to consume both them and the ground they stood on.

Inglis chuckled. "Looks like it's trying to swallow us whole!"

"We need to get out of here!"

“No, Miss Arles. I’ll take this one head-on!” Inglis wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to experience the jaw strength that crushed an ancient dragon’s prey. “Haaah!”

Planting her feet firmly, she activated Aether Shell, grabbed an approaching fang, and tried to hold it back.

“Then I’ll help too!” Arles stood back-to-back with Inglis, facing the jaw approaching from the left. A large golden shield, big enough to cover her completely, appeared in her hands. Inglis had seen this shield before when Arles had transformed; now the hial menace was calling it forth for herself to wield.

Inglis blocked the fangs coming from the right, and Arles those from the left.

“I see...! This one’s every bit as powerful as Fufailbane! It’s incredible!” Inglis felt a comforting weight press against her hand. A real fight was truly better than any training. She would have loved to continue enjoying it for a while, but her top priority was to get some of the ancient dragon’s meat. First negotiations, then combat.

“I-It really is incredibly strong!” Arles said.

Her shield was holding back the dragon’s fangs, but her back leg was forced almost to a kneel. Even a hial menace was having a hard time in the brute force department.



“Miss Arles, just step back! I’ll get that side too!”

“A-Are you sure you’ll be okay?!”

“Yeah, leave it to me! I’ll pull it right out of the ground. Now! Hurry!”

Carefully, Arles stepped back little by little.

The fangs closed in around Inglis, and as they did, she reached out her other hand to hold both sides back alone. “Keep going. The dragon’s coming out!”

“Of course!” Following Inglis’s instructions, Arles jumped back from between the jaws of the dragon. “But how will you...?!”

“Like this!” Inglis pulled with all her might! “Haaaah!” Still grasping a fang on either side, Inglis squarely planted her feet as if she were about to jump high. She could tell she was pulling something huge out of the ground, yet somehow it felt lighter than she’d expected.

Arles gasped. “Y-You’re pulling it out by force?!”

“Something’s coming!” Rafinha said, as she and her teacher squinted to keep the scattering debris and dust from their eyes.

Inglis turned to get a good look at the dragon that had appeared—and finally she understood why it had felt so light. “There’s no flesh! Just moving bones!”

This wasn’t a dragon; it was a dragon’s skeleton. Yet it was moving and trying to clamp its jaw down on Inglis. The dragon skeleton twisted away from Inglis, then fell low to the ground and raised its head like a snake ready to strike.

“Oooooooooo!”

Although it was unclear where it was coming from, a terrifying moan reverberated.

“Wh-What?! Dragons can keep moving even when they’re just bones?!” Rafinha gasped.

“Or maybe it was always like this?!” Arles pondered.

“No, the dragon that’s supposed to be here is Aulglora. It was known as the

gold dragon, and it's supposed to have golden scales," Inglis explained.

But what had emerged from the ground was nothing but bones. Where had Aulglora gone? A dragon only of bones like this one wouldn't yield any meat to begin with. Inglis didn't know what had happened, but if this was truly Aulglora, it was an alarming situation.

"Who are you?! Are you the ancient dragon Aulglora?!" she asked.

"Indeed... I...am...the ancient dra...dra-dragonnnn..." The reply was choppy and unsteady, but a reply all the same.

Arles drew in a sharp breath. "I heard a voice—it must be the ancient dragon!" Arles, who was also wearing a priestess's outfit, could hear it as well.

"So they really can keep moving even as just bones..." Rafinha said.

"No, it's not like that, Rani. Even dragons can't survive like this. I think Aulglora died and was turned into an undying."

Along with the ancient dragon's powerful dragon lore, Inglis also sensed the presence of an undying. The corpse of an ancient dragon, turned into an undying—"corpse dragon" sounded like an appropriate name for it.

"An undying... Yes, Inglis, I can sense it too!" Arles agreed. So she could also sense the undying. Inglis remembered that Eris, another hial menace, had also been able to sense them when a group of undying had attacked Leone's home in Ahlemin.

"Aulglora, what happened to you? Why are you in such a state?" Inglis asked.

"Oaaghhhh! Unforgivable! Unforgiiiiivable!" Aulglora's maw snapped toward Inglis, accompanied by a terrible roar.

"Haaah!" Wrapping herself in Aether Shell, Inglis directly took the attack. Her foe may have been lighter than she expected, but it was still incredibly powerful. All else aside, she wanted Aulglora to be her respected opponent, but that was not possible right now.

"Please, calm yourself, Aulglora! You're not my enemy! I don't want to kill you!" she yelled while holding Aulglora back.

"Oaaghhhh! Gaaaaaaaah!" Aulglora seemed to be in an extremely agitated

state, unable to speak clearly.

Inglis wondered whether it was feasible to wait for it to calm down. She called out to Rafinha and Arles, “I’ll keep it under control. It seems pretty worked up!”

The two nodded and got in position to observe the situation.

“Undying are the things that attacked us at Leone’s house, right?” Rafinha asked. “Liselotte said they attacked her too!”

“Yeah. Those are undying,” Inglis replied.

“And the giant that destroyed Illuminas was an undying made from mana extract, wasn’t it...”

“I think so. General Maxwell used an Artifact that does that kind of thing.”

“So maybe the skeletal dragon is also his fault!”

“Not necessarily, but we should probably save thinking about that for later.”

Had this happened naturally, with the sealed-away dragon’s life fading away but its hatred and resentment only becoming stronger, or had some powerful magic turned the dragon’s corpse into an undying, causing it to go out of control and forcing it to be sealed away? Or was Rafinha right, and this was the work of Maxwell? Considering the undying attacks that Leone and Liselotte had experienced, it certainly wasn’t impossible that Maxwell, with his ambitions of invading Karelia, was behind this as well.

But in any case, they had a more immediate problem here.

“By the way, Chris, what do we do?! This dragon doesn’t have any meat!”

“Hmm. What *do* we do?”

“So it’s useless... We can’t help Ross...” Arles’s heart dropped.

“B-But, even if there’s no meat, maybe we can take the bones back and make a broth! That might help a little! Right, Chris?” Rafinha asked.

“Maybe!” Inglis replied. “But there’s something else I’d like to try first!”

“*Goahhhhh! Unforgivable! Unforgivable, unforgiiiiivable!*” Aulglora didn’t seem to have calmed down at all.

“Something to try? The dragon doesn’t seem like it’s any calmer, but...”

“Yeah. It’ll work even like this, so I’ll give it a shot!” Inglis was waiting for Aulglora to calm down, but that wasn’t all. As she touched it up close, she was searching for its dragon lore. Coming in contact with its wavelength and qualities, she had come up with a rough idea of what it was like. Aether was extremely hard to control, but dragon lore was softer, more flexible, more responsive. It might even be easier to control than mana. Even the dragon lore bestowed upon Inglis by Fufailbane could be manipulated to match that of Aulglora.

And now, she poured that into Aulglora.

“O Aulglora, receive this offering! Dragon Lore!”

“Oaaghhhh?!” The dragon’s bones received Inglis’s dragon lore and began to shine.

“It’s glowing?!” Rafinha gasped.

“What’s going on?!” Arles asked.

“I offered it some of my dragon lore!” Inglis replied. This was an attempt to stimulate Aulglora’s power as a dragon. Her dragon lore traced the form of a dragon’s body as it manifested in order to interact with the material world. By pouring it into Aulglora, she hoped it would prompt the dragon toward some sort of image of its lost flesh.

“The light’s forming into the shape of a dragon!”

It was as Rafinha observed. The shine surrounding Aulglora’s bones spread and took on a golden color as it formed into the shape of a large dragon. It probably formed the rough contours of Aulglora’s original form.

“So you’re trying to get it to regain its original form?!” Arles asked.

“Yes, Miss Arles. I hope it goes smoothly, but...”

Dragon lore had provided an image of what Aulglora had once been. If Inglis could give that image substance, the ancient dragon would be reincarnated.

“Rwooooooogh!”

But the pressure from Aulglora's jaws only increased, trying to stop her. Her stance remained steady, but the ground itself gave way as she was forced back. "Ooh! Well, that definitely perked it up!" she happily announced.

"Chris!"

"Inglis!"

"It's fine. I think I can— Ah?!" Inglis gasped as the golden dragon lore surrounding Aulglora's bones dissipated. The force pushing her down felt lighter, like it had before. "So my dragon lore dissipated... The power couldn't take root because it lacked the physical body needed to anchor itself..."

So maybe it was time to just move on. As Rafinha had said, at the very least they could return with the bones, prepare them so they could be consumed in some fashion, and see what it did for Rochefort. But just as Inglis was about to give up, voices rang out from above.

"Everyone! Are you okay?!" Myce shouted.

Leone couldn't believe her eyes. "It's just...bones?! The ancient dragon is a skeleton?!"

"Leone!" Inglis replied.

"Myce!" Rafinha called out.

Leone and Myce had caught up with them. Their Flygear Port had come into sight—along with the mechanical dragon following behind.

"It's an undying, Myce!" Rafinha warned. "Like the thing which destroyed Illuminas!"

"What's going on?! Was it always like this, or...?!" Myce frowned in concentration. Perhaps he, like Rafinha, suspected it was the work of Maxwell.

"But we can't get any dragon meat from that. What do we do?!" Leone asked.

"That's right. I'm about out of... Hmm?!" Inglis noticed something strange as she spoke. Something about the mechanical dragon behind the Flygear Port. Its body had begun to glow the same golden color as Aulglora just had. "The mechanical dragon's glowing?! What's going on, Myce?"

“I-I don’t know! I have no idea!”

Groooooohhhnnnn!

The mechanical dragon roared as its body twisted. Now that Inglis thought of it, she didn’t think she’d ever heard them speak before. As it roared, covered in a golden light, the mechanical dragon overtook the Flygear Port and tried to approach Aulglora’s bones.

“I-I can’t control it!” Myce, panicked, gestured as if trying to inscribe something with his hands.

The mechanical dragon clung to the corpse dragon as if trying to overlap it from above, but its body was a mere fraction of the size of Aulglora’s skeleton. It was almost like a child climbing onto an adult’s back.

“W-We’re getting out of here! We don’t want to get in your way!” Myce continued to hurriedly give orders to the mechanical dragon, but it didn’t seem to want to follow them. Instead, it turned its gaze toward Inglis, as if it wanted to say something.

“No, Myce, let it be!” Inglis stopped Myce.

“Huh? But—”

“I think it’s trying to merge with Aulglora and help regenerate its body! That dragon must have once been one of Aulglora’s guardians!”

Mechanical dragons were weapons which incorporated Highlander engineering, just like Flygears and Flygear Ports, but they were built upon living dragons. This behavior appeared to be the will of the dragon taking over. The dragon was trying to save Aulglora, who had given it life. This must have been a result of some strong stimulus it had felt when it approached Aulglora. The mechanical dragon, too, was emitting powerful dragon lore, which seemed very similar to that from Aulglora itself. The two sources of this energy seemed to resonate and blend together.

“The mechanical dragon’s becoming part of the ancient dragon?!” Myce gasped.

“So it seems. I don’t know if it’ll work, but can we let it try?! I’ll help out too!”

Earlier, Inglis had used her dragon lore to generate the outline of Aulglora’s physical body, but it could not materialize anchored to nothing. However, if there was some kind of substitute, perhaps it would work. And if the new host originated from the same dragon, it would be the perfect substance with which to reincarnate Aulglora.

“O-Okay. You’ve got this, Inglis!” Myce’s hands stopped moving, and he released his magical control over the mechanical dragon.

Inglis looked to Leone, standing next to Myce on the Flygear Port’s deck. “Leone! Leone, can you help out too?!”

“Of course! What do you need?!”

“Hmm. Stretch out your sword so that it’s touching me, Aulglora’s skeleton, and the mechanical dragon! That should do it!”

“Got it!” Leone nodded, and pointed the tip of her greatsword down toward Inglis, who was still holding Aulglora back. “Extend!”

She lengthened the blade using the power of the Artifact’s Gift. It slid past the arm of Myce’s mechanical dragon and Aulglora’s rib cage, then the top of Inglis’s shoulder, before plunging into the ground, its flat coming to rest atop Inglis’s collarbone. “Like this?!”

“Yeah! Hold it there for a little while, then when I give the signal, fire as many phantasms as you can into Aulglora!”

“Okay, understood!”

Inglis, still holding Aulglora back, closed her eyes for a moment and carefully inspected the flows of dragon lore. She herself, the ancient dragon Aulglora, the mechanical dragon, and Leone’s artifact, and the dragon lore they each possessed, were connected through the blade of the dark greatsword. Dragon lore was a highly flexible power, and as each of these sources blended together, they fused into a greater whole.

“Now! Leone!” Inglis said.

“Okay! Gooooooooo!”

“Me too! Dragon Lore!”

The golden glow again formed into the image of what Aulglora had once been, and began to absorb everything within it, including the phantasms Leone launched and the mechanical dragon which clasped onto the bones. The mechanical dragon in particular could not maintain its form and transformed into a shower of golden sparkles. The light took form, expanding to cover Aulglora’s exposed bones.

“Oh! It’s dazzling!” Inglis heard Leone say. It was certainly bright enough that she couldn’t keep her eyes open. For a moment, Aulglora disappeared from even Inglis’s vision.

Gwoooooooooohnnn!

The dragon’s majestic roar echoed. Inglis could hear the sound of, even feel the rumble of, its heavy stomps. They fell with a weight beyond what the mere bones from before could produce. Meaning...

“It worked...?!”

Inglis opened her eyes and saw a gigantic dragon before her. Not merely bones as before, but a gigantic dragon with golden scales. “Is this the ancient dragon Aulglora?!”

“Inglis, did it work?!“ Leone asked.

“Yeah. I think so. But it’s not quite what I expected!” Her eyes gleamed, and her mouth grinned in delight. *That’s right. It isn’t what I expected. It isn’t just a golden dragon—its body is studded with hard mechanical bits, and its wings are not flesh but steel. Several huge cannons have appeared at its shoulders, arms, and waist.* “It’s not just an ancient dragon! It might even be a mechanical ancient dragon like Fufailbane now!”

The Papal League’s Archlord Evel had created a mechanical ancient dragon by subsuming the consciousness of the ancient dragon Fufailbane. Its power was beyond even that of an ancient dragon—it was the strongest dragon Inglis currently knew of. Fufailbane had mentioned the existence of wyrms, even

more powerful than ancient dragons, but she had never seen one with her own eyes. That mechanical ancient dragon had left before she had the chance to fight it, so this was a perfect opportunity.

“So does this mean that rather than the mechanical dragon offering its body up to the ancient dragon, it absorbed the ancient dragon and gained strength?!” Arles asked, and given the circumstances Inglis thought her theory made sense.

“But it seems like it won’t accept my control!” Myce again gestured as if inscribing something, trying to give orders to the mechanical ancient dragon, but it had no effect.

But on the other hand, it also no longer seemed to be so enraged that it could not be spoken with.

“I-It’s not moving, is it?” Leone pointed out, anxious.

“Yeah, I wonder why... Is it broken?” Rafinha asked.

They both tilted their heads in confusion, unaware of what was about to come next.

Ksshhaahh!

As the dragon roared, a massive foreleg swung down toward Inglis.

“Oooh?!” Inglis laughed as she prepared herself. She wouldn’t attack a foe who had made no hostile moves, but if it was attacking her, that was another story. Naturally, she didn’t try to run away and instead stared the attack down—she really, really wanted to experience the pure, majestic might of a mechanical ancient dragon.

Yet it never struck her. It stopped upraised, hanging in midair.

Inglis, wordless, eyed the dragon. Why had it stopped? Its sharp claws, each the size of a tremendous greatsword, gleamed in the sun. She wanted the dragon to bring its limb smashing down as hard as it could. That was what she was waiting for. But it hung there for a moment, then another, still motionless.

It was as if, while Aulglora wanted to attack her, the mechanical dragon's will was holding it back.

"Do your best! You're almost there!" Inglis called out to the mechanical ancient dragon.

"That's right! The mechanical dragon must be trying to calm the ancient dragon! Please do your best!" Arles called out.

"That's right! Our mechanical dragon is trying hard!" Myce agreed.

"Mr. Mechanical Dragon! Listen to Myce!" Rafinha added.

"Yes! Do your best!" Leone said.

Inglis was quiet. She had hoped the corpse dragon Aulglora, overcome by rage, would attack her. Arles, a far more earnest person, had made quite the opposite wish. Words were intransigent creatures indeed. She of course couldn't reject that at this point; all she could do was wait and see what happened.

But that wouldn't stop Inglis from cheering on its aggression.

Whoom!

The gigantic leg swung down toward her.

"All right!" she shouted.

"All right'?!"

Amid her friends' doubting cries, Inglis blocked the dragon head-on. It had become even more powerful; she'd even describe its force as refreshing. It was the ground under her feet that gave way to that might, and a crater formed around her as she sank.

She laughed again. "I see, so that's a mechanical ancient dragon's power... It's wonderful!" She would be crushed like a bug if she let her guard down—which was perfect.

"Wait, Chris!" Rafinha interjected. "You're having weird thoughts again, aren't

you?!”

“Umm... Now, now—don’t worry about that. Of course, if it attacks me, I’m going to have to defend myself, right?”

“I mean, yes, but...!”

“I understand how the mechanical dragon feels too. I’ll try to hold it back, so you all keep your distance and look for an opening to cut off its tail!”

It was not an ancient dragon but a mechanical one, but its tail was still flesh. Inglis theorized they could still treat Rochefort with it. Grabbing the tail was a vital part of the operation.

“Got it, Inglis!” Leone said. “Let’s go with that plan, Rafinha!”

“Okay, but this conversation isn’t over yet! Don’t get yourself hurt, Chris!” Rafinha said.

Inglis felt glad that, no matter what else her cousin had to say, she was still worried for her. “Yeah, got it, Rani!”

Vrrrrrm...

With a low rumble, the cannons built into the mechanical ancient dragon’s body fixed their sights on Inglis. A glow that had only just become visible was beginning to emerge from their barrels on the dragon’s shoulders, both sides of its torso, and the left foreleg; that made five at once. The right foreleg, which had swatted at her, had no line of fire, but it kept up its immense pressure, keeping her from moving. Even with Aether Shell active, while she hadn’t been crushed, she couldn’t easily push back either; it was a stalemate. The dragon wanted to pin her down and blast her with a barrage. Its attack was merciless; it must have truly wanted her dead.

“That’s great!” Inglis’s eyes gleamed as she smiled. “But I have tricks up my sleeve too!”

Dragon ice armor materialized around Inglis. Both her hands held back the mechanical dragon’s right arm from stomping down on her. Her dragon ice

armor and icebrand, combinations of dragon lore and magic that she now referred to as “dragon magic,” originally required certain motions to manifest. That had been the only way she had been able to control the flow of dragon lore and layer mana over it. But now, with time having passed since she had first invented them and having gotten used to using them in combat, she no longer needed those motions. Her control over dragon lore was improving. It was a subtle difference, but even a subtle difference meant a lot at times like these.

“Haaaah!”

Her augmented strength from the armor let her push the mechanical ancient dragon’s arm back. But at the same moment, a barrage of massive blasts of light had shot forth from its five cannons. Its overwhelming golden glow overtook all else within view, and she gasped.

“Chris?!”

“Inglis!”

She could hear Rafinha and Arles calling to her from behind. Given her position, if she jumped to the side or used divine feat to evade, they would take the brunt of the barrage.

Not like I wanted to dodge anyway!

“Okay, then!” She leaned back, whipped her arms behind her, and did a series of cartwheels backward to gain a little bit of distance. But the initial gap had not been much at all compared to the speed of the blast of light bearing down on her, so even a little bit was enough. After a few rotations, she landed and plunged both palms forward.

Aether Strike!

Blammmmm!

The mechanical ancient dragon’s cannonade and the Aether Strike collided, pressing against each other. They stayed locked in place momentarily before the Aether Strike steadily fell back little by little.

“So this is what it’s like when an ancient dragon’s breath is mechanically enhanced... It’s got such a wonderful potency to it!”

She could sense that the already-powerful dragon lore, within the barrage of golden light, was being compressed to an absurd degree. Its density must’ve been the result of augmentation from the mechanical parts. Inglis had been training peacefully at the knights’ academy recently, so it was the first time in a long time she’d felt anything like this. She couldn’t help but smile, even though it threatened to push her back more and more.

Just then, the sixth cannon, on the dragon’s right foreleg, lit up and added to the pressure. Just holding back the barrage for a moment, to allow Rafinha and Arles to retreat, was enough. Inglis could now turn her attention to evasion.

As if she’d do such a thing.

“I’m not done yet!”

I want to smash straight into this! She charged straight forward to where the forces collided. As she did, she changed the wavelength of her aether so that it would repel her previous Aether Strike, then punched it as hard as she could from behind. This was another application of Aether Reflector: not to control the trajectory of the blast, but to add momentum from behind and push it forward.

With that added power, the Aether Strike began to push into the barrage as if to split it. Inglis drew closer and closer to the mechanical ancient dragon. She was fine with continuing on with the Aether Strike until it landed, or—if it looked like it would be blocked—she could change the wavelength of her aether and detonate it with a punch with Aether Breaker.

“So, what’s your move?!”

Inglis couldn’t tell if the dragon had heard her, but it definitely had something to say too.

“Ksshhaahh!”

As its maw opened to roar, yet another cannon was revealed in its depths.

“Ooh...!”

There was yet another hidden cannon. Its addition would make things even more intense. Inglis prepared in gleeful anticipation, but the dragon never followed through. Instead, it ceased fire and soared high into the sky.

“Grrr...”

Even if the dragon didn’t have any duty to stay there testing its strength against hers, it still irritated her to be baited in and then blown off. She wanted to have some fun, and it’s not like the mechanical ancient dragon was being pressed yet either. As if reflecting her emotions, the Aether Strike, its target lost, gouged a furrow in the ground as it blasted into the distance.

“If that’s how you want it!” *Then I’ll do what I have to do without wasting my energy!* She leaped forward as hard as she could, chasing the Aether Strike. In an instant, she caught up to it and again adjusted the wavelength of her aether as she punched at it. “Haaaah!”

Blammmmm!

The Aether Strike roared as it changed trajectory, but its new target wasn’t the flying mechanical ancient dragon. It was the road leading to Venefic, a narrow defile between two mountain passes. Her battle with the ancient dragon had collapsed it, preventing military use for a long time and thus making an invasion impossible—but not yet enough for that long time to be months or years.

Arles gasped as she watched the battle. “The light’s going toward the path to Venefic?!”

The next moment, Inglis was there behind her. She had used divine feat to cover the distance—a short one, but speed was of the essence. “Miss Arles.”

“Eek! I-Inglis?!” Arles was shocked by the sudden whisper in her ear.

“I’m sorry, but I’m in a hurry! Could you transform, please?”

“Y-Yes, of course!”

As their hands met, light exploded around them and a high-pitched noise sounded. Within, Arles transformed into a large, beautiful golden shield.

“Excellent!” Hiera’s menaces really were great. Inglis could clearly feel her aether being amplified and returned to her. With a nod, she immediately disappeared again. And then...

Wham!

A blow echoed in all directions as one of the mountains that had sealed Aulglora went flying into the sky, blown away as if chasing after the dragon.

“Huh?! Wh-What’s going on?!” Myce asked.

Rafinha gasped. “Chris?!”

“She’s gone?!” Leone exclaimed.

Everyone had looked to the source of the noise, but Inglis had already disappeared. All that remained was the stump of a peak, its top missing, and rings of light which spread like ripples on water.

Wham! Wham!

Two more blows echoed out. The peaks were blown away, and while Inglis was gone, ripples of light remained. Inglis’s divine feat was a movement technique that instantly rewrote her position in the world. In terms of speed, it was faster than sound. If you turned your eyes to follow the noise, you would see nothing.

Slam!

With one final thunderous crescendo, Rafinha and the others were able to see Inglis just after she had smashed the peak away with Arles’s golden shield.

They could see her because she had finished. The four peaks she had struck

with the shield flew, overtaking the Aether Strike Inglis had changed the direction of. They stacked up like a gigantic stone wall on the road to Venefic. Stacked a little *too* neatly, perhaps; they seemed quite man-made. And there were gaps between them large enough for people to pass through.

And that was where the Aether Strike came in.

Rrrrrumble!

The sound of the peaks crumbling to rubble echoed far and wide. The trail of destruction appeared not unnatural, and the finely crushed rock fragments sealed the gaps through which people could fit. The road had been completely destroyed by some tremendous force, and made impassable.

“Ah, it looks like because the ancient dragon went on a rampage, the road to Venefic got blocked. What a terrible accident.” Inglis sighed theatrically.

“Ha ha ha... Y-Yeah, what a pity,” Rafinha agreed.

“Y-Yeah, you can’t do much about an accident. Mm-hmm...an accident,” Leone said.

“I guess you could say Inglis was just caught up in it, right?” Myce asked.

The three laughed wryly.

“And, now that that’s done with...” Inglis turned her eyes to the mechanical ancient dragon in the sky. While she was blocking the road, it hadn’t done anything in particular. But that had only taken her a moment, so perhaps it just hadn’t had a chance yet. “Now, let’s continue!” As she called out to the dragon, she loosened her grip on the shield that was Arles.



“Thank you, Miss Arles. I’ll handle the—”

Arles’s voice echoing in her head interrupted her train of thought. *“No! Let me keep on protecting you! I understand that you want to fight alone, but as a teacher I want to protect my students!”*

“Miss Arles...”

“And besides, I think wielding me as you fight will be good training. Someday, we’re going to be fighting something even stronger!” Arles spoke as if she had an idea of what that thing might be.

Inglis, on the other hand, did not, but if it did exist, she couldn’t wait to see it. “In that case, I’d love your help!” She tightened her grip on the golden shield as she watched the mechanical ancient dragon closely.

It returned her gaze as it landed unhurriedly in front of her. Although it had slipped away from their previous head-on clash, it seemed like it might be up for round two.

“We can pick back up from anywhere.”

In response, the mechanical ancient dragon opened its maw wide, showing the cannon within. This was the attack it hadn’t performed before.

“Ooh, I’d love to see that! Thank you!” But Inglis’s joy was fleeting. The mechanical ancient dragon cranked its head around and faced its own tail, then opened fire.

“Wh—?!”

“It attacked itself?!” Even Arles’s voice in Inglis’s head sounded astonished.

A dazzling flash of light shot forth, and then its severed tail rolled along the ground. It was a completely self-inflicted injury.

“Take that. I believe it’s what you need.” The tranquil, soft voice came from the mechanical ancient dragon.

“Wh—?! Human speech?!” These were not the words of dragons, intermediated through dragon lore. They were perfectly formed human words.

“Because I was among humans, and because human hands kept me alive—”

“You learned human speech,” Inglis assumed. “Then you are not Aulglora, but the mechanical dragon from Illuminas?”

“I thank you... Because you suppressed my mother’s strength, my will is sufficient to control this body.”

“Your mother?”

“I am a guardian, birthed forth from Aulglora...”

“I see... So when we were just fighting, Aulglora’s will came forth strongly...”

Its energetic wielding of its might must have exhausted it, allowing the mechanical dragon’s will to triumph over the ancient dragon’s. Thinking back, Inglis realized the change had come when it broke off its attack with its mouth cannon and took to the skies to avoid a raw test of power, when it had avoided fighting altogether.

“That is correct. I have no intention of harming you.”

That was a bit of a problem for Inglis. “I see. But if you don’t mind, could I possibly ask you to change back into Aulglora again?” she asked politely. Arles was already transformed into a weapon; it would be a waste not to spar with the mechanical ancient dragon just a little bit more.

“Hold it right there! What are you talking about, Chris?! Haven’t you fought enough?! Stop causing trouble!” Rafinha’s familiar scolding came from above.

“C’mon, I haven’t had my fill yet, and it was *just* getting to the good part, and I never get to fight alongside Miss Arles, and—”

“I am sorry, but neither I nor mother have time left...” Even as the dragon spoke calmly, smoke billowed from its body.

“Ah! That’s—?!” It wasn’t normal smoke; it contained an extremely high concentration of dragon lore. This didn’t seem like a simple malfunction of the mechanical parts. It was as if the mechanical ancient dragon’s existence itself was dissipating into mist.

As if to provide proof for this, the dragon’s body itself began to wither away and collapse.

“Wh-What’s going on?!” Arles asked.

“I-It’s collapsing!” Leone said.

“Mr. Dragon?! A-Are you okay?! C-C’mon, Chris! Tell me it’s okay!”

“I... I can’t. Its dragon lore is fading away...”

“Is... Is that what our mechanical dragon wanted...?” Myce asked.

The mechanical ancient dragon slowly nodded. “My life shall calm my mother’s death. Use my tail as you see fit...”

As it trailed off serenely, its body began to collapse. Turned into an undying, Aulglora had combined with the living mechanical dragon, and these two entities had canceled each other out, ultimately disappearing together. That must have been what it had meant by “calming her death.”

“How moving,” Inglis murmured, her heart stirring. It was a pity she couldn’t fight it anymore, but this was the act of a child driven by its feelings for its mother. That feeling transcended humanity or dragonkind. All she could do was solemnly bear witness.

As she did, she thought of her relationship with Rafinha. In Inglis’s mind, they were grandparent and granddaughter rather than the mother and child relationship these dragons shared, but she hoped fervently that her beloved granddaughter would never have to do anything like this for her.

“I thank you. If there is anything else I can leave you, take it freely.” With those as its final words, the mechanical ancient dragon finished its collapse and withered away into a dry fossil. Its sliced-off tail, and only its tail, retained its form.

“The mechanical dragon used its life to free Aulglora from undeath.”

“Couldn’t there have been another way?” Rafinha stepped down from the *Star Princess* and stood in front of its weathered remains. Her glum expression sent pangs through Inglis’s heart.

“I... I don’t think so. Now, since it did leave that tail behind, let’s hurry up and bring it back to Rochefort, okay?” Inglis held Rafinha’s hand tightly and gave her a way forward.

“Yeah... Let’s.” The way Rafinha held her hand back even tighter made Inglis

very happy.

Chapter V: Inglis, Age 16—The Bichromatic Dragon

Whirrr... Whirrr...

Meltina awoke in the middle of the night to a strange rumbling noise. The ceaseless whine of the flying battleship's engines as it soared through the sky blended with a gurgling—the sound of her own stomach.

"Well, that's not good." Meltina sighed and rubbed her belly as she sat up in bed. It was nowhere near mealtime yet, but she was quite hungry.

She was no longer an imperial princess of Venefic, just a student at Karelia's knights' academy accompanying the investigation of an ancient dragon. Her life at her villa had lacked in freedom and camaraderie; she far preferred her current school life, surrounded by Inglis, Rafinha, Leone, Liselotte, and—really—everyone around. She had learned a lot about what a fortunate, precious thing it was to be accepted as a friend. However, it was a bit inconvenient to not be able to eat whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted.

"Hmm..."

She got up from her bed and stretched to loosen up. Her bed was a simple bunk, fixed to the wall. It was hard enough to leave her stiff in the morning. There were other similarly furnished bunks in the cabin—a total of four. The cabin was so small that it seemed packed full with the beds alone. It was a bleak environment, apparently dedicated solely to the mechanical task of sleeping. Then again, this was, in the end, a warship, and one with a large crew. Even having a room in which to sleep was fortunate. Liselotte sometimes slept in this cabin as well, but now Meltina was alone. The two of them took turns looking after Rochefort, who was in the next cabin.

After finishing her stretch, Meltina headed for the door, thinking that she might head to the canteen and see what she could find. She walked down a passageway lined with similar doors, headed astern. These cabins were along the starboard side of the bow, while the canteen was all the way in the back.

She passed by a number of crew before a voice called out to her.

“Lady Meltina, what seems to be the problem?”

“Ah, Sir Rafael.”

“What has you up at this hour?”

“Oh, nothing in particular...”

Seeing Meltina’s hand on her stomach, Rafael knew what was up. “Ah, I believe I can help. Follow me.” Rafael grinned as he led her off.

“Um, I couldn’t possibly take up your time when you’re already so busy...”

If she was acting formally as a princess, that would be one thing, but she was a normal student here. Rafael, the commander of the Paladins and Karelia’s greatest knight, leading her to a midnight snack was absurd.

“No, it’s fine.”

Grrrgl!

This time, the sound didn’t come from Meltina. “Looks like I’m in need of refreshments too, ha ha ha.” Rafael smiled and scratched the back of his head sheepishly.

Meltina chuckled. “Then I welcome your company.”

They walked side by side to the stern of the ship.

“How’s Sir Rochefort doing?” Rafael asked.

“Well, no real changes, but with how he’s been, I can’t say he’s doing well.”

“I see. Well, Rani, Chris, and Lady Arles are doing their best to save him. Try to keep his spirits up so that he can hang in there until they make it back.”

“Yes, of course! I hear the two of you met on the battlefield... Thank you for showing such consideration for a foe.”

“I don’t hold any grudge against him, and I don’t think he holds any against me. Plus, he’s an instructor at the knights’ academy now, and I’ve heard that

Rani and Chris are his students. It sounds like he's been good to them. They're important to me, so it's only natural that I'd like their teacher to be well."

Meltina laughed. "Yes, I think he's a very good teacher. It's hard to believe a former general took to it so well—he even supervises our independent training after lessons."

"I've heard Chris has been sparring with him a lot."

"Yes, that's right. I've been doing my basic training near their practices, and he complains, but he puts up with it." Meltina chuckled, thinking of her new daily routine. It was physically hard work that left her muscles aching every day, but mentally it was peaceful and happy.

"To the extent possible, I think us knights who've been granted Runes shouldn't use them to fight against other people, but to protect them from both the Prism Flow and magicite beasts. Otherwise, we end up having to fight people who aren't fundamentally bad."

"Yes, I agree... I don't want us to fight."

When Meltina talked to Rafael, everything he said seemed to make perfect sense. Talking to Rafinha gave her a similar impression; they really were brother and sister. Rafinha was more enthusiastic, energetic, and lively, while Rafael was calm, refined, and quietly confident, but they truly were both wonderful—especially Rafael. Talking to him made her heart flutter. She didn't recall feeling this way about someone before. She couldn't help but keep staring at his face.

After continuing down the hallway for a while, Meltina and Rafael arrived at the ship's canteen at the stern.

"Sorry to bother you. Have anything we can eat?" Rafael asked a man in a white chef's outfit.

"*Again*, Sir Rafael?" The young but stout man sighed.

"I'm sorry. I can't focus when I get hungry, and I've got all sorts of paperwork to get through."

"Couldn't you just ask Lady Ripple to help you? If you went to sleep earlier instead of snacking, we wouldn't be pressed so hard to make ends meet with

food.”

“Well, that kind of thing isn’t really her forte. Lady Eris could help... But until she gets back...”

“I see, that makes sense. Well, if you’re looking for volume rather than flavor, how about the usual?” The man took out a loaf of bread about the size of someone’s head. It was a hard bread, with a thick crust, but it was sprinkled with sugar before baking, giving it a deliciously toasted look.

“Of course. I love those.”

“Well, that’s good to hear! It’s nothing special, just something I made to have on hand, but it still is *my* cooking.”

“Actually, I’m sorry, but could I get a second one?” Rafael asked, motioning with his eyes toward Meltina.

“Hmm? Oh, for her. Sure, got it.” Seeing Meltina’s face, the man understood what was needed and produced another loaf of bread just as big.

“Thank you.” Meltina bowed politely as she took the bread.

“Never thought I’d see a girl with an appetite that stands up to Sir Rafael’s. And then there’s those other two... I think we’re gonna go through all the provisions we managed to pack aboard. Next time, give me a little bit of warning before we take kids like that on.”

Rafael laughed. “Sorry about that. Anyway, thanks.”

The ship’s canteen had several chairs which could be folded down from the walls, so there they sat. Each took a bite of their bread.

“Oh my. The crust is firm, but the inside is soft and fluffy. And the toasted sugar is so aromatic...” Meltina began.

“Isn’t it? I know he said he was going for volume more than flavor, but it’s delicious.”

“It really is! It’s baked so perfectly.”

As they enjoyed their delicious midnight snack of bread, though, a knight spotted Rafael and rushed over. “Sir Rafael! There you are. Sorry to interrupt

you during your meal.”

Seeing how he was comported, Rafael’s expression sharpened. “No need for apologies. Did something happen?”

“Several knights on the night watch have gone missing.”

“What?! Is someone attacking us?!”

“I don’t know. I and a few others have searched, but we haven’t found any signs of a struggle or bodies.”

“So we aren’t under attack? But there are people missing?”

“Correct, sir.”

“That’s worrisome. Let’s be cautious, then. Gather more people and search the ship. Even if something is going on, we’re in the sky—there’s nowhere for an adversary to escape to. I’ll come along. Lead me to the scene.”

“Yes, sir. It’s this way.”

“Meltina, you take care as well. Rendezvous with Liselotte, and keep an eye on your surroundings. Take care of Sir Rochefort, as well.”

“Yes, understood.”

Rafael hurriedly stuffed bread into his mouth as he left with the knight who had issued the report.

Meltina had wanted to talk to him a bit longer, but she certainly couldn’t object given the circumstances. She quickly finished what was left of her own bread and peeked back into the ship’s canteen to thank the man who had baked it.

“Er, excuse me!”

No answer. The only sound to break the silence was the far-off noise of the flying battleship’s engines.

“Huh? Where’d he go?”

She hadn’t seen him leave out the front of the canteen. Was there another passageway? She didn’t know, and she didn’t see him, so she didn’t expect an answer to come.

“Thank you. It was delicious!” she called.

With a polite curtsy, she headed back down the shipboard passageways toward the starboard bow. She went to check the room where Rochefort was recuperating, since it was so close to her own. Liselotte was likely watching over him now. Meltina decided to join them, as Rafael had advised.

“Muster! First, second, third squads to the hangar!”

“Intruder alert! Beginning a sweep of the entire ship!”

As the chaos erupting across the ship washed over her, Meltina opened the door to Rochefort’s cabin. “Liselotte, how is Mr. Rochefort—”

Whoooooosh!

Instead of a reply from Liselotte, who she expected to be there, all she heard was a roaring wind. The hull had been blown out, and outside air was rushing in. The force of the wind took her off her feet, and she stumbled to her knees.

“Wh-What’s going on?! L-Liselotte! Mr. Rochefort!”

She called their names, but they were nowhere to be found. Perhaps they had been in the room when it had been blown out.

“What happened here?!” Meltina approached the hole in the hull to look outside, but the wind was so strong that she was afraid she would follow downward. Just to be on the safe side, she drew her aqua-colored whip-sword Artifact and wrapped it around the doorknob as well as her hand. She used it as a lifeline to lean out the hole in search of the duo.

“Liselotte! Mr. Rochefort! If you can hear me, respond!” But nothing reached her ears except the howling of the wind.

Attracted by the noise, several of the knights aboard rushed over to Meltina.

“What happened?!”

“Did someone attack?! You there, what’s going on?!”

“I don’t know! I came to check on them, and I found the cabin gone!” Meltina

said.

“So there *is* an infiltrator?!”

“If we don’t do something about that hole, the whole ship might fall to pieces!”

“All right, patch this space up!” The knights rushed to make emergency repairs to the hull.

“Be careful! If you need it, use this whip as a lifeline. You should be fine if you hold on to the parts without blades!” Meltina said.

“Roger that!”

“Will do!”

As the knights entered the room, another appeared behind them. The new arrival was not wearing the uniform of the Paladins, who reported to Rafael. Instead, she was a knight with red hair—one of Chancellor Riegliv’s two bodyguards.

“Lady Echidna?! What’s wrong?”

“We’ll handle things here. You should go back to guarding Chancellor Riegliv. We don’t know what might happen!”

“Understood!”

The lady knight, Echidna, rested her hand on the hilt of the sword at her waist as she gave them all a nod. In the next instant, she unsheathed the blade with blinding speed. The slash as it left its scabbard cut through the doorknob where Meltina had secured her whip-sword.

Meltina stumbled, her balance lost. “Ah?!”

“What?! Lady Echidna?!”

“What are you doing?!”

As the knights gasped in surprise, Meltina went flying out the hole.
“Eeeeeek!”

She found herself thrown into the sky, falling helplessly. Humans were not meant to fly, and she couldn’t help the wave of instinctive fear that struck her.

If I just resign myself to my fate here, I'll never change from who I was. I'll always be the powerless person living locked away in a villa who let herself helplessly be sold to Highland.

Meltina refused to live that life again. She was different now; she would fight back with whatever she had. She had to.

“But...! Not yet...!” She stretched out her whip-sword as long as she could, aiming it at the flying battleship as it pulled away. Somehow she managed to hook the final link around the vessel’s armor. “I did it! Wait—aaah!”

Unfortunately, it hadn’t planted itself securely enough to hold her, and it quickly came loose.

She’d tried her best, but now she was out of options. She closed her eyes and tensed up.

But a moment later, she felt as if she were floating, surrounded by warmth.

“Meltina! Are you all right?!”

“Ah! Liselotte! Thank you! Yes, how about you?”

It was Liselotte, flying with the pale wings of her Artifact’s Gift and cradling Rochefort—and now Meltina. With Liselotte’s right hand dedicated to holding her Artifact, things were quite cramped.

“I am fine. And as you can see, Mr. Rochefort is safe as well!”

“Hey, Princess. Glad you’re okay.” Rochefort was conscious, though his face was pale and lifeless.

“Anyway, let’s head back! We mustn’t be left too far behind, or we’ll never catch up!” Liselotte put all her strength into her wings and headed for the flying battleship at full speed.

“What on earth happened?” Meltina asked her.

“I’m not quite sure...but there may have been an undying made with mana extract! Some kind of liquid dripped down from the ceiling, took human form, and smashed through the hull... Mr. Rochefort ended up getting sucked out!”

“Mana extract?!”

“Yes. It was smaller, but I think it was quite like that...thing...General Maxwell controlled!”

The memories came welling up whether Meltina wanted them to or not. She remembered when a company led by General Maxwell had invaded the villa where she lived. Then, Maxwell had captured the dovish faction, which he claimed “sought to raise the imperial princess as a figurehead in rebellion against the Emperor,” an accusation she knew nothing of.

True, many around her held what might have been described as moderate views. She did, almost unquestioningly, as her tutors had. Not free to leave the villa herself, she had invited scholars and intellectuals from far and wide in the hopes of broadening her knowledge. She believed many of them had been moderates, but not once had she thought of rising in rebellion or seizing the throne. The current emperor was her half brother and much older than her. Even though they shared a father only, she found the idea of fighting her own family unthinkable.

As a result of her being accused of a crime she did not commit, Venefic had rounded up all her familiar faces—the guards, the servants, the tutors, anyone connected to them—and sent them to Illuminas. Only Meltina had escaped, when she happened to encounter Inglis; the rest had, she had heard, dissolved into mana extract. She hated the very idea of that nightmarish substance. She’d never forget the pain of learning what had happened to them.

“Meltina! Meltina! Get a hold of yourself! Your face has gone all pale.”
Liselotte shook Meltina with the arm in which she carried her.

“Ah! Y-Yes, sorry! So, General Maxwell is aboard the ship?!”

“I’m unsure if it’s him, but there could well be a collaborator or a traitor.”

“Ah! Then—”

“Did someone come to mind?”

“Lady Echidna, one of Chancellor Riegliv’s aides, made me fall from the ship! She just might be...”

“I see, so there might be a spy from Venefic among Chancellor Riegliv’s aides.”

“Anyway, we have to save everyone we can! If they’re using mana extract from Illuminas, that means it was made from the people who once served me. The very least I can do is to let them rest in peace!”

“Yes, of course! I’ll get you there as fast as possible!” Liselotte’s wings flapped faster as she trailed the airship. They had almost caught up. But just then, the hull exploded outward from the lowermost area, which housed the hangar for Flygears and Flygear Ports. The wreckage scattered in front of Liselotte’s path.

“When—?!”

“Eeeeeek?!”

Liselotte was shocked but spun to dodge, and Meltina, shrieking, spun her whip-sword Artifact in a wide arc in front of her. Its blades were arranged in a circle, and when they connected, the power of its Gift created a gleaming veil of water. It became a shield to deflect the debris.

“Thank you! You saved us!” Liselotte said.

“I-I just did it without thinking... I’m glad it helped,” Meltina said.

“This is a sign you’ve been training well. You’ve been working hard, that much is obvious.”

“Thank you...!” Up until recently, Meltina had been so unclear on what it took to be a knight that she wasn’t sure whether the word started with a *k* or an *n*, so she was happy to be praised by Liselotte, who was undoubtedly the real thing. It gave her some much-needed confidence.

“We can get in through there!” Liselotte flew through the hole blown in the hull near the hangar. There, a large force of knights was trying to surround a single enemy, a huge round lump that seemed partly liquid. There was no other way to describe it. Additionally, it was completely lacking in surface adornments like a magicite beast’s.

“Wh-What is that thing?!”

“Don’t get too close! It’s already killed more than its share!”

The knights seemed to be blocking the mass’s advance deeper into the hangar.

“It doesn’t matter how—just protect me! It would be a loss for the country if its chancellor fell here! Attack!” There was palpable tension in Chancellor Riegliv’s voice. Next to him was his male bodyguard. It seemed that the Paladins had come to the fore to protect Riegliv, who was cornered in the hangar.

“I knew it, this is—!” Just as Liselotte spoke, the clump began to form itself into the shape of a human, but several times larger. It had no face, bore no expression, and its limbs were short and stocky. “This is the mana-extract giant General Maxwell controlled! It’s smaller than when I saw it in Illuminas, but...!”

“Th-The mana extract... Ahh—” Meltina drew in a breath sharply. If it had been created from the sacrifice of those who had been taken to Illuminas with her, how sad a fate that would be. They had been peaceful, with no ill will toward Karelia. She couldn’t stand this desecration of their lives.

“For now, I’ll help them!” Liselotte put Meltina and Rochefort down safely behind a wall nearby. “Meltina, take care of Mr. Rochefort!” However, as soon as she landed, she wavered on her feet and fell to her knees. “Agh!”

“Liselotte?! Are you okay?”

Blood flowed from her right knee. “It was the debris before. It appears I didn’t avoid it completely.”



“I’m sorry, if I had only done better...”

“Never mind me. Take care of Mr. Rochefort.”

“No, you should stay here! I’ll go!” Meltina couldn’t stand to let Liselotte, who was injured, fight while she stayed safe.

While she tried to hold back Liselotte, the mana-extract giant swung its arm around, trying to attack the Paladins. As elite knights, this was not a particularly threatening attack, but the hangar was packed with a variety of materials, and those went flying. Many of the Paladins ended up tripping over or running into the resulting debris and losing their balance. Toward one of the knights, the giant stretched out its other arm, ready to grab hold.

“Ugh... Dammit!”

“Oh no!”

“We’ve got you!”

“Yessir!”

Other knights unleashed their Artifacts’ Gifts to hold back the giant’s arm, but before their attacks could connect—

“Agh?! Ahhhhhhhh! Gghhh...” The knight who was caught withered away with a sickening crunching of bones and flesh—and disappeared. Their clothes and Artifact were left behind, but they had vanished completely. And the giant seemed to have gotten a bit bigger.

Meltina shuddered. “Ahhh... It captures people, absorbs them, and gets bigger?!” Seeing a person wither away before her was a terrifying sight.

“If you get caught, you’re done for! Spread out!”

“But there’s not enough room!”

“We can’t abandon Chancellor Riegliv!”

“There’s a big hole that’s opened up! Get him out through it, scatter, and open fire!”

“That makes sense! Chancellor! Hurry outside!” one of the Paladins called out, and Chancellor Riegliv’s bodyguard nodded.

“Understood! Your Excellency, we’re taking you out in a Flygear! Wait a moment!” The bodyguard ran toward one of the Flygears in the hangar while the Paladins held back the mana-extract giant.

Meanwhile, another person appeared at the far side of the hangar. Sword in hand, she slipped past the giant and ran in between the Paladins and Chancellor Riegliv.

“Ah, Echidna! You’re back!” Chancellor Riegliv looked relieved.

“Good timing!”

“Take care of the chancellor!”

The knights did not see her as a threat. This was a battle, so her having her sword drawn was only natural. But silently, Echidna ran up to Chancellor Riegliv, and in the same motion pointed the tip of her sword at her master.

“What?! What are you doing, Echidna?! Eeeek!” Chancellor Riegliv screamed and tried to duck down, but his portly figure made it quite impossible to dodge.

However, the sword did not run him through. Instead, a narrow, aqua-colored whip of light entangled it, stopping its momentum.

“No... You can’t do such a thing!”

It was Meltina’s Artifact. While no one else had suspected the lady knight, Meltina knew better. Already on guard, she had managed to be one step ahead.

“Oooh! Well done, my dear! Thank you!” Chancellor Riegliv escaped, worming along the ground toward Meltina. While she found it rude to think so, she did feel a bit of revulsion as he clung to her ankles.

“Good job, Meltina!” Liselotte called out. “Now stay right there!”

“O-Okay!”

Liselotte tried to press on with her hurt leg, but before she could, Meltina was already pulled to the ground and dragged with an incredible force.

“Eeek?! Sh-She’s so strong!”

It was hard to believe Echidna was human. A few aimless swipes with her blade entangled with Meltina’s whip-sword, and Meltina was sent flying into

the air. Somehow, with every ounce of effort, she managed to keep her grip on the hilt.

“Meltina!”

“Bwuhhh?!” Chancellor Riegliv, who had been clinging to Meltina, lost his grip on Meltina’s ankles, and he was swung away—unfortunately, not even toward a wall, but toward the hole Meltina had entered through. Perhaps that was Echidna’s intent.

“Ah?! Chancellor Riegliv?!”

“Ugh! I’ll get him!” Liselotte reactivated her Gift and caught Chancellor Riegliv as he was about to be thrown out the hole.

That was good, but it left Meltina with a problem. With no one to help her, she was pulled forward and forcefully slammed into the floor in front of Echidna.

“Ah?!” The shock was nearly enough to knock her out.

Echidna’s blade swung free of the whip-sword.

“Run away! Meltina!” Liselotte called out.

Liselotte’s voice made Meltina look up, only to see Echidna’s sword swinging down toward her. She gasped and braced for it.

“Damn you, Echidna!” Before she could cut down Meltina, another blade thrust from behind Echidna, piercing through her and coming out her chest.

It was Chancellor Riegliv’s other bodyguard. He had charged from behind and had run Echidna through. “I won’t allow you to raise your blade against our master!”

“Ahhhhh...” Meltina was saved, but it was a gruesome sight.

But that is the battlefield’s nature, Meltina thought. People try to hurt each other. What a sorry end.

But things were not over yet. Echidna chuckled and grinned as she spun toward the knight behind her. It was quite the eerie sight, given the sword projecting from her chest. There didn’t seem to be much blood flowing from

her wound either.

“Sh-She’s an undying! Be careful!” Liselotte called out.

“Gah! I can’t pull it out!” As Riegliv’s bodyguard tried to pull his sword back for another strike, Echidna’s cut into his gut. “Gwuhh?!” Her sword was covered in blood, and a red pool quickly formed around his feet.

“All right, now to feed you...” Echidna hoisted the knight with her sword, then carelessly flung him away. Her uncanny strength easily sent him flying toward the mana-extract giant. He slammed into the giant, and from there, his fate was the same as the previous knight. A sickening crunch of bones and flesh, then unity with the giant.

“Ga ha ha ha...ha ha ha...” Even sacrificing her supposed comrade, she showed no sentimentality, only a smile. And even her words were unsteady and halting. Liselotte had said she was an undying; had that granted her strength at the cost of her mind?

“Still, this is the first time I’ve seen an undying that can speak even a little! Tell me, to what aim are you here?! It’s Venefic’s General Maxwell that made you like that, isn’t it?!” Liselotte asked.

But Echidna did not answer. In place of a reply, she leaped toward Meltina, who was close to her.

“Ah?!”

Her movement was so swift, her aim so true, that Meltina had no time to react. Meltina braced herself again, but before Echidna reached her, the undying flew away to the side. Someone had rushed in and kicked her in the side of the face with such force that Echidna bounced off the ship’s interior.

“Meltina, Liselotte, are you two okay?!” A pair of fluffy ears and a tail were a welcome sight; Ripple had arrived.

“Lady Ripple! Yes, we’re still okay!”

“Thank you!”

“Great! Sorry I’m late!” Ripple turned to Liselotte and Meltina and smiled, then immediately turned her attention back toward where Echidna had been

thrown.

There, a man in crimson winged armor with a sword in the same crimson faced off against the mana-extract giant. It was Rafael in the Dragon Fang's armor. Nearby, Echidna had collapsed on the ground. She had taken Ripple's kick head-on, and while she immediately sprang back up, her neck was bent at a strange angle. Expressionless, she reached up and twisted her head back into place, to the accompaniment of creaking, cracking bones.

"Ugh...!" Meltina breathed in sharply.

"She must be an undying," Liselotte reaffirmed.

Her head forced back into position, Echidna charged toward Rafael, who was near her.

"Rafael! Behind you!" Ripple's warning and Echidna's slash came at the same time.

"Yes! Ready!" Rafael dodged her blade so smoothly that it seemed like he had eyes in the back of his head. Not only that, but he spun around as if trading places with Echidna, getting behind her and delivering a powerful kick to her back. Sent flying by Ripple and then by Rafael, Echidna crashed into the mana-extract giant, where even she was absorbed into the creature.

Meltina gasped. "Wh-What's going on?!"

"An undying is consuming another undying?!" Liselotte asked.

"I can't tell either. Are they fighting about something? Did she lose control of it?!" Ripple wondered aloud as she ran to join up with Rafael.

As she did, a change took place in the mana-extract giant. In the empty space where it should have had a face, Echidna's features arose, far larger than on her original face. It was entirely out of proportion with the giant's short, stout body, and it exuded an eerie, uncomfortable ominousness to those who saw it.

"No! Th-They've merged into one!" Ripple shouted in surprise.

The face's mouth opened wide, leaning toward Ripple trying to chomp down on her. The short neck stretched out until it almost reached the hial menace.

"Whoa!" Forget the strength of the attack—the visual was enough to frighten

her. Even the previously faceless version would've been preferable. Ripple screamed and leaped away from Echidna's oncoming face. She jumped up and kicked off the face, somersaulting a long distance away. "I don't wanna get eaten by that thing!"

Having missed Ripple, Echidna swung her head around, setting her sights on Rafael. She moved as if crawling across the floor. A tongue flicked from her mouth, and wrapped in it was the sword she had wielded. As it scraped a wide arc on the floor, a wall of wind spun forth and crawled forward. Her sword must have been an Artifact. Even in this form, she could still control Gifts.

"You've been reduced to this! How pitiful—at least I can give you peace!" Rafael made no move to avoid the attack which sped at him. "Hyaaaah!" He swung Dragon Fang down from above into the wall of wind. The power of the blade split it in two.

"Aw yeah! We knew you had it!" the knights cheered.

Rafael wasn't done, though. With Dragon Fang, he'd sent a line of fire through the split wind to run along the ground, scoring a direct hit on Echidna's face, which burst into flames. Before Echidna could extinguish it, Rafael leaped up and propelled himself forward with his armor's wings. In an instant, he had moved into close quarters and drove his blade into the enemy's thick neck. Imbued with the intense heat of a dragon, the blade burned through the mana extract and lopped the giant's head off in a single stroke.

But it would take more than that to stop the mana-extract giant. Its arms and legs reached for Rafael; however, he'd anticipated that.

"Not happening!"

He flew at high speed with his wings, unleashing slashes at the mana-extract giant and carving through it. Crimson flashes of light burst forth, and in the next instant, the arms, legs, and torso of the giant all fell in pieces to the floor.

"A-Amazing! He really is our greatest holy knight," Liselotte murmured in admiration, not even aware she'd said this aloud. Of course, the power of Dragon Fang as an Artifact was a factor, but Rafael's swordsmanship alone was amazing as well. In terms of raw skill, he was even on a level with Inglis, she thought.

Paladins under his leadership cheered. “All right! You did it, Rafael!”

“Ha ha ha ha! No one can stand up to Sir Rafael!”

“We can’t let our guard down yet! Let’s completely burn the fragments until they’re gone! Help me out!” Rafael instructed.

The cut-up pieces of the mana-extract giant had not stopped writhing. Left alone, they would probably revert to their original form.

“Yes, sir!”

But then, immediately above the head of the mana-extract giant, which still bore Echidna’s face, the ceiling collapsed and something massive fell in.

“Ah! Everyone! Get back!” Rafael warned as he pushed knights away.

What came falling from above was a nearly liquid clump. That is, a lump of flesh made from mana extract, the same material as the giant he had just fought. And it was just as big. The second half of the battle had begun.

“Ngh!” The lump fell on Rafael, enveloping him.

“Sir Rafael?!”

“Wh-What the—?!”

“He saved us, but...!”

The knights he had shoved away were safe, but they turned pale at the sight of him being swallowed up.

“Hey! Don’t give up! It’s not over yet!” Ripple called out to the knights as she pointed at the center of the mass of flesh that had swallowed Rafael. Its core glowed a faint red, and something like steam began to rise from it. “Rafael’s burning it out from the inside! He’s still okay! But we need to get him out of there!”

Her gunfire chipped away at the surface of the mana extract.

“Allow me!” Liselotte said.

“M-Me too!” Meltina added.

The two joined in.

“Don’t count us out!”

“We’ll save Sir Rafael!”

“Raaah!”

The Paladin knights joined the all-hands effort to save Rafael, attacking all at once. However, some of the cut-up parts of the mana-extract giant began squirming again. Writhing along the floor, they joined the mass of mana extract enveloping him, becoming one with it.

Ripple gasped. “Is it trying to put itself back together?!”

“It’s getting bigger and bigger!” Liselotte said.

They looked worried, but they were already fighting as hard as they could. They couldn’t stop the pieces from fusing together, and the clump covering Rafael grew larger and thicker. The crimson glow within it grew fainter and fainter.

Liselotte despaired. “L-Lady Ripple! H-How do we deal with this?! If this keeps up, Sir Rafael will be—! Rafinha’s brother will be—!”

“We can’t manage anything more, Liselotte!”

“No, don’t give up yet.” Rochefort stood behind them, wobbling on his feet.

“Mr. Rochefort! Don’t push yourself too hard!” Meltina quickly lent him her shoulder to lean on.

“We’re in a tough situation. I’ve gotta do what I’ve gotta do.”

Something only Rochefort could do for them—Ripple immediately realized what he meant. “Y-You want to wield me?! In your condition?!”

“It’s *because* of my condition. Didn’t Arles tell you?”

A hiral menace wielded as a weapon sapped away their wielder’s life; that was simply the cost for a holy knight to wield such power. Somehow, this didn’t affect Inglis, but that girl was always an exception even among exceptions.

“Well... Yes, she did, but...”

However, there was a way to bypass this cost: a wielder close to death with no more life-force to give would get away with using the most powerful Artifact

for free. In fact, Rochefort had already inadvertently illustrated an example of that very case.

“Now c’mon. I’d look like a damn fool if I died without doing anything here. Hurry it up.” Rochefort’s hand, which bore a special-class Rune, trembled slightly as he held it forth. Although he was managing to hold his speech together, he was obviously near his limits.

“Understood! Take care of Rafael and everyone for me!” Ripple said.

Rochefort’s and Ripple’s hands met, and light exploded forth. Amid a light so bright one would have to close their eyes, Ripple transformed. When the light subsided, Rochefort held a golden gun.

He laughed. “Don’t know how much longer I’ve got left, so let’s get this over with quickly.” He pointed the barrel straight toward the center mass of the mana extract clump. As if sensing danger, it stretched out tentacle-like limbs toward Rochefort.

“Hmph. That ain’t gonna stop me!” He pulled the trigger without hesitation.



A brilliant flash of light shot forth, exploding the limbs, which dissipated before they reached him. Then the light left a trail as it punched a huge hole in the creature itself. Given Rochefort's position, the attack inevitably punched through the wall behind the creature and even the hull beyond that. Beyond the hole in the mass of mana extract stared the starry sky through several intermediate walls. But the mass of mana extract immediately writhed, trying to regain its form. Rochefort's shot had blown some of it away, but the bulk of it was still intact.

Liselotte sucked in a breath. "It's trying to regain its form!"

Soon, the mana extract entity would be whole again.

"Now hurry up and get out of here!" Rochefort bellowed. "You don't want me wrecking the ship, right?"

There was no way he could have heard Rochefort, but someone appeared out of nowhere to save the day—the edges of the hole that were closing up exploded yet again, and a crimson glow shot forth. Rafael burst forth in Dragon Fang's armor. The armor looked damaged and corroded in places, but he himself seemed fine.

"Sir Rafael!"

"Are you okay?!"

The knights rushed over to Rafael.

"Oh, thank goodness!" Liselotte exclaimed.

"He's safe!" Meltina said. The two patted their chests in relief.

"Hey." Rochefort nodded at him. "Glad you pulled through."

"Sir Rochefort?! Are you wielding Ripple to save me?!" Rafael's eyes went wide as he saw the golden gun in Rochefort's hands.

"Yeah, that's how it ended up. Now get outta my way, I'm taking another shot."

"W-Wait, Sir Rochefort!"

"Ha, what kind of fool waits as he's told?" Rochefort grinned and tried to pull

the trigger again, but his finger slipped, and the gun fell to the ground. At the same time, Rochefort collapsed, bringing Meltina to her knees as she barely supported him.

“Guh...ghh...?!”

“Mr. Rochefort!” several of the girls said in unison.

Ripple returned to her original form and rushed to Rochefort’s side. “A-Are you okay?!”

“Dammit. I don’t even have the strength to pull the trigger anymore. Well, I guess I’m basically a walking corpse, after all...” As Rochefort spoke, blood welled up from his mouth. “You handle the...”

Having rushed over with Ripple, Rafael said, “Understood, Sir Rochefort! I’ll handle the rest!”

“S-Sir Rafael!” some knights shouted.

“The enemy is regaining its form!”

The mass of mana extract was shifting back into humanoid form. A gigantic version of Echidna’s face was still plastered on its head. However, its overall size was far larger than the first time it had taken humanoid form because of the mana extract. When it stood, its Echidna-head struck the ceiling, breaking a hole through to what lay above. Not only that, but tentacles extended from all over its body. With those, it began to crawl outside through the holes in the hull. The ship began to creak and shudder.

The first to scream was Chancellor Riegliv, who was crouched by the hole, trembling. “E-Eeeek! Sh-She’s trying to sink the ship! S-Sir Rafael, do something! Use that hial menace!”

“Ah! Y-Yes... Lady Ripple!” Rafael looked to her.

“W-Wait, Rafael! You’re healthy, not like Rochefort! I don’t want you to wield me if you don’t have to! We need to save as many people as we can instead!” Ripple insisted.

“No, that would mean abandoning ship!” Riegliv complained. “This ship is essential for our war against Venefic! And besides, we can’t save everyone

anyway!”

Their arguments were completely opposed.

“Lady Ripple, Chancellor Riegliv’s position makes sense as well, I—!” Rafael stopped, unsure of what to say.

“No, I’m pretty sure you should listen to the hial menace here...” Rochefort said. “After all, if your will isn’t united with hers, you’re not gonna be able to wield her power anyway...”

“But, Sir Rochefort!” Rafael protested.

While they argued, the mana-extract giant flung itself into action. Its neck stretched out, and Echidna’s face, its maw spread wide, chased the knights as if about to devour them.

“Whoa!”

“Aaaaah!”

Rafael clenched his teeth. “Ugh! I can’t just stand idly by!”

“No one’s telling you to do that... Sir Rafael Bilford, use this!” Rochefort reached to the sword at his waist, unclasped its sheath from his belt, and handed it to Rafael. It was Dragon Claw—an Artifact well beyond all others, one of a pair with Rafael’s Dragon Fang. King Carlias had bestowed it upon Rochefort when he had entered Karelian service.

“Sir Rochefort...!”

“This is your path. To reach even greater heights, without a hial menace! Master this. You know it’s worth it.”

Dragon Fang and Dragon Claw were, excluding hial menaces, Karelia’s strongest Artifacts. They each were imbued with the strength of a powerful dragon, and they were not merely weapons; they lent that power to their wielders. It was from Dragon Fang that the crimson armor Rafael now wore came; its manifestation was proof that the blade had lent him its strength. And what if its wielder also bore Dragon Claw in the other hand? Rochefort had given Rafael his blade for that very reason.

“Understood! I’ll give it my all!”

When Rafael had visited the knights' academy, he'd had the opportunity to spar with Rochefort in his capacity as an instructor. At that time, when Dragon Fang and Dragon Claw had clashed, the power of each had mixed together and produced a tremendous blast. In other words, when the two were combined, a new, even greater power emerged. The potential was there; the question was whether Rafael could control it.

Rafael drew the azure Dragon Claw from its sheath.

Dragon Fang held the power of a dragon of crimson flames; Dragon Claw, the power of a dragon of azure ice.

"Lady Ripple! I'll take the giant on! You help everyone escape!" He held both weapons at the ready.

"S-Sure! Got it! Everyone, let's get out of here! We'll use the remaining Flygears! Liselotte, use your Gift and wait outside! Take Meltina and Rochefort with you!"

"Y-Yes! Understood! Meltina, bring Mr. Rochefort! Chancellor Riegliv, you come as well!" Liselotte was the first to exit the ship, carrying Meltina, Rochefort, and Chancellor Riegliv. Echidna's head swung after her in response, but Rafael intervened.

"Not happening!" Dragon Fang held the head back from its advance, but in turn his foe latched on to the crimson blade, holding it in place. Without a moment's hesitation, large arms sprang forth and grabbed Rafael, trying to envelop him again.

"Sir Rafael!" Liselotte cried.

"Don't look back! Get out of here, Liselotte!" As Rafael called out, an azure glow unlike his previous crimson one wrapped around him.

With that, Liselotte flew from the ship, not looking back. She was determined to follow Rafael's orders.

Thus, she did not see the crimson and azure lights combine and well up explosively. And not only the lights swelled—Rafael did as well. The giant's arms were torn apart from within, and yet Rafael continued to grow—and to transform.

“Gwoooooooooohnnn!”

It was only when she heard the roar of a tremendous dragon that Liselotte turned. As it bellowed, the beast’s head tore upward through the ship’s deck, springing into sight. Its scales were cleanly divided, left and right, between azure and crimson.

“Ah! Where did such a huge dragon come from?!”

“I-It’s Sir Rafael! He grew and transformed!” Meltina explained as she pointed at the dragon.

“Th-That’s Sir Rafael?!”

The dragon Liselotte saw was of a scale to rival even the ancient dragon Fufailbane. Because it had appeared from inside the flying battleship, the ship had taken even more damage and seemed to be half-destroyed. Perplexed by this, the bichromatic dragon looked around itself.

Rochefort laughed. “Who would’ve known...? I guess if you master the Artifacts blessed by dragons, you turn into a dragon yourself... But that’s definitely Sir Rafael Bilford. Look at ’im. He’s all in a tizzy about destroying the ship. Such a damn Goody Two-shoes.”

“Ha ha ha... It really does seem that way,” Liselotte agreed.

But the pause lasted only for a moment. The dragon, making up its mind, fully broke through the deck to the skies above. Its treelike rear legs tightly grasped the mana-extract giant, dragging it along.

“H-He’s taking the enemy along!” Meltina gasped.

“He must be trying to get it away from the ship!” Liselotte said.

If they could get the mana-extract giant away from the ship, it could safely land. Rafael appeared to have accomplished that admirably. What remained was defeating said foe.

The bichromatic dragon twisted around, drawing its rear legs upward toward its face. Those legs still grasped the mana-extract giant, which drew closer and

closer to a maw studded with sharp fangs.

That maw opened wide.

Fwoooooommm!

The dragon's breath, a spiral of crimson flames and freezing cold, erupted forth.

Not only was it a powerful blast, its scope and scale were gigantic. In one blow it enveloped the mana-extract giant completely, burning away what it couldn't freeze and shattering what it couldn't burn. In no time at all, there was not a trace left.

"H-He did it! That was amazing!" Liselotte gasped.

It was as—no, maybe even *more* powerful than that of the ancient dragon Fufailbane. Such was its impact and potency.

"He really did! And he looks so beautiful..." Meltina had never seen anything like it.

"I-Is that Rafael?! Wow, he took that thing out in one shot!" Ripple said. She'd taken a Flygear and now joined them.

"Yes. I'm sure of it. Lahti had become able to transform into a dragon after eating large amounts of dragon meat, and I think something similar has happened with Rafael. Though there's of course no comparison to be made in size or strength."

Their scale as dragons differed by several orders of magnitude. Compared to the imposing majesty of Rafael, Lahti's transformation seemed almost cute.

"W-Wow. If he can do that, maybe he doesn't even need me." Contrary to her phrasing, Ripple's tone and expression were pleased.

"You seem quite a bit happier about it than your words imply, Lady Ripple," Liselotte pointed out.

Ripple laughed. "I guess. I guess so."

The two shared a grin.

Meanwhile, Rafael, in his bichromatic dragon form, was trying to position himself under the flying battleship. Smoke poured from the ship, which could no longer fly steadily. He was trying to support it so that it could land safely.

“Yup, there’s the Rafael we know and love. I’m glad everything’s working out. Eris would have my head if anything happened to him while she’s gone.”

“And it’s all thanks to you, Mr. Rochefort. Thank you!” Liselotte said.

“All you have to do now is wait for Miss Arles and the others, Mr. Rochefort!” Meltina said.

But Rochefort did not respond.

“Mr. Rochefort?!” The two nervously checked on him.

“A-Are you okay?!” Ripple also hurriedly turned her gaze to him.

“H-He’s unconscious!” Liselotte exclaimed. “He’s breathing, but barely...”

“At this rate, I don’t know if he’s going to make it until Miss Arles gets back...” Meltina fretted.

The heavy air pulled their gazes downward.

“Oh! Hey, I have an idea!” Ripple exclaimed, clapping her hands together. She, at least, had thought of something.



“Ah! There it is! The Paladins’ ship!” Leone called out.

The group had scattered on the deck of the Flygear Port to observe their surroundings, and Leone was the first to spot the Paladins’ ship. Everyone gathered around her while Rafinha looked up at the sky in the direction Leone had been keeping watch. It was a clear blue, with only a few wispy clouds visible.

“Huh? Where? I don’t see them.”

“Rani, look down.” Inglis pointed not up at the sky but down at the surface. There, the half-destroyed flying battleship had landed. The Paladins had come out around it and were doing some kind of work. Emergency repairs on the hull,

probably. Whatever the cause, something had obviously gone very wrong.

“Look at how damaged the ship is! What could have happened?! I hope Ross is okay...” Arles exclaimed, worried.

“Let’s get over there and check it out. So long as it’s within my line of sight, I can jump us over there right away.”

“Please, Inglis!”

“Of course. Rani, everyone, hold on tight.” Inglis took a knee and pressed her hand to the deck of the Flygear Port.

When ready, she fixed her gaze on the crash-landed flying battleship that was her destination.

Time for this divine feat!

The next moment, she, her friends, and their Flygear Port appeared directly above the flying battleship.

“Whoa?!”

“What the—?! A Flygear Port?!”

“I didn’t see it approaching at all. Where’d it come from?!”

The knights hard at work below them stared up, buzzing with surprise.

“All right, we need to hurry!” Inglis hoisted up Aulglora’s tail, which the Flygear Port was carrying. Much of it was covered in machinery and armor, which wouldn’t make for exactly the most appealing taste, but it wasn’t like there was any other option. Well, the mechanical ancient dragon was a more powerful dragon, so Inglis surmised the edible parts would hold more latent power. That’s why they had brought it back to heal Rochefort.

“Miss Arles, I’m jumping down. Hold on to me.”

“Y-Yes!”

“Take me too! Leone, Myce, could you please land the Flygear Port?” Rafinha asked.

Both she and Arles wrapped their arms around Inglis.

“Of course. I... I’m a little scared of the idea of just jumping off.” Leone was not very good with heights, so she seemed a bit relieved for the excuse.

“O-Okay! Be careful!” Myce said.

“Here I go!” After seeing Myce nod, Inglis leaped from the deck of the Flygear Port into the air. “Everyone below, make way! I’m going to land down there!” Inglis yelled.

“You’re already jumping! You’re going to scare me to death!” Leone shrieked.

“S-Sorry! In a hurry!”

The knights hard at work flailed about when they saw her midair.

“Whoa! Those are the girls from the knights’ academy! They’re coming our way!”

“Is that some kind of tail?! That’s absurd! Well, she took on a Prismer, so I guess this isn’t that odd...”

“She’ll make it through without a scratch. But we need to get out of the way, and fast!”

Bam!

With a loud noise and a cloud of dust, Inglis landed next to the flying battleship. “Sorry to cause such a commotion. I’m in a hurry.” Inglis curtsied to the shocked knights.

“O-Okay. I guess it’s fine...”

“Y-You really made it through that fine. What’s going on...?”

The knights were astonished more than they were impressed.

“Where’s Ross? Where is Ross Rochefort?!” Arles asked.

“We’ve got some ancient dragon meat! He needs to eat it right away!” Rafinha followed.

“Oh, then—” a knight began, only for a voice to come from behind.

“That one’s all covered with Flygear parts and stuff. You sure I can eat that?”

“Sorry, Mr. Rochefort. The mechanical dragon merged with the ancient dragon, so we took the part that seemed the most edible. It’s the only option we have!” Rafinha answered without turning around, only to then realize something important. “Wait...! Whaaat?!”

When she faced the source of that voice, she saw Rochefort there. When she’d left, he’d been so short of breath he couldn’t even get up, but there he was standing hale and healthy.

“Mr. Rochefort?!” Inglis joined in Rafinha’s shocked gasp.

“Hey. Sorry, but I’d rather skip the iron and oil as seasonings.”

“Ross!” Tears welled up in Arles’s eyes as she flew to embrace Rochefort, and he held her tight.

“Sorry I made you worry, Arles. I’m better now, so I won’t need that meat.”

“That’s fine! As long as you’re feeling better!”

“Right. Now can we stop making a scene?” Everyone’s attention was focused on their embrace, and Rochefort seemed a bit embarrassed.

Rafinha’s eyes gleamed. “It’s fine, Mr. Rochefort! I’m so happy, and I’m glad I worked so hard! Even though it was for nothing!”

“We’re not really supposed to do this in front of students, though.”

“No, no, it’s fine, we saw *even more* up in Alcard! It really was amazing what Lahti and Pullum were getting up to, right, Chris?”

“Stop that. You know how much it embarrassed the two of them.”

“But I wish I could have seen a bit more... Just, y’know, for future reference.”

“That’s not something you need to study! You’re still too young for that, Rani! No more thinking about it! Forget it! Right now!” Inglis wouldn’t let Rafinha do something like that. Absolutely not. She was still way, way, way, way too young.

“Aww, c’mon. Can’t you take a joke, Chris?” Rafinha stuck out her tongue.

“But Ross... I’m so glad you’re okay, but how did you recover so quickly?” Arles asked after she calmed down a little. That was a natural question to ask.

Inglis and Rafinha were curious too.

“Oh, it was easy. We got some dragon meat here too. And ours is fresh.”

“Whaaaat?! H-How did a dragon just show up here? We had to search and search until we finally found ours...” Rafinha began.

“Did an ancient dragon suddenly appear here?” Inglis asked. “You recovered so quickly that it’s hard to imagine it happening without ancient dragon meat.”

“Well, yeah, going by that, it must have been at least as strong as an ancient dragon.”

“Great job beating it!” Rafinha said, before suddenly frowning. “Oh! R-Rafael didn’t have to turn Ripple into a weapon and wield her, did he?!”

Inglis stiffened. That didn’t necessarily happen, but it could have...

Just then, Rafael stepped out of the flying battleship and called out to them. “Rani! Chris! Welcome back!”

“Rafael!” the two answered in unison. Fortunately, their worries had been unfounded.

“You too, Arles! I’m glad Rochefort is feeling better now!” Ripple chimed in.

“I’m relieved you’re all safe!” Liselotte said.

“We were worried about you!” Meltina said.

The flying battleship was in a terrible state, but everyone was okay.

“Rani, Chris, you didn’t get hurt, did you?” Rafael asked with a gentle smile as he rubbed the back of his waist for some reason. This wasn’t a normal tic of his. Had he been wounded?

“What’s wrong, Rafael? Throw out your back?” Rafinha asked confusedly.

“Huh? Oh, well...”

“Call it a badge of courage, eh, Rafael?” Ripple asked.

“Ha ha ha. I guess so, Lady Ripple,” Rafael replied with a wry laugh.

Extra: A Gift from Inglis

Just before Inglis and Rafinha loaded up the mechanical ancient dragon's tail, they found something sparkling amid its withered remains.

"Huh? Chris, was that just something shiny?"

"Yeah, it was! Wait, could it be... A dragon gem?"

Buried in the wreckage, they saw a shining golden gem. It glittered beautifully, like a jewel of the highest quality.

"A dragon gem?"

"Yeah. A stone in which a dragon has imbued a part of its power," Inglis explained. "You know how in stories, dragons always love to hoard precious metals? I think that comes from them making dragon gems."

"Ohhh, okay."

"It takes a tremendous amount of power to form a dragon gem, though, so this must be the mechanical dragon's last gasp... It must have really, really trusted us."

The mechanical dragon had said, in the end, that if there was anything else it could leave them, to take it freely. As Inglis touched it, she felt powerful, yet gentle, dragon lore. It wasn't really a gem; it was extremely condensed dragon lore. It just looked like one because it had been condensed into a solid mass. The serene feeling it gave seemed to reflect the personality of the mechanical dragon, which had sacrificed itself to pacify Aulglora's death.

"We should take this with us. The mechanical dragon must have wanted to leave it in our hands."

"Yeah. It's pretty, so should we put it on display or something?" Rafinha suggested. "We'd have to find a stand for it."

"Actually, I think I have a better idea for it."

"Like what?"

Inglis laughed. “Oh, you’ll see.”

Thus, she brought the mechanical ancient dragon’s dragon gem along with her back to the Chiral Knights’ Academy.

“Ahh, classes have got me all worn out. Let’s go to the cafeteria, Chris! There’s a new dessert starting today.”

“Ah, sorry, Rani. I’ve got to go to the principal’s lab for a little bit, so I’ll pass... Why don’t you go with Meltina?”

“Huh? Again? You’ve been spending all your time there lately.”

Over the days since they’d returned to the knights’ academy, Inglis had been holed up in Principal Miriela’s lab whenever she’d had free time.

“You’re not doing anything weird with the dragon gem you found, are you?” Rafinha shot her a look.

“N-No... Of course not. I’ll show you when I’m done, so look forward to it!”

“Well, if the principal’s keeping an eye on you, I guess it’s fine... Okay, I’m headed to the cafeteria! Let’s go, Meltina!”

“Of course! The infinite macaron parfait I proposed is finally going to see the light of day!”

“Infinite?” Inglis asked. “That sounds amazing.” But still, she had her priorities. She could wait.

A few more days passed in a similar way, and then one night...

“Ah, Leone. Leone!” Inglis shouted to her friend in the courtyard of the academy.

Leone was taking a short break from her training. Meanwhile, Inglis, on her way out of Principal Miriela’s lab, happened to pass by her.

“Oh, Inglis. Still at the principal’s?”

“Yeah. I just finished the Artifact I’ve been spending all this time on.” Inglis held a small box that looked like a jewelry box. The finished product was inside.

“If it’s in there, it must be pretty tiny. What kind of Artifact is it?”

“Look!” Inglis opened the jewelry box and pulled out a silver chain pendant with a golden gem at its center. The golden gem was, of course, carved from the dragon gem left behind by the mechanical ancient dragon.

“Oh, that’s so cute! Is this an accessory Artifact? I’ve never seen anything quite like it.”

“Yeah. It’s the kind of thing you just keep on you. Just wearing it will protect you.”

“Does it protect from Gifts and attacks from magicite beasts?”

“Yeah, things of that nature. Here, Leone, you can have it.”

“Huh? For me? Thank you!”

“Yeah. I think it’s really important for you to have, so keep it on you. Can I put it on you?” As Inglis spoke, she held the pendant out toward Leone’s neck.

“Yes, of course. Sorry, though, I just worked up a bit of a sweat.”

“It’s fine—ah!” Just before Inglis could place the pendant around Leone’s neck, it slipped from her hand. It was dark and she couldn’t see well. “Gotcha!” She caught it quickly so it wouldn’t fall, but her hand moved with enough force to push into Leone’s chest. It was very soft, and felt surprisingly different from Inglis’s own.

“Wha...?! Is it okay? You didn’t drop it?”

“It’s fine! Just, I, what have I done! I’m so, so sorry!”

“Y-You don’t have to be that worried about it. We’re all girls here.”

Well, Leone might have thought about it that way, but Inglis didn’t.



A few days later, Inglis was talking with Silva over breakfast at the cafeteria.

“Silva, I’d like you to have this.” Smiling, she handed him a pendant like Leone’s.

“Eh?! But this looks expensive! I mean, I appreciate the thought, but, I mean... Ripple... I don’t just want to take gifts from another lady... And if it’s from you, Inglis, I’d never hear the end of it from my brother...” Silva wavered, mumbling to himself, as Inglis handed him the Artifact pendant.

“Oh, don’t worry about it, Silva. Inglis hasn’t figured out the idea of giving gifts to boys she likes yet,” Rafinha commented from beside her. “It’s an Artifact. Chris made pendant-shaped ones—look, we have them too. Pretty surprising that it’s not a weapon, right?”

Rafinha showed him the one she was wearing. Leone, Liselotte, and Meltina, all seated at the same table, had them too.

“Well, this might even be a better weapon than a weapon Artifact, you know?” Inglis had made several of the Artifact pendants, and was passing them out. Apart from Rafinha and her other constant companions, she had a list of people who should get them, and Silva was one. She had already given one to Principal Miriela and one to Rochefort. Rafael was on her list. And she’d like to offer one to King Carlias, if possible.

“Oh, I see. So it’s an accessory Artifact. Thank you,” Silva said as he took the pendant and put it on.

“Got one for me?” Yua peeked over, a blank look on her face.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Yua. I haven’t made one for you...”

“Aww, that’s too bad.”

“Yua,” Rafinha began. “I can give you one of mine. I’ll be fine without it.”

“Absolutely not!” Inglis said. “You need to keep that on you, Rani!”

“But—” Rafinha pulled what she was talking about out and placed it on the table. Rather than the Artifact necklaces she was sharing with everyone else, this one was an imposing neck ornament lavishly studded with dragon gems. It was extremely flashy, the kind of thing that might be worn to stand out at a ball

or so on. “I know you gave it to me, but this is honestly a pain to wear, and people are going to think I’m new money or something. So why don’t you take it apart and use it to make more for the others?”

“Absolutely not! I worked hard to make that for you, Rani!” Inglis had really wanted to give Rafinha something that stood out from the others. She’d worked hard to decorate it, even skipping out on the infinite macaron parfait at the cafeteria.

“Chris...” Rafinha looked at Inglis with obvious pity. She stood and patted Inglis’s head reassuringly. “I know, I know. You made this just for me, and you worked really hard on it. I’m grateful. That really makes me happy.”

“Really? You’re happy with it?”

“Yes. Just, your taste in fashion... If I don’t keep an eye on you, sometimes it ends up really dowdy...”

“Aw...” Well, Inglis couldn’t argue with that. It was something she had carried over from her previous life. She couldn’t be right about everything. That was part of being human.

“It’s okay. I’ll help you make it cute! Just warn me next time beforehand, okay?”

“Okay...” Inglis’s shoulders slumped.

Afterword

First, thank you very much for picking up this book! So, that's the twelfth volume of *Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire* ♀. I hope you enjoyed it.

This time I wanted to get back to something more relaxed about daily life at the knights' academy, so I had fun writing this one. Maybe someday I'll spend a whole volume just on daily life.

Meanwhile, on a personal level, up until recently I had a daily goal to write twelve hundred words per day and track how long my streak was on X (formerly Twitter). Well, I wanted a little more flexibility, so I stopped keeping track, and it's bothering me that my pace has really dropped. I've also been exercising less often, and I feel like my health has gotten a little worse. Maybe it *is* better for me to have that pressure...

Do I start counting again to give myself a push? I wanted to have a little more time to relax, but it feels like all I use it for is watching videos on YouTube. I'm starting to feel a bit behind on a lot of projects, so I really need to pick things up before things get bad. But I'll do my best!

Thankfully (at least for now) I've still got enough work to do this full-time, so as long as there's demand, I need to give it my all. I can't let myself forget the time when I was moonlighting and wishing I could just work on what I really wanted to.

Finally, I'd like to thank my editor N, the illustrator Nagu, and everyone else involved for their hard work and dedication. Goodbye for now!

Bonus Short Stories

Enjoying Life

Training had just concluded at the knights' academy for the evening. Before Inglis and her friends returned the Flygears they'd used for the day's exercises, they decided to take a quick flight over Lake Bolt to enjoy the view. Meltina was at the stick, and Inglis and Rafinha rode in the seat behind her.

"You're doing great, Meltina!" Rafinha cheered. "You're definitely getting the hang of this."

"Thank you. Flying is so nice. I love it—it makes me feel free. I never could have done something like this confined to that villa in Venefic."

"They had you pretty much locked up in there, right? That's terrible, you didn't even do anything wrong."

"Yeah. However, if you're shunned simply for being born, then from their perspective, your whole existence is wrong," Inglis observed.

"See, I don't get that. My dad's a duke, but I guess things are different for royals." Rafinha frowned, dissatisfied. It seemed there were many things about Meltina's situation that she couldn't bring herself to accept as normal.

"Well, Rani, your family's exceptionally warm and friendly by the standards of the upper nobility."

"Like yours isn't, Chris? You're an only child, so I think you got *especially* spoiled."

Inglis laughed. "Yeah, I guess so."

That said, her past self as king had been one as an orphan, with no relatives remaining at all. It was that experience that made her understand how blissful her life was as Inglis Eucus, and she knew the Bilfords were also a loving family. They were by no means the norm.

“I don’t think the first emperor of Venefic founded the country meaning for things to end up like this,” Rafinha said.

Inglis nodded. “I suspect you’re right.”

This was the opinion of someone who had actually founded a country in her previous life, even though that founding had not been deliberate but instead a matter of circumstances falling into place as she did what she believed was right. The crown itself was a byproduct, not a treasure to be grasped for. However, she was now concluding that as a country’s history was woven through generation after generation of kings, eventually those would arise for whom the crown was far too alluring. Perhaps that was what had wiped the hero king’s Silvere Kingdom from history.

“But that’s just how it is and how it’s always been. I don’t know if it can ever change,” Inglis said.

“Wait, are you saying there’s nothing we can do for Meltina?”

“No. We can be with her, enjoy our lives together, without worrying about the complicated parts.”

Meltina chuckled. “That’s true. That’s more than enough.” She smiled happily.

Rafinha beamed back in return. “All right! Then let’s head back and march through a mountain of food at the cafeteria tonight!”

“That sounds like a great plan, Rani.”

They didn’t need to tell Meltina twice. “Let’s! We trained hard today, and I’m feeling hungry.”

“And after that we can take a bath and squeeze Chris’s chest as much as we can—”

“No, let’s not do that,” Inglis interrupted.

“What? You’re the one always saying to just go ahead and have fun.”

“I absolutely do not!”

“Okay, okay, fine.”

Inglis let out a sigh of relief—prematurely.

“Then I’ll do it now instead!”

“Eek! Stop! Rin, don’t you get in there too!”

“W-Wait, please stop horsing around! This is dangerous! You’re going to make me crash!” Meltina protested.

In the end, they enjoyed a bath, followed by a feast in the cafeteria.

To Protect

In the royal palace in Chiral, King Carlias spoke to Rafael from upon the throne.

“I understand well. Then, I shall entrust you with Dragon Claw in addition to Dragon Fang, which I have already bestowed upon you.” The king nodded to his knight.

“My utmost gratitude, Your Highness.” Rafael knelt and lowered his head respectfully.

During his recent deployment to Chancellor Riegliv’s lands in the east, Rafael had caused the resonance of two Artifacts, considered natural treasures of Karelia, unleashing a power which allowed him to transform into a gigantic, bichromatic dragon. This was a power which appeared to approach even that of a hial menace, but it was one which required Rafael to be wielding both blades. As Dragon Claw had originally been bestowed upon Rochefort, Rafael was now receiving formal permission to carry it.

“To think that these two swords held such secrets... For many years I carried Dragon Claw myself, yet I never heard nor saw a sign of their resonance together. You truly are the greatest of the holy knights; not even I, in my youth, could compare.”

“But, Your Majesty... Such praise is more than I deserve.” Rafael, filled with gratitude, bowed his head even deeper.

“I thank you for hearing my request, Your Majesty,” Rochefort said. “I am grateful as well.”

Once they left the audience chamber, Rafael asked Rochefort, “Are you

completely sure about this, sir? If I'm to carry Dragon Claw, then in an emergency, you..."

"What? No, I don't mind a bit. It's not like I can turn into a dragon with it. With a power like that, it's better to have one strong force than a couple weaker, discrete units. That's the sort of era we live in now."

Rochefort himself had wielded both Dragon Fang and Dragon Claw at once and tried to transform, but it was something of which only Rafael was capable. After Rafinha and Inglis had infiltrated Alcard, upon their return, they had shared with Rafael some of the ancient dragon meat they had brought back. It was delicious, and he had eaten quite a bit. Perhaps his ability to draw out the power of the two Artifacts which carried the might of dragons was because that had increased his affinity with them. Inglis had said that dragon meat held that sort of power.

"Plus, when I have Dragon Claw, that cousin of yours's after me every day for after-school training. Saves me that headache too."

"Ah, I apologize on her behalf. Thank you for all you've done for her."

"Anyway, I'm counting on you to master it. Can't let our last line of defense always be a schoolgirl—we adults have to keep *some* kind of authority."

"Yes, I really do agree. I've always wanted to protect the people of this country, my friends, my family... But Chris has never once let me protect her. She's always been the one helping me."

"Well, you may not be giving her covering fire, but you cover her tab, right? 'Oh whoops! I ate too much, I'm broke, I'm gonna need to get some money from Rafael!' is all I hear from those girls..."

"Ha ha ha... I guess I do spoil them a bit. I don't have much to spend money on, so I'm happy to use it to make them happy."

"Well, what you do with your money is your business. Whatever, honestly, their appetites are outta this world. But from now on, you can just transform and lop off your own tail and save 'em from hunger that way. Nice to have more options for protecting them, right?"

"Ha ha ha... That's a bit much." Rafael grinned wryly.



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Reborn to Master the Blade: From Hero-King to Extraordinary Squire ♀
Volume 12

by Hayaken

Translated by Mike Langwiser Edited by Carly Smith

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