
THE RISING OF 7 THE SHIELD HERO
Aneko Yusagi
ONE PEACE BOOKS

THE RISING OF THE SHIELD HERO

Aneko Yusagi




Filo
L'Arc Berg
Raphtalia
Ost
Kyo
Naofumi Iwatani
Glass
Therese
THE RISING OF THE SHIELD HERO


"I, the Shield Hero, borrow the strength of the Spirit Tortoise to command the heavens, command the earth, defy all reason, join, and spit up blood. Oh great strength of the dragons—join the power of the heroes with magic. The source of power that is the Shield Hero commands you. Read and comprehend all that is under the sun, and show your power to me! I command you—give them everything!"
"All Liberation Aura!"

汚い海賊

Prologue
The Search

Filo pulled our carriage across a ravaged land as I looked for the other heroes. How long had I been searching for them?

“Ren! Itsuki! Motoyasu! Time to face reality, guys! Come on out!”

“Mr. Naofumi, can’t you try to sound a little nicer?”

“I can’t help it. We’ve been at this for days.”

In order to explain why we were frantically searching for the other heroes, I’ll have to go back a bit and start from the beginning.

My name is Naofumi Iwatani. I’m 20 years old.

Back in modern Japan, I was a college student with otaku tendencies.

I was bored one day, so I went to the neighborhood library and started reading a book called *The Records of the Four Holy Weapons*. Before I knew what was happening, I found myself summoned to another world.

The book had been going on about the deeds of four heroes, and I had been summoned to serve as one of them: the Shield Hero.

The new world was under the threat of a horrible destructive force called “the waves,” and it was my job to help defend the world against the existential threat it faced.

At first I was thrilled. The world was like a dream. And I had been summoned to save it! But things didn’t go quite so smoothly—I was falsely accused of rape, arrested, and thrown out into the streets, penniless and alone. To make matters worse, the Shield Hero wasn’t capable of actually dealing any damage to enemies. The tradeoff, however, granted me incredible defensive capabilities.

So that's how my life in the new world began: framed for a crime I didn't commit, completely without friends or connections, and without the ability to fight on my own (which meant I couldn't gain experience or level up).

That brings me to my next point. The world was a strange one indeed. Like an RPG, the people had levels that could be raised by defeating monsters in battle. Whenever your level increased, so did your abilities. It was a world that directly rewarded effort. On the other hand, it also meant that as long as your level was high, you wouldn't have to exert much effort at all.

Getting back to the story, I saved a little money and bought myself a slave. Slaves were under a special sort of magic that prevented them from disobeying their masters, which I hoped would prevent another betrayal of the sort I'd already endured.

Because all I could do in battle was defend, I needed someone on my side that could take care of the offense. So I added the slave to my party and forced her to fight monsters on my behalf. It was the only way I could gain the experience necessary for leveling up.

I know it sounds a little unethical, but it was the only option I had.

"But this leaves a bad aftertaste, doesn't it? Something about this doesn't seem right."

"I know what you mean. It all feels . . . unfinished. There's no sense of accomplishment."

The girl I was talking to was that very slave, the demi-human girl Raphtalia.

Demi-humans were a race of people that didn't exist back in modern Japan. They were basically humans that also shared features with different animals, usually their ears or tails.

Raphtalia was a raccoon type, so she had tanuki ears and a tanuki tail.

If you just looked at her, you'd think she was 18 or so. With her

clear, bright skin and composed, gentle face, she was a classic beauty. I don't think anyone would disagree with that. Whenever a breeze caught her red hair and it streamed out over her shoulders, she looked like she'd just stepped out of a painting.

Demi-humans had another notable characteristic: when they leveled up, their apparent age changed along with their battle abilities. So when I first bought Raphtalia as a slave, she looked like a 10-year-old girl. But as we both leveled up, she grew into an adult before my eyes.

Her hometown was destroyed in the first wave of destruction. A horde of monsters overran the village and killed nearly everyone there. After the monsters left, the slave hunters came. Then I bought her from the slave traders, and we've been battling together since.

Then came a time when Raphtalia got the opportunity to free herself from the slave magic. She had grown to trust me, though, and so she decided to remain a slave in hopes that she might earn my trust in return. I told her that she didn't need to remain a slave, but she insisted.

Anyway, now she's my most trusted partner.

She had also become unbelievably strong. She had recently defeated a very powerful monster, the Spirit Tortoise.

She was my Raphtalia. I watched over her like a surrogate parent.

She tried very hard at everything she did and was generally a very serious person. Whenever I stepped over the line—which I often did—she was always ready to put me back in my place with a stern word or two. If anything happened, I'd be there to protect her from it. I had to. She was like my daughter.

"Filo, you better help us find Ren and Itsuki and Motoyasu."

"Huh? But I can't smell them at all!" the monster pulling our carriage yelled back to me. She was a giant bird-like monster called a filolial. Her name was Filo.

She wasn't like normal filolials though—Filo could transform into a little human girl with wings on her back. When she did, she looked just like an angel.

Filolials liked to pull carriages. It was instinctual for them. But whenever a hero raised a filolial, it grew into a filolial queen (or king), which was different from other filolials by virtue of its rank and ability.

As for Filo . . . Shortly after Raphtalia decided to remain as my slave, we stopped by the slave trader that I'd purchased her from. The trader's nefarious business had to be hidden from public sight, so he ran a cover operation where he sold monster eggs in a sort of lottery game. I bought an egg from him and it was Filo that hatched from it.

She was a naïve little girl, a voracious eater that never knew when to stop talking.

When she transformed into her human form, she had blonde hair, blue eyes, and looked like she was about 10 years old. Like Raphtalia, she had a pretty face. Even I had to admit that she was pretty cute.

To sum it up, she was exactly what you picture when you hear the term "lolita angel." Of course, she was also a giant bird monster that never stopped eating. But that last thing she said was a little over the top, even for her.

"Smell them?" I asked. I had to remind myself that she was a monster, so of course she had a different way of searching for things than humans.

She was a wild thing, but I sympathized with her. It wasn't fun to keep hunting for people that probably weren't anywhere nearby.

You see, we were looking for the other heroes, the ones that, just like myself, had been summoned here from another world. Each of them came from a different version of Japan. And each of them already knew a great deal about this new world, because it was similar to video games they had played back in their own worlds. Thinking they knew everything, they got to be supremely overconfident and ended up acting like fools.

When I was framed and persecuted, they seized the opportunity to get rid of me—okay, that might not be fair—but they had ignored the truth when it was staring them in the face. They were a bunch of fools.

The person that framed me and saw to my persecution was none other than the bitch princess of the kingdom. Her piece-of-trash father, the king, helped her the whole time. Eventually, the queen, who was the real monarch of the kingdom, stepped in to clear my name and prove my innocence.

As you might imagine, many things happened to get me to that point. The bitch princess had a younger sister named Melty (Filo ended up becoming best friends with her). Melty ended up being harassed, and we all had to go into hiding. Of course, after we ran away with Melty, it was widely reported throughout the kingdom that we had kidnapped her. Relentlessly pursued, we were able to slowly get to the bottom of the conspiracy that tried to destroy us.

In the end, it was the national religion of Melromarc, the Church of the Three Heroes, that had been behind it all. We had to face the high priest in battle to clear our names, but we were successful. Funny thing—the three heroes I was searching for, at the moment, were the very same three heroes the church worshiped. After all the scheming was made clear to the public, the church lost its reputation and support and it was officially declared heretical by the crown.

"If they're not here, we're just going to have to widen our search."

"You're right. And a lot of these suffering people are still not safe."

Once my name was finally cleared, the kingdom started to support me in my efforts to protect it from the waves of destruction. The queen arranged to have me sent to the Cal Mira islands, which were in the middle of an activation event at the time. That basically meant that we could earn double the experience for any battles we fought there.

We went to the islands to continue our training, and we were able to level up very quickly. Before we left for the islands, all four heroes had a meeting to share what we knew about how to power up our legendary weapons. I learned a lot from that meeting, and I was able

to put my new powered-up weapon to the test while we trained in the islands.

I guess I should probably explain a bit more about the other three heroes we were looking for. I'll start with their names and personalities.

I'll start with the Sword Hero, Ren Amaki.

I think he was 16 years old. He was younger than me, and shorter too.

He had a cool, kind of androgynous face that was framed with glossy black hair. He liked to wear black clothes, so most of his equipment was black too. Maybe it had something to do with his age—a lot of teenagers go through that sort of phase.

As for his personality, he was cool and standoffish—a loner for sure. He was a terrible communicator, which caused me no shortage of strife.

Back in the world he came from, they had games called "VRMMO," which basically let players completely immerse themselves in online worlds. The game he'd played that was similar to this place was called Brave Star Online.

The Spear Hero is next, Kitamura Motoyasu.

He was 22 years old. So he was a little older than me. He was tall and the most handsome of the heroes. His hair was long and streaked with brown, and—I hate to say it—he really was actually pretty handsome. The only thing you need to know about his personality is that he was constantly hitting on girls. The second he laid eyes on a woman, he lost all self-control. But once he decided to trust someone, he would never give up, no matter how awful they were. That made him do some pretty stupid things in the past. I'm only just starting to understand that he didn't mean to be as awful as he was. He was just tricked by that woman of his.

Speaking of that woman, she was the one that falsely accused me of rape and had me thrown out in the streets. After my name was cleared, the queen striped her of her princess title and had her name officially changed to Bitch.

According to Motoyasu, the world we'd been summoned to was the spitting image of an online game he'd played in his own world, a game called Emerald Online.

The last hero was the Bow Hero, Itsuki Kawasumi.

I get irritated just thinking about him, but I guess I need to explain what sort of guy he was. I shouldn't neglect to do that.

He was 17 years old, and was about the same height as Ren.

His hair was styled and fell in soft curls. From the look of him, you'd think he was an artistic, sensitive kind of guy. He wouldn't look out of place running his fingers over a piano. I suppose that if you only had his appearance to go by, he was an attractive person.

But his personality betrayed all of that. He was selfish beyond belief, and thought he could do whatever he wanted, so long as it satisfied his own puffed-up sense of justice. I could never get along with Motoyasu because of his relationship with Bitch. But taken at face value, Itsuki was the worst person of the bunch.

He'd made so many people cry, one of which is important to my story—but I'll get to that later.

He insisted that the world we were in was copied from a console game he'd played in his own world, a game called Dimension Wave.

So the three heroes were all very different people, but they each thought they knew how the world worked. When we all sat down together to discuss the best methods to accrue power, all of them had conflicting ideas. The meeting quickly devolved into a shouting match.

Specifically, details they thought they knew about the world didn't quite line up with what the other heroes were saying. The methods

they'd learned in their respective games to power up their weapons didn't match either.

Each of them was so stubborn that they refused to listen to, much less believe, what the other heroes had to say.

In the end, I experimented with all the methods they'd indicated, only to find that each method actually worked as long as you truly believed that it would. It was a messy answer, but as far as I could tell, it was the truth.

Luckily for me, it was exactly the information I'd needed. When I arrived in this world, I'd been the only hero without any previous knowledge of the world or its mechanics. But because of that, I was the only one that had really studied and practiced. I was able to put all of their individual methods to use, and in the end, I quickly outpaced the other heroes in levels and power.

"Mr. Naofumi? Where do you think the other heroes have gone?"

"We need to get to where they were last seen. It's still pretty far from here."

"Judging from reports we've received from people in the area, it doesn't sound like anyone has spotted them."

"That's what worries me. Still, they aren't dead, so they must be hiding somewhere."

Filo and our carriage kept rattling across the wilderness, following the giant footprints that dotted the landscape.

Thinking back on it, we were already in danger.

When we first left for the Cal Mira islands, we ended up sharing a room on a boat with two people named L'Arc Berg and Therese.

At the time, I'd thought they were typical adventurers, but they ended up playing a pivotal role in the events that followed.

L'Arc Berg (who I normally call L'Arc) was a really friendly older

brother sort of guy. His friend Therese was quiet and conducted herself with deference and courtesy. She was like Raphtalia in that way.

Everything was fine until we found a temple under the ocean near the islands. A giant dragon hourglass stood inside, and it was counting down the remaining time to the next wave of destruction. Worse yet, there were only a couple of days to prepare. We quickly told the other heroes, recruited the kingdom's military and its freelance adventurers, and made a stand against the wave when it arrived.

When the most powerful monster showed up—if it was a game, it would have been the boss—we were able to defeat it without much trouble at all.

But the moment the boss fell, L'Arc and Therese appeared and rushed to attack us. They didn't just want to win. They wanted us dead.

I still don't know why. L'Arc had said it was for the good of the world. He'd also said that their mission was to kill all of the heroes.

L'Arc proved to be a formidable opponent. He knocked out all the heroes with one wave of his weapon. They floated in the ocean, unable to move, much less fight. So it was up to Raphtalia, Filo, and I to fight them off.

Surprising even myself, we held our own and even turned the tide. But just when it looked like victory was within reach, a powerful enemy we'd met during the second wave of destruction appeared: Glass. With Glass on their side, we weren't able to fight for very long and soon were exhausted. Defeat was imminent.

I still can't believe we actually survived.

Because we'd fought her before, and because of the special abilities of a shield I just happened to have, we were able to hold off Glass and L'Arc. But I don't know if we could have done it again. They both had abilities that rendered my strengths useless: defense-rating attacks and defense-ignoring attacks.

Because all of my abilities were built around defensive tactics and skills, those two attacks were a serious threat. Luckily, I was able to avoid most of their attacks, but because they moved so fast, I wasn't able to escape unscathed. It was very dangerous.

There were other problems during the battle. L'Arc had an ace up his sleeve, too. He had a bottle of soul-healing water, which was used to replenish SP, the stat necessary to use skills. And he dumped the whole bottle on Glass. Her power grew exponentially. It was all I could do just to defend my party from her relentless attacks.

In the end, they retreated before they were able to kill us.

After all the drama blew over, I sat the other heroes down for a chat, thinking that I had to impress upon them how useless they'd proven in the battle. Because I was the Shield Hero, it was very difficult for me to take on an offensive role in battle. If only one of the offensive heroes could manage to acquire the same amount of power that I had, the battle with L'Arc and Glass wouldn't have ended with their retreat. It would have ended with our victory.

But when I tried to talk to them about it, they refused to believe that I could have become as powerful as I was by applying the very tactics they explained. Unable to admit that they might have all been correct, they stubbornly refused to listen to each other and accused me of cheating instead.

I tried to tell them that they had been right, but they were more interested in fighting than they were in actually getting stronger. We had to cancel the meeting.

We did agree to start training when we returned to Melromarc from the islands. It was easy to understand what level you were at. But there were other ways to exercise power as well, like actually learning how to fight. So we agreed to study under a master of the Hengen Muso fighting style. We were all surprised to discover that this master of martial arts was actually an elderly woman.

In hindsight, I should have known that the other heroes wouldn't take it seriously. By the end of the first day, they were loudly complaining about every aspect of the training. Soon enough, their

complaints morphed into straight-up sabotage, and before long they stopped coming all together. They were just about to leave the country for distant, less-troublesome lands when the queen suddenly appeared with a request. If the heroes were able to accomplish the task set before them, then she would permit them to pass through her country's borders and leave the kingdom for good. That was enough to convince them to accept the mission.

I suppose I don't need to tell you that this simple mission turned out to be the start of an incredible sequence of events.

The mission sounded simple enough: mysterious monsters were appearing throughout the country—no, the world. We needed to get rid of them.

It turned out that these monsters were really all servants of something much larger called the Spirit Tortoise, though no one knew that at first, because we weren't able to read the full names of the monsters like we normally could in battle.

The first monsters we came across were giant bats that had tortoise-like shells on their backs. I shared all the information I had about them with the queen and the other heroes, but the other heroes kept their own information to themselves. They acted on their own, in secret.

I suppose it doesn't matter now. We found out the truth anyway.

Because the monsters were servants, they had to be serving something. That something turned out to be a monster called the Spirit Tortoise.

The other heroes went after the Spirit Tortoise without telling anyone, and the Spirit Tortoise started to advance and invade country after country, possibly in response.

The Spirit Tortoise was so enormous it defied belief. It was larger than a mountain itself, and actually had a mountain range covering its back.

The other heroes had attempted to attack the monster from the

front, but that was the last report we received about them before they went missing.

The good news was that, with Raphtalia, my other friends, and the support of the coalition army behind us, we were able to defeat the monster. And yet the blue hourglass that appeared in my field of view, when the Tortoise first awoke, never disappeared when we defeated it. So I felt like we might not be out of trouble.

“Looks like we aren’t going to find the heroes until we get to the place where the Spirit Tortoise was first sealed away.”

“Master!”

I was muttering to myself when Filo shouted and took off running, dragging the carriage behind her at a breakneck speed.

“What is it?”

“I can hear someone screaming off in the distance!”

“Take us there!”

“Yup!” she shouted and kept on barreling down the road.

Sure enough, there was no doubt about it. This wasn’t over yet.

Chapter One
Helping Others

"AHHHH!"

Filo carried us to the source of the screams. There we found a horde of monsters attacking a group of people.

The monsters were Spirit Tortoise familiars (bat type). That's right—even though we'd defeated their master, the servant monsters were still marauding across the countryside.

They were the same type of monsters that we'd first encountered after accepting the mission from the queen. Since then we'd run into plenty of other types, but the bat-like monsters appeared to be the most plentiful.

"Let's go!"

"Yes!"

"Hyaaa!"

I jumped out of the carriage and ran to shield the people from the attacks of the Spirit Tortoise familiars (bat type). I pushed the people back and readied my shield just in time to block a laser-like heat beam a monster shot at them. The monsters had a tendency to focus their attacks on the weakest member of a group, which made it difficult to effectively protect everyone.

"Hate Reaction!" I shouted. It was the name of a special ability my shield had, a skill that would draw the attention of any enemies in the area.

Being a human, I wasn't able to see how it worked. But Filo was a monster, and she immediately turned to face me, her attention captured by some invisible force.

“Who are you?” one of the people shouted.

“We’ll talk later. If you don’t want to die, you all better bunch up in one place! I can’t protect you if you’re scattered all over the road!”

“Okay!”

The panicking group of people ran to line up behind my shield.

“Perfect. Shield Prison!”

That was another skill of mine. This one produced a cage of defensive shields to surround the cowering crowd.

“Air Strike Shield! Second Shield! Dritte Shield!”

I used three additional skills in succession, placing a few more lines of defense between the people and the monsters. The shields produced by the skills wouldn’t last very long, but it was better than nothing.

“Raphtalia! Filo! Think you can take care of those monsters before these skills run out of time?!”

“No problem!”

“Easy!”

Raphtalia steadied her grip on the hilt of her sword and was in the thick of it in a flash. Her blade caught the light as she furiously beat the Spirit Tortoise familiars (bat type) back. Filo quickly transformed into her filolial queen form and slipped her feet into a pair of claw weapons before quickly following Raphtalia’s sword with a flurry of fast kicks.

Both of them were very high-level fighters and had considerable power behind their attacks. If they didn’t hold back, both of them could make mincemeat of a monster with one hit. They didn’t hold back—dozens of the monsters fell with each swing of sword or claw.

The bats were obnoxious because of their chaotic flapping. But

they weren't very intelligent, and they didn't try to escape or avoid our attacks.

"Hey, big sis!"

"I'm on it!" Raphtalia shouted. A second later and she was spring boarding from Filo's back to knock a number of the monsters out of the air.

Heh. It was pretty impressive to see.

By the time the Shield Prison skill ran out of time, the majority of the monsters had already been defeated.

"Master! I think there's a BIG one!" Filo shouted, pointing frantically. I turned to see what she meant, only to see a Spirit Tortoise familiar (yeti type) running towards us. It was another one of the Spirit Tortoise's underlings, but this kind was much larger and more powerful. It was a giant yeti-like creature, but its back was covered with a large tortoise shell. It stood at least as tall as Filo in her filolial queen form, and its considerable strength was evident by its prominent bulging muscles.

The bat-like creatures were weak enough that an average adventurer would be able to handle a couple of them without too much trouble. But these larger yeti types were a powerful enemy to face. I'd seen very strong adventurers fail to defeat them many times. Anyone at level 25 or so could have handled the bat types, but I don't think anyone under level 55 would survive a fight with one of those yetis.

Although, come to think of it, the bats always attacked in large groups. Anyone at level 25 would be in real trouble facing down a crowd of them.

That reminds me of another thing I've learned since I was summoned to this world. Normal adventurers were only able to get to level 40 here, unless they performed some specific task. If you wanted to level up past 40, you had to procure the permission and support of the crown. Once you had those things, you could participate in a class-up ceremony, which utilized the dragon hourglasses to raise your level

limit to 100.

So basically, to survive a one-on-one encounter with a yeti type, you would have to have already been through the class-up ceremony—a relatively rare thing, accessible to only the most experienced adventurers.

Still, weaker soldiers and adventurers might be able to defeat one if they had an organized formation and a solid battle plan, but it would take a long time.

"Think you can take him?"

"Leave it to me!"

"Alright!"

Raphtalia climbed onto Filo's back and prepared to use one of her killing blows while Filo took off sprinting for the monster, prepared to follow up with furious kicks if necessary.

"Ying-Yang Sword!"

"Hyaaaaaaa!"

Raphtalia's sword cleaved the beast in two, and Filo's follow-up attack blasted the monster's remains far into the distance.

"Whew . . . That should just about do it, right?" Raphtalia said as she jumped down from Filo, slid her sword into its sheath, and began to survey the damage.

She looked unfazed by the battle, which I probably should have expected considering how powerful Filo and her actually were. They weren't just high-level warriors either—they were skilled fighters.

"Yeah! I don't think there are any more of those monsters around here!"

"Great. Good job," I said while walking over to the people that the monsters had been terrorizing. "Are you guys alright?"

“That shield . . . That mysterious power you used to protect us . . . Could it be? Might you be the Shield Hero?”

“I am. So what?”

“Thank you very much! I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t come along when you did!”

The people all stepped forward individually to express their gratitude.

“This is a dangerous place. Why are you guys still here?”

“Actually, we were starting a new village here.”

“Ah, I get it.”

We were looking for the other heroes, but in doing so, we were retracing the path the Spirit Tortoise had taken on its rampage. Naturally, we ended up meeting a lot of distressed people along the way, so we’d been taking the time to stop and help whenever we could.

But to tell the truth—and this is pretty common after natural disasters—I couldn’t bring myself to really trust the people we’d been running into. With all the chaos enveloping the countryside, there were definitely robbers and highwaymen out there to make a killing while they had the chance. Many of the ruined towns contained abandoned treasures that attracted thieves and other nefarious types.

“I have to check, just in case. You all, lay out all of your belongings before me.”

“. . . ?!”

The group of people suddenly looked less happy to see me. But I had to be sure. Since I arrived in this world, I’d found myself surrounded by some of the worst, most despicable people I’d ever met—and I didn’t have the time to waste helping a rag-tag team of bandits plunder the countryside.

“We found all of these things ourselves!”

I sighed. I should have expected as much. It was a good thing I decided to act on my suspicions. I mean, who knows what would have happened if I’d turned my back on them? It was a common tactic that these types liked to use. You’d get them out of danger and take them somewhere safe, only to realize they were waiting for a chance to put a knife in you and escape with all your valuables.

It’s easy to imagine that a new fantasy world would be amazing and chock-full of dreams. But this wasn’t that kind of place. It was a rough dog-eat-dog kind of place. Anyone arriving from modern Japan would have a hard time protecting themselves from all the real dangers out there.

Maybe it was the only way that these people had to survive. Even in the modern world I came from, there were countries and places where citizens really had to look out for themselves. I guess I couldn’t blame them.

“Ah, and I guess you think you have looters’ rights to this stuff? Whatever, I don’t want your stuff. We’re going to move on now. So try not to get yourself killed by all the Spirit Tortoise’s monsters.”

One by one, the people unsheathed their weapons and leveled them at me. I summoned all my apathy and turned to leave. The whole region had been thrown into chaos recently. What good did it do us to try and save people if those people all turned out to be lawless bandits?

“W . . . Wait!”

“You’re just going to leave us here?!”

“Who said anything about that? Didn’t I just save you from those monsters? I’m just saying that I’m not going to do any more for you.”

“Damn.”

The crowd all turned to look at the person who seemed to be their leader.

“I guess we better try to make it to safety before the sun goes down.”

There were still a lot of wild monsters roaming in the area. It looked safe for the moment, but they would be back—which reminds me of something I forgot to mention, a really nasty characteristic of these Spirit Tortoise familiars. When they died, their bodies would eventually spawn a lot more of whatever monster had fallen.

When the Spirit Tortoise awoke and rampaged across the world, it destroyed a lot of towns and villages along the way. All the dead things left in its path, including all the people, spawned vast numbers of more familiars.

The coalition army was doing all it could to deal with the remaining monsters, but it would be a while before it was able to get the monster numbers under control.

If anyone were to try and say that some pathetically weak crowd of looters could trek off into a dangerous region like this and get out alive, I’d have to shake my head. No one would say that if they had actually seen the conditions out here.

And there was nothing to be gained by death. Even worse, there was the risk that they might end up as a seedbed for new monsters while they were still alive. That had almost happened to a friend of mine named Keel—actually, he was from the same village as Raphtalia. While he was alive, he had been infected by one of the Spirit Tortoise familiars. Luckily, we were able to save him from death, but he was seriously hurt by the whole incident and was still convalescing.

“Aren’t you supposed to be a HERO? You really aren’t going to help us?”

“I never claimed to be a religious scholar. Besides, I don’t think anyone will mind if I don’t go out of my way to save a bunch of thieves.”

Raphtalia looked a little upset by my answer. Still, she understood that they were wrong, so she didn’t attempt to contradict me.

Filo was just staring up at the sky, completely oblivious.

The very fact that I wasn't impressed or moved by all the extraordinary things happening around me spoke to how accustomed I was becoming to this world.

Sure, it sounds good to call it "rough and tumble," but the truth was that this world was a stinking pile of garbage.

"You'd leave us here to die!? You . . . you murderer!"

"Whatever—I'm out of here. Filo! Time to get going."

"W . . . Wait!"

And they took the bait. I smiled.

"What?"

"We'll give you this. So please . . . please take us to safety."

Each of the looters held out a valuable to me.

"I think I'll take everything you've stolen."

"Oh, um . . . very well."

"Raphtalia, we better frisk them just to be sure."

"Understood. You know, I knew it would end up this way."

Raphtalia said softly as she patted down the looters to make sure they weren't hiding anything else from us.

But of course they were. Lots of stuff.

"Damn! We risked our lives for that stuff—just to end up with nothing!"

"If you're complaining, you must be alive, right? Here, climb on up. We'll take you to safety," I said, climbing up into the carriage. We left for the nearest village with fortified defenses.

“Have you guys run into any of the other four holy heroes?” I asked the crowd of looters in the back of the rattling carriage.

“Sure haven’t.”

That was the typical response. Sometimes we found someone who claimed to have seen them, but it always turned out to be a false rumor or a case of mistaken identity.

“Actually, I saw someone dressed all in black. He looked like the Sword Hero. I saw him running to attack the Spirit Tortoise,” one of the looters muttered.

“Are you serious?”

“I was focused on escaping at the time, so I can’t say for sure, but . . .”

“That’s fine. Just tell me what you saw.”

“The guy I saw—and I think there was only one—was running at the Spirit Tortoise and swinging a sword. I saw him shouting and charging at the giant monster. I didn’t see anything after that, because I was focused on trying to run away.”

“Where was this?” I asked, unrolling a map.

“Here,” he said, pointing to a town.

It was very close to the last location where Ren had been seen. The looter’s story sounded reliable.

The other heroes had all gone missing in different places, so it wouldn’t be unexpected to have sightings scattered all over the map. Unfortunately, that was exactly what made it difficult to tease out the rumors from the truth.

This story, on the other hand, sounded like it might contain a kernel of truth.

“You didn’t see anyone else with him?”

“I remember the Spirit Tortoise stomping everything, and then . . . no—I don’t remember. I was so focused on trying to get away.”

I had heard a similar story before. They’d said the Sword Hero charged at the Spirit Tortoise from the front. He was bold, or so they said. They hadn’t really been sure, because no one had been able to stop and get a good look at what was happening.

Every time I heard a story like this, the circumstances were always the same. Each witness had been caught up in the chaos and running for their lives when they caught the briefest glimpse of the hero. People mentioned that they had felt a glimmer of hope, a hope that was inevitably proven mistaken when the Spirit Tortoise marched on, undeterred, to destroy their towns and villages.

“That’s just like him, to get people’s hopes up and then not follow through.”

We had to make a small diversion from our course to accommodate them, but we visited a town that had been unaffected by the disaster.

The looters climbed down from the carriage, wearing strange expressions of disappointment.

Ever since we started our search, we’d had to devote so much of our time to helping groups of helpless fools. It was starting to feel like we were never going to make headway on our actual mission.

The seven star heroes had been sent to investigate the lands where the Spirit Tortoise had originally been imprisoned. I’d been waiting for a chance to finally meet them, but it was going to be a while until that could happen.

“Have you noticed that the signs around here use a different writing system than Melromarc does?” Raphtalia asked, pointing to a nearby shop sign.

“You’re right.”

The shield had the wonderful ability to translate speech for me, but it didn't do anything to make reading and writing any easier. So even though we were still in the same world, there were other languages we had to worry about, too. What a pain. I wanted to yell at them to hurry up and agree on a standard. Though, come to think of it, my own world hadn't been able to do that either. Oh well, at least my shield made it possible to communicate.

"Let's leave the carriage at the nearest adventurer's guild and head back to the castle for the night."

"Alright."

We had a number of transport options available to us—including a teleportation skill called "portal." The skill was only available to heroes like myself, and it enabled teleportation to any place that we had already been. However, the skill did have certain limitations. You could only teleport to a place you had already been, and it had to be a place that you remembered well. Furthermore, the number of places that you could choose from at any given time was limited. Finally, it was impossible to bring any large objects along, like our carriage.

We stopped by the adventurer's guild and flashed an official-looking document that bore the queen's signature. When the staff saw it, they agreed to store our carriage without charge.

"Portal Shield."

A portal to Melromarc castle opened, and Filo, Raphtalia, and the others followed me through it.

"We're back!"

The unfamiliar town around us vanished and was instantly replaced by a scene we were well accustomed to: the courtyard grounds of Melromarc castle.

Filo shouted excitedly as she jumped through the portal. Then she quickly took off running into the castle interior.

She must have been off to see her best friend, Melty. Whenever she

had a second to spare, she spent it playing with Melty.

"Welcome back, Naofumi."

"How's it looking? Any updates?"

Eclair and Rishia came walking over from the training grounds.

Rishia's full name was Rishia Ivyred, I think. Yeah, that was it.

She used to be a member of Itsuki's justice squad, but the team ended up betraying her and framing her for a crime. It was just like what had happened to me. They did it to kick her off the team.

The reason she had joined his team in the first place was interesting, too. She was the oldest daughter of a ruined noble family. Itsuki swept in to save her from a particularly thorny situation. So even though they'd treated her badly in the end, she didn't blame Itsuki or look down on him. If anything, she still admired him—maybe even worshiped him.

She was a strange girl. She normally prefaced everything she said with a pathetic whimper and tried to hide the depression evident on her face behind a kigurumi. She didn't exactly inspire confidence.

"Feh? Did I, um . . . do something wrong?" She asked. At the moment, she was wearing a kigurumi that was based on Filo's filolial queen form.

"No . . ."

According to the old lady, the master of Hengen Muso fighting style, this sad weakling of a girl had a natural talent for the martial arts. The old lady had taken it upon herself to personally train Rishia.

Sometimes—I mean every once in a great while—Rishia pulled off a set of graceful moves, but she hadn't yet achieved any sort of consistency.

In my own opinion, she seemed more like an "indoor" type than an "outdoor" type of girl. I figured she would be better at magic than she

was at combat.

But like I mentioned before, people had actual stats in this world, and Rishia's stats were so low it was hard to believe. The first time I saw them, I nearly screamed. So I was really looking forward to the day that her abilities blossomed. If they didn't, she wasn't going to be able to participate in any battles.

As for how she looked, well, her face impressed even the lecherous Motoyasu.

She looked younger than she actually was, and her hair was pulled back into an intricate French braid. Even I had to admit that she was just as attractive as Raphtalia and Filo were.

"Master Iwatani? Judging from the look on your face, you didn't get any good news today, did you?"

That was Eclair. Her full name was Eclair Seaetto.

She was from the noble family that had once ruled the region where Raphtalia's village had been. She was a master swordsman, and she had agreed to help teach Raphtalia and Rishia to wield their weapons better. To sum up her personality, she seemed to have a stick up her ass. She had long strawberry blonde hair and eyes so sharp they seemed to look right through you. From the very first second you saw her, it was clear that she meant business.

After all, she was a knight of Melromarc.

I'd only met a bunch of jerks since I arrived in this country, but if there was anyone in the Melromarc army that actually behaved the way you'd expect a knight to behave, it was Eclair. While that meant sometimes she came off as too serious for her own good, it also meant that she had exceptional manners and carried herself well.

She never made allowances for others—which was a great thing about her but could also be grating at times. And she had a beautiful face. Between Eclair and Raphtalia, it was hard to say who was prettier. Her skin was white and clear . . . Actually, I guess everyone around me was really quite beautiful, weren't they?

And she was a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield. They say that God doesn't give with both hands—but that's a lie. Not that I cared. Raphtalia could have been the ugliest girl around, and I wouldn't have treated her any differently.

"Mr. Naofumi? Are you thinking nasty thoughts again?"

"Of course not."

Raphtalia was very good at reading my thoughts. Whenever I let my mind linger on something inappropriate, she could tell.

"Yes, well . . . Master Iwatani, I was asking if you had gathered any new information on this outing."

"We heard some stuff, but nothing dependable."

"That is too bad," Eclair said, looking disappointed.

I could understand the feeling. After all the death and destruction that the land had experienced, how would it feel to know that the heroes summoned to save the world had gone missing?

"How many days has it been since we defeated the Spirit Tortoise?"

"About a week. Where ARE those losers?" We'd been looking for them for days. I could understand the difficulty if the Spirit Tortoise was still out there, but we've already taken care of that. I expected to know something about their whereabouts by now. Were they hiding in the mountains or something?

"We've widened our search area, but at the same time we've increased the number of looters and refugees we meet and have to assist. It doesn't feel like we are making much headway."

"I understand. If there is anything we can do, Rishia and I are ready to assist you. Just let us know."

"I know, thanks. But I think it would be better if you helped the old lady train Rishia for now. Keel will be back on his feet pretty soon,

and I'll need your help getting him up to our level, too."

"Very well. Though I must mention that, as the queen's guardian, I often have to accompany her out to the Spirit Tortoise mountain."

I already explained this, but the queen she referenced was the queen of the country that originally summoned me to this world, Melromarc.

She was married to the piece-of-trash king who'd relentlessly persecuted me since my arrival, and she was the mother of the wretched bitch of a princess who framed me. But the queen genuinely wanted to cooperate with me on behalf of the country and for the future of the world. She was very knowledgeable about legends and folklore, and she was fascinated by the waves of destruction. Whenever the waves came, she did all that she could to support me in my battles against them. She'd saved me from certain death more than once, so I tended to leave the strategizing up to her.

She looked like she was only in her late twenties and was exceptionally beautiful. She had a habit of covering her mouth with a folding fan. From the look of her, you would never think it was possible for her to have already had two children.

Both her husband and one of her daughters were the very definition of stupidity. Of the royal family, only the queen and Melty were decent human beings.

"Well, whenever you head out with the queen, leave Rishia with the Hengen Muso lady."

"Fehhhhhh!"

The Hengen Muso master was actually an old woman that I'd saved once when I was traveling around the countryside peddling wares for cash. Her son was nursing her back from the brink of death, but the medicine he had wasn't effective enough to save her. I used one of my shield's abilities to make the medicine better and she was cured. But once she was back on her feet, she was more energetic than I could handle. I started calling her "old lady" back then—and as far as I know, it's the only name she's got.

She seemed to know everyone in some way and had apparently participated in many illustrious battles in the past.

The fighting style she employed, Hengen Muso, was thought to have been lost years ago. It was a very wide ranging set of tactics and skills that could be applied to a diverse set of circumstances.

She insisted that Rishia had an innate talent to learn how to use those tactics and skills, so Rishia had been training with the old lady out in the mountains.

"Sounds good to me. I really think that Rishia has been improving lately."

"R . . . Really?" Rishia asked, looking encouraged.

"Of course you still have a lot to learn. But if you continue to make a sincere effort, I think you will do very well for yourself."

"Thank you! I will!"

"Yeah, keep it up," I said, disinterested. I made for the nearest doorway so that I could go pay my respects to the queen. "I'm going to go speak with the queen. Raphtalia. Stick with the others and help them practice their fighting and magic."

"Understood."

A whole week had passed since we defeated the Spirit Tortoise. But we still hadn't found the other heroes. Each evening, after we concluded our search for the day, we teleported back to the castle so I could make my report to the queen. In return, she filled me in on all the reports of the lingering troubles posed by the Spirit Tortoise familiars. From the way things sounded, we still had a long way to go before those troubles were put to rest. So that's how things stood.

At the time, I had no way of knowing that the very next day would bring enormous changes. Even if I had known, I wouldn't have looked forward to it.

Chapter Two
Spirit Tortoise Familiar (Human Type)

I expected the next day to be just like the last one—we'd spend all day looking for the heroes, but we wouldn't end up with anything tangible. But after we finished our breakfast at the castle and teleported back to the town we'd visited the day before, it was immediately obvious that we'd arrived right in the middle of something significant. The streets teemed with a chaotic mass of screaming people.

"Ahhhhhh!"

"Heeeeeelp!"

People rushed past us from all directions.

"What's going on here?!"

"Mr. Naofumi!"

"Master!"

Raphtalia and Filo called out to me. They were pointing in the opposite direction that everyone was running.

Once, a long time before any of this stuff happened with the Spirit Tortoise, we'd been forced to face the giant reanimated corpse of a Dragon Zombie in battle. The monster was huge, but it wasn't anywhere near the imposing size of the Spirit Tortoise. So the tortoise was the largest opponent we'd ever faced. But the giant black shadow creature now bearing down on the town was pretty damn close.

I had to squint to make out the details as the beast moved closer to the town.

Spirit Tortoise familiar (amalgamated parasite type)

Gulp. It was one of the Spirit Tortoise's servant creatures.

What did amalgamated parasite type mean?

The monster stood about eight meters tall—an imposing figure. Judging from the way it looked, it must have been a giant reptile of some kind—something like the dragons you see in fantasy games. It had the muscular, scaled body of a dragon, but the head of a lion, and scythe-like arms that reminded me of a praying mantis.

And it was heading straight for us.

Chimera—that was the word for it. A traditional chimera had the body of a lion with the head of a goat and a dragon stuck onto it. I'd fought one or two before, and those chimeras had snakes for tails.

But this new monster was different. It had the body of a dragon, the head of a lion, and the scythe-like arms of a praying mantis. As it approached, I saw that it had another head—the head of dragon—and that a giant tortoise-like shell covered its back. That shell had been the only consistent characteristic that the various servants of the Spirit Tortoise shared. But what the hell was it?

Just a second now . . . The monster seemed to be dragging something heavy behind it. I tried to make it out, but it was still too far away.

"We're stopping that thing, now!"

"Yes!"

"Let's go!"

Raphtalia and Filo shouted their agreement, and we took off running straight for the monster. Filo transformed into the filolial queen form and led the charge.

“Be careful!”

“I will!”

Between Filo, Raphtalia, and I, Filo was by far the fastest on her feet. She also had the strongest attacks. I put my life in her hands, but she wasn’t the most cautious person. She was rushing straight for the mysterious monster. We didn’t even know what sort of attacks it would use against us.

But she was on the beast in a flash, and before I could even blink, she had reared back and delivered a crushing kick to the monster’s dragon-like head. The moment her claws connected with the beast, a huge spray of blood burst from the head. It was torn to bloody ribbons that went flying from the creature’s body.

“Ew! Master! This thing is rotten!”

The Spirit Tortoise could infect dead bodies and use their abilities, which meant . . . it must have been controlling this corpse. We were facing a Chimera Zombie.

“But, um . . . Something’s weird about it!”

“What is it?”

Filo cocked her head to the side in thought, sidestepping a strike from the monster’s scythe-like arms. It was a good strike. The monster was fast on its feet.

“Air Strike Shield!”

I followed the movement of its arms and deployed a magic shield just at the point where the arms were weakest. The joint of the scythe slammed against the Air Strike Shield with a clang, and soft chunks of flesh flew into their air where the bone tore from the arm. The scythe fell to the ground with a loud slam.

“Ew.”

Raphtalia clapped her hands over her mouth. She looked sick.

I couldn't blame her. It was a really disgusting sight.

"Oh, hey! I got it! Master!" Filo shouted, turning to face me.

"This little guy isn't rotten! He's all patched together!"

"What?"

As if it were trying to put my confusion to rest, string-like tendons appeared from the fallen scythe and head. With a crunching sound, the tendons stretched out to the body they'd been torn from, pulled themselves back up, and reattached themselves to the creature.

What the hell was going on?

"This monster . . . I feel like it's more than one thing! Like there's more than one? I don't think it's a good idea to keep attacking it."

"What do you mean by that?" Raphtalia shouted. She charged up for a powerful attack, swung her sword down hard, and cleaved the arm of the monster from its body.

At the moment, Raphtalia and Filo were both in the upper seventies, level-wise—so you can bet that their attacks carried considerable weight.

After participating in the class-up ceremony, the highest level limit was moved to 100. It was easy to see how much more powerful they'd become recently.

The arm hit the ground with a heavy thud and then quickly started to wiggle and writhe in the dirt. Raphtalia dashed forward and sliced through the string-like tendon.

I would have been thrilled if that were enough to stop the monster's strange regeneration, but Filo's outburst had me suspecting it wouldn't be that easy.

"Um, you know? When you like, bam crash him, there's, um . . . more!"

“Can you please do a better job explaining yourself?!”

Filo was unbelievably bad at explaining things to humans. When her friend Melty wasn’t around to translate Filo’s ramblings, it was nearly impossible to make heads or tails of the things she said.

Any attempt to parse Filo’s intentions from her mishmash of words required enormous stores of understanding, trust, and energy.

“Mr . . . Mr. Naofumi!” Raphtalia shouted, pointing at the severed arm.

I was confused for a second, but then it all became clear. The arm wiggled and twitched, and then a tangled crowd of Spirit Tortoise familiars (bat type) burst from the severed end of it.

Damn! Any attempt that we made to cut this monster down to size only resulted in making more and more of the familiars?! The monster’s name suddenly made perfect sense. It was a parasite amalgamation because the monsters had infected a giant corpse and were controlling it, even as future monsters festered inside!

A week had passed since we defeated the Spirit Tortoise.

The original, dragon-like monster might have died during the Spirit Tortoise’s original rampage, but would the whole corpse have rotted through in a week? If the temperature and all the conditions were right, then it was possible. But that didn’t explain where it would have accrued these other body parts.

It had the head of a lion. Was that part one of the Spirit Tortoise’s familiars too?

“Filo, Raphtalia. If we aren’t careful with the way we approach this, we’re just going to end up with more enemies to fight. But that doesn’t mean we are totally helpless.” I had a hunch that a powerful fire-based attack would be effective against this sort of monster. To put that in modern terms, maybe a bomb or a missile would do the trick.

But I wasn’t in Japan. The closest we could get in this world would be some kind of magic. There was ceremonial magic—powerful spells

that had to be cast by groups of people all working together.

If we couldn't attack it with powerful magic, then we'd have to tear the thing apart and focus on killing each and every monster that emerged. That sounded nearly impossible to me. There was probably some sort of core that we could attack. If we could hit it there, then it might self-destruct.

Yes—that was our best option. We had to go after whatever looked like its weak point.

"Focus your attacks on that moving part there. Where it looks like a lion."

"Understood," Raphtalia said and began to focus her magic power into her sword.

"Got it!" Filo shouted, crossing her arms in front of her and preparing to use her special move.

Both of them had mastered a couple of very powerful attacks, and I could really depend on them when push came to shove. As for myself . . . what was I supposed to do?

"Shooting Star Shield!"

I used a skill that formed a protective force field with myself at the center. It was large enough to protect Raphtalia and Filo as well.

That was the first step. I looked around quickly to make sure the townspeople had evacuated the area. They had.

The skies were filling with clouds of furiously flapping Spirit Tortoise familiars (bat types), but we couldn't do anything about them until we dealt with the enormous monster before us.

That settled it—we had to take down the big guy. But how?

We slowly approached the monster, keeping our eye on all the enemies, and made sure that we got within range of my skills.

“Mr. Naofumi. I’m ready.”

“Me too!”

“Right! Air Strike Shield! Second Shield!”

I used my shield’s skills to produce two magical shields in the air—one at the monster’s torso, one at its feet—to make it hard for the monster to maneuver around the battlefield. I had the ability to make one last shield if I needed to, but I decided to wait and see how the monster reacted.

“Gahhhhhh!” The monster slammed into a shield with its torso and let out a pained cry before it tottered back slowly, thrown off balance.

“Now!”

“Right! Ying-Yang Sword!”

“Spiral Strike!”

Raphtalia and Filo unleashed their attacks on the monster’s restrained lion head. After the strike of Raphtalia’s sword, the beast’s head was nearly torn free of its neck. Filo’s follow-up attack sent the head flying with a spray of blood.

The monster lurched and swayed, its giant body suddenly unstable on its feet.

“Yeah!”

If that had knocked the massive thing down, that would be enough. Tons of bat-type familiars would come pouring out of the corpse, but we’d just cross that bridge when we got to it.

At the exact moment my heart leapt at victory, I heard a woman’s voice behind me. “I truly hate to bear this news, but the monster still stands. See for yourself.”

Whoever was behind me pointed to the object the Spirit Tortoise

familiar was dragging.

"That is where it replenishes itself. Watch."

Just like the voice said, to replenish the missing head, the back portion of the monster twitched, and then a giant eyeball grew out of its body.

Gross.

"That thing in the back is not really the monster's true form. It is Legion . . . It infects whole groups of monsters and amalgamates them into one beast. If it runs out of something it needs, it simply takes it from somewhere else. To defeat it, you must use a more powerful attack."

I was still using Shooting Star Shield. It was a powerful defensive spell that would block everything, except my own party members, from passing through it. So there was a problem. How could someone be standing behind me telling me what to do?

Nothing could pass through the force field, so that meant that whoever it was must have materialized *inside* of it. I quickly turned around to see what was going on.

"You!?"

A mysterious woman was standing behind me. I'd seen her before. Once, just before the Spirit Tortoise started to terrorize the countryside, I'd seen this woman in the castle courtyard when I was standing there alone.

She had shiny red hair tied into a chignon and sharp Chinese-looking eyes. She looked like she could eat another human without batting an eye. Despite having grown accustomed to beautiful women like Raphtalia, this woman's face was so stunning it was noteworthy.

A strange air of innocence and charm hung unmistakably about her. Anyone would notice it. She wore a heavy robe that completely concealed her body from the neck down—a very mysterious woman, indeed.

She looked like she would instinctively speak in a whisper

Like the queen and Bitch, her skin was healthy and bright, full of hot blood—she looked vivacious, and also like she would have no qualms with using people to get what she wanted. Yes, she gave off the distinct impression of power. And she was standing right behind me.

“Now is not the time for discussion. We must first defeat the foes that stand in our way. I will restrain the monsters, while you finish them off,” she whispered softly. Then she stretched out her hand toward the monster and glared at it.

The beast completely stopped moving.

What kind of magic was that?

“Whoa . . . Um . . . Hurry! Now’s our chance!”

“Understood!”

“Filo! Use a magic spell—the strongest one you know!”

“Okay!”

Filo began to chant the spell’s incantation, and Raphtalia prepared to use Ying-Yang Sword again. They approached the newly immobile monster and unleashed their attacks with remarkable speed.

The monster was slashed to shreds. The shreds fell to the ground and wriggled like snakes, but unlike last time, they didn’t turn into other familiars, and they didn’t reattach themselves to the main body. The mysterious woman must have been preventing it somehow.

“I’m gonna use that powerful spell that Mel-chan taught me!” Filo shouted, sounding impressed with herself. She had been spending a lot of time with Melty lately. She said they were studying.

“Filo, the source of all power commands you. Hear the truth I speak, and destroy them with the angry sky’s fierce tornado!”

“Drifa Tornado!”

So she could use the Drifa class of spells now. Impressive.

I'd figured that Raphtalia would learn to use those spells first, but I guess Filo had managed to beat her to it. Although, come to think of it, Filo had learned to use the Zweite class without having to consult a magic book. I guess she was pretty talented in that area.

The sky filled with roiling clouds, and they spiraled together to form a massive tornado directly over the monster. The howling funnel of wind slowly touched down, sending all the houses in the area soaring through the air.

The debris caught up in the swirling wind ripped and tore at the monster's flesh. Soon, violent spurts of blood filled the tornado and were carried up into the sky, a red pillar of blood in the wind.

But when the wind subsided, the monster still stood, and the bulk of its mass was still holding together.

"Whew! This is one tough monster, master!"

"Damn. I guess I don't have a choice then."

I looked back to see if the woman understood what I was saying, then I slowly stepped forward. I only had one option for a powerful attack that worked over an area. It was my last resort, a special shield that I tried to avoid using as much as possible.



“Raphtalia, Filo, you should get back.”

“You’re not going to . . . Are you sure?”

“It’s too dangerous to let this thing be—I have to take care of it. If we had a group with us that could use ceremonial magic, I might have avoided this, but . . .”

“Please be careful.”

“I know. I won’t let the rage control me.”

We were talking about the Shield of Wrath, a dangerous weapon that ate away at my very heart as I used it. The last time I used the shield’s most powerful skill, I was so badly hurt that I nearly died, and when I was finally able to get out of bed, I discovered that all of my stats had fallen by two thirds due to a curse the shield had put on me. I had only recently recovered from the last time I used it, so you can see how I would want to avoid it as much as possible.

And yet faced with an enemy too powerful for Raphtalia and Filo to defeat on their own, I didn’t see any way around it. I tightened my grip on the shield and transformed it into the Shield of Wrath.

When I did, my field of vision dimmed considerably and I felt a long-slumbering rage and anger begin to stir in the depths of my heart. At the same time, I remembered Raphtalia telling me she believed in me. I remembered her saying that she knew I didn’t commit any of the crimes I was accused of. I felt a tender warmth at that recollection, and I used it to contain the howling rage that was beginning to surface.

The warmth was winning . . . for now.

I saw Filo out of the corner of my eye. Her legs and claws were engulfed in black flames. She shared a connection with the Shield of Wrath, and when the rage grew powerful, it affected her as well.

But thanks to Raphtalia and Filo, I'd learned to control my anger. They'd taught me to stay in control.

I took another step toward the monster. Then another. With each step, my feet felt like they were burning. Soon, I was very close to the beast. I turned to shoot an accusatory glare at the woman. She nodded and slowly lowered her hands.

As she did, the power she'd been using to stop the monster's movement faded, and it lunged at me, swiping with its scythe arms. I raised an arm and easily blocked its attack with my shield. The moment the scythe connected with my shield, the shield erupted in tongues of black flame.

You see, the Shield of Wrath had a special counter-attack called Dark Curse Burning S—and the monster had just activated it by attacking me. The flames used my own internal rage for fuel, and they leapt from the shield to burn the whole area.

"ARRRRRGGGGHHHH!"

"Guruuugahhhhhhhhh!"

The dark flames from the Dark Curse Burning S enveloped and burned the monster.

Then I saw the monster's skin buckle and bend, and a flapping flock of bat-type monsters came pouring forth out of the beast. They tumbled into each other in their desperate attempt to escape, but the dark flames found them. When they fell from the sky, they were clouds of ash.

Huff . . . Huff . . .

I waited until I was sure the enemy had fallen before changing my shield back to its original form.

"Oooooh! It kind of stings!" Filo shouted, shaking her hands and feet. Her eyes brimmed with tears.

“Oh you’ll be fine. I’ll heal you later.”

“Okay.”

First things first—we had to see what we were dealing with. What had happened to the Spirit Tortoise familiar (parasite amalgamation type)?

Part of the corpse was clearly nothing more than ash. Raphtalia hesitantly poked it with the point of her sword.

“It certainly *looks* dead.”

“I hope you’re right.”

I really didn’t want to use the Shield of Wrath. But what choice did I have? I was the Shield Hero—I didn’t have any other way to go on the offense. So I was forced to rely on the only shield that offered me a way to attack. If there were any other way, I wouldn’t have done it.

“Thank you for restraining that thing. So? Who are you?”

“Mr. Naofumi. Might this be the person you mentioned before?”

“Yeah, the mystery woman that showed up before all this Spirit Tortoise stuff really got going.”

“Hm?” Filo chirped. She’d turned back into her human form and was sniffing at the woman.

The last time I’d met her, she appeared behind me speaking nonsense. She’d asked me to defeat her. What was that supposed to mean? She also referred to me in the strangest way, calling me “he who holds the holy weapon.” My shield even reacted to her presence. There were too many mysteries around this woman. When I turned to ask for an explanation, she vanished—like a ghost.

“Excellent job. You have saved many in this area from certain heartache. And yet . . .” She trailed off, her eyes on the western horizon. The last time I saw her, she’d gazed off to the east. There was only one way to make sense of that—she was looking towards the

Spirit Tortoise. “You still haven’t defeated me. You who hold the holy weapon, you must defeat me soon. Already, I cannot fulfill my role, so you must defeat me quickly.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about? Who are you? Explain yourself!”

“He’s right. If you wish for Mr. Naofumi’s help, you first need to tell us who you are. How else will we be able to help you?”

The woman nodded silently after listening to Raphtalia and I.

“The last time I saw you, I was in a rush because there was so little time left to resist. But now I have the time necessary to properly explain.”

“Hey, master!”

Before the woman could start to explain herself, Filo came running over.

“Filo, be quiet for a minute.”

“But you know what? This lady—she’s not human. She’s not even a demi-human!”

“What?”

I didn’t know what to make of what Filo was saying, but I realized it soon enough.

“That’s correct. I . . . I am the Spirit Tortoise. To speak more categorically, I am a Spirit Tortoise familiar (human type).”

Chapter Three
The Spirit Tortoise Reawakens

"What?"

I couldn't wrap my mind around what she was saying, but we weren't going to get anywhere if I started out disagreeing with her. At the very least, I reasoned, I needed to hear her out.

"Alright, alright. Let me get this straight. You have time to talk, right?"

"Yes. That is the very reason I came here, but we do not have time to dally," said the woman—the Spirit Tortoise familiar (human type)—as she gazed off to the western sky.

I wanted to open a portal and take her back to the castle with us, but the cool-down time for the Portal Shield skill was long, and it wasn't ready for use yet.

We'd defeated the giant monster, but it would be a while before the evacuated townspeople came back.

"Let's talk at the adventurer's guild in town. It should be empty for a little while."

When we got there, the guild was unbelievably quiet.

Any brave adventurers in the area had left to drive the remaining Spirit Tortoise familiars out of town, but that didn't mean that the whole town was deserted. Someone was waiting to check us in to the guild. After making sure that the building was safe, he set himself to reopening the business. I showed him the document the queen had given me, and he quickly showed us to a small meeting room.

The woman familiar followed us in silence.

We entered the room, chose a quiet place where we could speak for

a while, and sat down. Then I started talking.

“Alright, how about you tell us what the hell is going on?”

The woman removed the heavy robe to reveal a Chinese dress beneath it. Her shoulders were wrapped in a delicate shawl. Once again, I got the feeling I was looking at a fairy from Chinese mythology. Her devilish eyes only made that feeling grow stronger. I half expected her to turn into a fox.

“Very well. My original role was to gain the favor of a monarch from the sealed country, in order to bring ruin to the land and end the lives of its inhabitants. I was to collect the souls of those who fell victim to the chaos.”

“Oh, um . . .”

Was I hearing her correctly? Was she confessing to the most nefarious deeds I could imagine? I started to feel strange about our meeting.

“And? Why would you do something like that?”

“To protect the world from the waves of destruction, it is necessary that we build a defensive barrier, and we need a great deal of souls to build that barrier. Of course, it doesn’t matter if they come from humans or monsters.”

“I see.”

The conversation was starting to remind me of something that Fitoria, the queen of the filolials, had said.

“Right . . . Someone who demands sacrifice for the sake of the world . . .”

Fitoria wasn’t the only one who had said something like that. We found a similar message scrawled on the wall of an ancient temple in the city on the back of the Spirit Tortoise. An ancient hero had written it there.

It all pointed to one thing. The Spirit Tortoise existed to kill things so that it could use their souls to create a giant barrier that would protect the world from destruction.

Whatever. To be honest, I didn't care one bit if the people of this world died. As long as I could protect the people I cared about, it didn't sound like a terrible option. But I wasn't going to doom the whole world—especially considering that I'd already battled the Spirit Tortoise to prevent that very thing. Not to mention I'd spent a lot of time looking for the other heroes.

"Okay, I've got a question. What does the blue hourglass in my field of vision mean? It says 'seven' next to it."

"It is not one of the dragon hourglasses. It indicates the amount of gathered souls. Seven refers to the power level of the waves."

The power level? I hadn't stopped to consider it before, but the waves had been getting more powerful each time they arrived. How many waves had I fought against? There was the first one that came after I arrived—according to everyone else, that was the second wave. Then we fought Glass in the third one. Then the fourth one came when we were in Cal Mira. Yes, thinking back on them, it was clear that they had been getting more powerful.

If it was safe to assume that they progressed in power, then the coming waves must be much more powerful than the first one, the one that had destroyed Raphtalia's village. And that meant that the Spirit Tortoise must be much stronger than any enemy we'd faced until now, since the wave that came to Cal Mira was only the fourth.

"I am powerful enough to warrant the number seven, yet you stand against me. I believe I can help you."

"Can you tell us more about the waves? The one in Melromarc should have been the third one, which means that the one in Cal Mira was . . ."

"I don't know as much as you may hope. I was created to protect the world. So I cannot tell you the exact information about each wave that occurs in various countries. However, I think it is safe to assume

that they could not have been above a power level of two or three."

Damn. That meant that after we struggled so hard to overcome a level two or three disaster, we'd have to find some way to defeat a level seven?

"Some very powerful people came out of the waves and said their mission was to kill the heroes of this world. I'm guessing they are part of the waves too?" I asked, hoping that would get to the core of the mystery. If this was an opportunity to figure out what was going on with Glass and the others, then it was an opportunity I couldn't pass up.

"I . . . don't think so. I do not believe that the waves have those sort of properties."

"Damn," I muttered. The woman was so suspicious. Was she telling the truth? "Let's change the subject. 'Spirit Tortoise familiar (human type)' is a bit of a mouthful. If you were supposed to win the favor of a monarch, I'm guessing you have an easier name to say."

"I do. My name is Ost. Ost Horai."

Ost? I'm pretty sure that meant "east" in a language back in my world. And as for Horai, that probably referred to the name of the mountain the Spirit Tortoise had on its back—pretty simple, really.

"Okay, Ost, so why did you abandon your mission and reach out to us? The Spirit Tortoise broke his own seal and started all this mess, didn't he?"

"There's an explanation for that. My true body is the Spirit Tortoise itself, though the situation has become so bad that the Spirit Tortoise is no longer able to fulfill his role in the plan. That is why I have come to ask you, who holds the holy shield, for assistance."

"And this 'role' you're talking about . . . it's the creation of a barrier to protect the world? You know we just fought the Spirit Tortoise to prevent him from doing just that?"

"Yes, but you should know that my true body has not been

defeated. And since he was awakened, he hasn't been able to make any progress towards his goal. At this rate, all of those that have been sacrificed for the sake of our goal will have died in vain."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked. I was starting to get a bad feeling about where all this was heading.

The heroes couldn't get along with each other, so Fitoria had given up on fighting the waves and instead had encouraged the Spirit Tortoise to create a barrier to protect the world. And she is saying all the sacrifices up until this point have been for nothing?

"My true body has been . . . it has been taken over by someone else. This person only wants to use me to cause more destruction."

"What?"

"I do not know what the enemy wants. It seems they are using me as a medium to collect energy, but they have no intention of using that energy to create the protective barrier the world needs."

"So your seal was broken . . ."

"Yes, but the proper unsealing procedure was not followed. In the original plan, I was to slowly and secretively gather souls. If I were not successful then other familiars would be sent out to gather the souls more quickly. Only if that was unsuccessful was my true form to be revealed in an effort to forcibly gather the necessary souls."

"So the seal doesn't really work very well, does it?"

I was asking if past heroes had taken the knowledge of how to break the seal to their graves.

"In order to prevent a plan like that from being carried out, I have been entrusted to supply the holy heroes, and the vassal weapon heroes, with hints about how to unseal the Spirit Tortoise. I cannot allow anyone to unseal my true body if that person is not capable of defeating me in combat."

"So you're supposed to look for someone that can kill you?"

“Yes. I was waiting for one who holds a holy weapon to arrive and put an end to my ambitions,” she answered so simply that I was caught off guard. The look on her face made it clear she was serious.

But what was a vassal weapon? I remembered Glass and her friends had mentioned something similar, but I had no idea what it meant. I decided to ask about it later.

“So the order of events is all messed up, and someone else was able to take control of the Spirit Tortoise. Is that even possible?”

“It should have been impossible. I don’t know what power they used to do it, but it has happened. Someone has taken control of my true body.”

“Hmm . . . But we ripped the Spirit Tortoise’s head clean off.”

“That is not enough to kill the Spirit Tortoise’s true body. Unless it is killed properly, you will not be able to stop it.”

“That reminds me, Mr. Naofumi. Didn’t you read something that the ancient heroes had written on a temple wall?”

“Yeah. Well, there were parts I couldn’t read, so most of it is still a mystery.”

Ost regarded me in silence. She was pretty, and she spoke so sincerely that I wanted to take the conversation seriously. But I couldn’t ignore the possibility that she was lying to us.

“And I’m guessing that you know the proper way to kill it?”

“Actually, that is a mystery even to myself.”

Useless! Was she trying to get us killed by giving us an impossible mission? And besides, the Spirit Tortoise had stopped moving a week ago. We were deep in conversation when someone knocked on the door.

“Excuse me!” the manager of the adventurer’s guild said, ducking into the room. His face was pale.

“What is it?”

“I have an urgent report for the Shield Hero.”

It had been bothering me for a while, so at one point I asked about the system used to convey messages in this world. It was very rare, and limited to only approved organizations, but there was a magic system that made it possible to talk to people who were very far away. It was something like a telephone. But because of the magic and technology involved, it was only possible to leave messages and not have whole conversations. Back in Japan, we probably would have called it a telegraph. Still, if you could only leave messages, then it didn’t have much advantage over just using traditional letters.

“And?”

“The Spirit Tortoise has reawakened! Your immediate presence is requested!”

Damn it. Ost had been telling the truth.

“You must defeat my true body quickly. I will do all I can to assist you.”

“Can you keep the Spirit Tortoise from moving the way you did with that familiar we just fought?”

“Unfortunately no. That would be impossible. Not only am I unable to halt the motion of my true body, but I may not be able to stop any familiars in his immediate vicinity.”

“Then what can you do?” I snapped, irritated. Had she just shown up to make demands of us? I wondered if she might actually be behind all the trouble.

“I can support you with magic, and I can also interfere with the other familiars, perhaps stalling them or dulling their movement. Hero of the holy shield, please help destroy me,” Ost said, bowing deeply.

Well, we were certainly going to need all the help we could get. In

truth, my party was sorely in need of someone who could really handle support magic. I wished that I could have my pick of helpers, but her offer was better than nothing.

"It's going to be tough, but I don't think we have a choice."

I sent Ost an invite to join my party's battle formation ranks, and she quickly accepted.

"So what sort of magic are you good with?"

"Earth magic and support magic, mainly. Furthermore, I can use magic that was long ago forgotten by humans."

Forgotten magic? This world really was like a game. You always ran into "long forgotten" spells in RPGs.

"Great. But just so you know, don't think this means I trust you."

"I understand, but I will do all I can to assist you, the holder of the holy shield, in the coming battle," she said and casually cast a spell on me. When the spell took effect, I was suddenly able to see all of Ost's important stats displayed in my field of vision. I was surprised to see how impressive they were. They might have even been better than Raphtalia's. They were a little lower than Filo's stats, but they were balanced very well. In general, her stats seemed slightly balanced towards defensive capabilities—that was probably because she was a Spirit Tortoise familiar.

I finished reading through the numbers displayed in the air, only to realize that her current level wasn't indicated anywhere.

"We should introduce ourselves. I'll start. I'm Naofumi Iwatani."

"And I am Raphtalia. Very pleased to meet you."

"And MY name's Filo! Nice you meetcha, turtle lady!"

"So there you have it. By the way, I know we're only going to be fighting together for a little while, but please stop calling me 'he who holds the holy shield.' It's too long and dramatic. Just call me the

Shield Hero," I said. That's what I was used to being called, so I would respond instinctively in the middle of battle.

"Yes, very well. I suppose I will only be with you a short while, but I'm glad to have met you all, Shield Hero, Ms. Raphtalia, Ms. Filo."

A short while . . . just until we defeated the Spirit Tortoise, right? That's what Ost was after, so I guess we would part ways once that happened. But she was a Spirit Tortoise familiar too, so if we defeated the Tortoise, then . . .

I still didn't completely believe everything she was saying, but I knew that we were about to head into another thorny situation. I sighed and checked through my party inventory, which now included the Spirit Tortoise familiar (human type) who called herself Ost.

"Hey, I've got another question."

"What is it?"

"You've been calling me the holder of the 'holy shield.' Is that right?"

"Yes. That is what it was called by the older versions of what are now known as the four holy heroes."

That was exactly the answer I was expecting, but then what was the vassal weapon? "And what's a vassal weapon?"

"It is the title of someone who holds the power to assist the holy weapons."

The power to assist? I'd never heard of anyone like that. The only thing I knew of that was even remotely similar was the seven star heroes.

"Are you talking about the people called the seven star heroes?"

"Perhaps . . ."

Maybe she was just using an ancient name for them. But if that were true, was that the connection between the four holy and the seven star legends?

“Regardless, I confess I’m not an expert on the topic.”

“Sure, right. Anyway, that’s enough talking for now. I’m going to open a portal to the place where we defeated the Spirit Tortoise.”

I concentrated on the shield in my hand and used Portal Shield. I could actually activate the skill without saying anything out loud. When the spell activated, a list of saved locations appeared, floating in the air before me. The skill was capable of storing three different locations. If you wanted to add new places to the list, you would have to delete the old locations, starting from the oldest on the list. Managing the list of locations was a bit of a pain, but I had no choice but to keep on top of it.

Anyway, I was about to choose the location of the fallen Spirit Tortoise from the list when a sandstorm appeared in my vision, obscuring that option.

“What the hell?” I yelped.

“What is it?”

“When I tried to choose the last location of the Spirit Tortoise, a cloud of dust—”

Before I could finish explaining, a message appeared over the swirling dust.

Unable to teleport

The words flashed on and off.

Damn.

“You were attempting to use a teleportation spell, yes? There is a good chance that my true body is exerting a powerful influence on that location, thereby rendering teleportation there impossible.”

I supposed I should have expected something like that. Of course we weren’t able to teleport back the Spirit Tortoise. That would be too easy! If we had to travel on foot to where the Spirit Tortoise had fallen, it was going to take a long time to get there from where we were. It might be faster to teleport back to Melromarc and go from there.

“We’re going to head back to Melromarc first. Besides, there’s no reason for us to take on the Spirit Tortoise alone.”

“Understood. This way we can ask the castle soldiers, Rishia, and Ms. Eclair for their assistance.”

“I concur,” Ost nodded. She had a strange way of speaking. She was certainly polite, but she had such an evil look in her eyes. I was never sure how best to respond to her.

She behaved so differently from how she appeared.

“What’s wrong, master?” Filo asked, looking up at me with her head cocked to the side. I turned my eyes away. Sometimes she looked like she was staring right into my soul.

“Alright. Let’s head back to Melromarc.”

I chose the castle courtyard from the displayed list of available locations, and we flew there in an instant. When we arrived, we found the queen and the soldiers, and even Rishia and Eclair, deep in frantic departure preparations.

“Ah, Mr. Iwatani! I trust that you received our correspondence?”

“Yeah, you say the Spirit Tortoise is moving again?”

“That’s correct. Hadn’t you returned from your search, we would have gone to investigate ourselves.”

“I don’t know if my luck is good or bad.”

What if the queen had been there when the Spirit Tortoise had reawakened? She could have been killed!

“What is the coalition army doing?”

“Soldiers that were patrolling the area immediately returned to base. A number of them were not able to make it, however, and we have lost contact with them.”

Things weren’t looking good.

“By the way, that individual with you, isn’t that Ost Horai? Isn’t she some king’s mistress?”

“Yes, we have met a number of times, haven’t we, your majesty?” Ost said, lowering her head to the queen.

For a second, I thought the two wicked women were going to enter a staring contest, but Ost bowed deeper to show her sincerity. She kept her head bowed and showed no sign of moving.

The queen seemed surprised by Ost’s actions. Her eyes were wide with disbelief.

What was so surprising about it? Wasn’t it normal to bow to royalty?

“And how have you come to be involved in all this? I never expected you to bow like this to someone like me.”

“You know each other?”

“I met her at the last diplomatic meeting of nations. She was with a king and his servants.”

“To dispense with the formalities, we were political enemies at the time,” Ost said simply. “Our nation is a private, isolated one, though much of the nobility wanted to participate in the talks. To be honest with you, I played the role of a nasty woman.”

Okay, so the wicked woman was actually part of wicked government too? From the way Ost had been acting with us, I never would have guessed that she was involved with such a thing.

"And how did that king's mistress find herself traveling with Mr. Iwatani?"

"Ah, the wise queen, they call you the fox of Melromarc, you know. Listen, and I will tell you how this came to be. I tell you because you, too, are cooperating with he who holds the holy shield."

Ost told the queen all about her status as a Spirit Tortoise familiar and about how someone had taken control of the Spirit Tortoise's true body. And she told her about how the tortoise would no longer be able to fulfill its role. Speaking in public, Ost continued to refer to me as "he who holds the holy shield."

The queen slapped her folding fan shut and tapped her chin with it while she thought.

"Our goal has always been to stop the Spirit Tortoise from fulfilling its designs. I cannot immediately believe all that you say, but I cannot deny the possibility of truth, either."

"I feel the same way. So getting back to what we should do about it, it doesn't look like I'm going to be able to teleport to where we defeated the Spirit Tortoise. We're all going to have to depart together, from Melromarc."

"Like Mr. Iwatani has said. I also believe that is our only way forward."

"Before we leave, we should probably call a meeting and get a strategy together. Aside from that, are we all ready to leave?"

"Yes, the preparations are all complete."

"Then let's get going!" I shouted to the soldiers gathered in the castle courtyard. They cheered.

Chapter Four
Spirit Tortoise Tyrant

We left the castle and travelled for a day, during which we heard all the details related to the Spirit Tortoise's reawakening. From what people said, it was focusing its efforts on populated areas. Even worse, people were saying that its attacks were even more powerful than they had been and there were more casualties than the last time.

"The Spirit Tortoise has crossed the border into Melromarc and appears to be heading for the castle."

"Oh no . . ."

Inside the carriage, the queen unrolled a parchment map and indicated the current location of the Spirit Tortoise as well as its apparent heading. It was very close to our current position and we would probably be able to see it pretty soon.

"There are already reports of mass casualties in Melromarc," the queen said pensively.

I understood perfectly well what was happening. After all, I'd spent quite a bit of time wandering around the country. I had probably visited a number of the towns the Spirit Tortoise had destroyed.

"So what were you saying about the proper way to defeat the Spirit Tortoise? You said it could only be defeated a certain way."

"That's correct."

"We cut the damn thing's head clean off last time."

"As I have already said, that was clearly not sufficient to prevent it from reawakening."

"Reports from the area indicate that she speaks the truth. They say that a new head grew from the corpse before the Spirit Tortoise

awakened."

Looking at it from a different perspective, at least we knew that blasting its head off would buy us some time before the monster was able to get back on its feet. We could do it again if we needed to. That would give us time to research the way to defeat it for good.

"What have you heard from the seven star heroes?"

The seven star heroes were legendary heroes like the four holy heroes and they had their own legendary weapons. From what I'd heard, they fought for the sake of the world, just like we did, but because they operated in a different part of the world, I'd never had an occasion to meet them.

"Because they were investigating the lands where the Spirit Tortoise was originally imprisoned, it will take them a little while to reach us here."

"Useless, as always," I muttered. We had been on our way to meet with them while we searched for the other missing heroes. At one point we'd been relatively close to where they were supposed to be operating. Maybe I should have taken a trip to meet them myself? With Portal Shield at my disposal, it was easy enough to get back to where I needed to be, after all. But I had never met them, so I didn't know who I was looking for. Coordinating a meeting would have taken a considerable amount of effort on my part. I didn't know if they were powerful enough to warrant it. At the very least, I hoped they were more powerful than the other three missing heroes were.

"Hey, queen."

"Yes, what is it?"

"How strong are the seven star heroes?" I asked. The queen frowned and fell into deep thought. I didn't think I was asking such a difficult question.

"May I be frank with you?"

"Yeah."

“From what I have seen, they are not as powerful as you are. Naturally, I don’t claim to have witnessed the full extent of their abilities, so I cannot speak with confidence, however . . .”

“I see.”

“But I believe they may well be able to match Ms. Raphtalia or Ms. Filo in battle.”

Well, I suppose that was better than nothing. If they were only as powerful as Filo and Raphtalia, that wasn’t going to do me much good. I already had those two on my side. I wished I had more people standing with me, but if this was all we had to work with, then it probably made more sense for Raphtalia, Filo, and I to go ahead of the others.

“Then, just like last time, we . . .” I tried to explain my thought process to the queen, but Filo interrupted, screaming.

“Master! Master! Look!”

“What is it, Filo?!”

Filo was pointing to something on the horizon. I followed her finger to see something shooting up into the sky. What was it?

At first glance, I thought it looked like a missile, but there weren’t any missiles in this world, were there? This place was like the middle ages, so how could there be . . .

I was thinking it over when I heard a sound and turned to see thousands of birds fleeing the forests around us. It looks like the very clouds themselves were running away.

A sinking feeling gripped my gut, but I didn’t have time to sit around and think about it. I turned back to see enormous spear-like objects raining down from the sky. They fell straight down on the mountains on the horizon, just where we were heading.

And then, just like a scene out of a war movie, a series of loud explosions echoed off the mountains, followed by strong gusts of wind

that rattled the carriage. I squinted to see where the objects had fallen and I saw pillars of fire. No, they converged to form giant domes of fire, many of them.

It looked like the end of the world. The trees were all ablaze, and the earth shook with the concussive force of the explosions. What would happen in my own world if someone were to set off a series of massive explosions so powerful they changed the shape of the ground? It was horrifying to imagine—but it was already happening here.

"What the hell was that?"

Raphtalia and Filo were both staring at the explosions, mouths agape, just as aghast as I was.

"Fehhh . . . How scary!"

"Rishia, get it together."

"He's right, girl. I gather we're on our way to meet those explosions," the old lady said.

"Fehhh!"

The back of the carriage was in a raucous uproar. What a pain.

"Hey. Do you think the Spirit Tortoise did that?"

That couldn't be it. We'd already battled the Spirit Tortoise, and it hadn't used any attacks like that. Its strongest attack had been an electric beam that could shoot through a mountain. It was more likely that we were witnessing some kind of ceremonial magic performed by the coalition army against the Spirit Tortoise.

"Perhaps . . . There is a ceremonial spell called 'Meteorite' that groups can perform in concert. I suspect that is the source of what we are seeing."

"Huh?" Filo chirped, turning her head to the side. She seemed suspicious of the queen, who looked nervous and fidgety as she

stumbled through an explanation. What was going on? If the explosions weren't the work of the coalition army, we were in big trouble.

"Hey, master!"

"What?"

"I don't think that's it. Something about it doesn't feel like magic to me!"

"Oh come on, Filo. If that isn't magic, then what is it? It looks like heavy artillery from my world!"

"Could it be?" Ost muttered to herself while she watched the explosions. "I believe the Shield Hero's servant is . . . correct."

What the . . . Did she mean that the explosions really were an attack by the Spirit Tortoise?

The carriage rounded a bend in the road and emerged from it with a much better view of the distant violence. But I wasn't ready for what I saw.

"Hey. Wasn't the Spirit Tortoise the size of a mountain? Didn't he cause horrible destruction just by walking around?"

"My true body has been taken over. Please, Shield Hero. You must defeat me!"

Finally, the Spirit Tortoise stepped into view. It was different than the last time I'd seen it—it even looked like it had rabies. A long web of drool dangled from its gaping mouth, and its eyes appeared to glow red while the beast stomped the ground.

When I'd last seen the tortoise, the remnants of a town had adorned its shell, but the town was so diminished that it was practically invisible. It may have fallen off while the monster walked across the world, or it might have been thrown off as part of the reawakening. It was hard to tell what had happened, but the whole shell looked different. Now it was covered in towering, wicked spike-

like thorns. The Spirit Tortoise had changed. Now it looked like an enormous, crazed, wild beast.

Somehow, the monster had accrued even more power for itself. Because it looked so different, I decided to call it Spirit Tortoise Tyrant. The monster was even walking faster than it had before.

This was impossible! I couldn't imagine us winning a battle against such a beast. Just when I was about to wallow in despair, the Spirit Tortoise stopped in its tracks.

"What's happening?"

I got my answer before I could finish the question. The towering spikes on its back moved back and forth, and then a number of them shot straight up into the air. I followed them with my eyes as they sailed up through the clouds, slowed, turned, and fell back to the earth.

Then, just like we'd just seen, the area around the Spirit Tortoise was filled with towering pillars of fire and smoke.

So . . . It must have been an area-wide attack, right?

What the hell were we up against? How were we supposed to fight something like that?

A nearby town had been completely obliterated. There was nothing left.

I'd seen an attack like that in a game I played once, a long time ago. In the game, the attack destroyed the whole world. And we were supposed to fight this thing? If this were a game, the Spirit Tortoise would definitely be the final boss. But this wasn't a game. This was a real world. It wouldn't end, even if we won the battle.

If what Fitoria said could be trusted, then the waves would stop coming and the Spirit Tortoise would go back to sleep—that is, if we let it do what it wanted. But if what Ost said was true, and someone else had taken control of the Spirit Tortoise, then we had to defeat it to make it stop. And judging by the last attack I'd seen, if we left the

tortoise alone, it really might destroy the whole world.

I sighed. Facing a battle like this, who would volunteer to fight if a hero didn't lead the vanguard?

"Alright! Where's the coalition army?"

We had to get together and strategize. I scanned the area for signs of the army from our vantage point on the road. Where the hell was it? The landscape was covered in a thick blanket of debris, and it was hard to make anything out.

"There it is!" the queen shouted, pointing.

Following her gaze, I saw the army split into many groups, roughly surrounding the tortoise at a distance. They were on the move, and it was actually a good idea. The Spirit Tortoise chose its targets based on the number of people in the group, and therefore damage resulted in greater loss of life. If the army split up and kept moving, the tortoise would have a hard time focusing on anyone in particular.

"We have to get down there and meet up with them. Come on, Filo!"

"Yeah!"

We set our sights on the fractured coalition army and took off running.

Chapter Five
Mass Destruction

Compared to the last time I had seen it, the coalition army was fractured. Still, I assumed it was successful in drawing the Spirit Tortoise's attacks—there was plenty of destruction. But I didn't see many casualties.

We decided to have our strategy meeting inside of a carriage and we kept moving.

The queen, Ost, and I all squeezed into a carriage that was already packed with soldiers from the army.

"My apologies for the venue," a commander of the army said to me. I recognized him from the last battle with the Spirit Tortoise.

"It's not your fault. That's just how it is."

"Unfortunately, I wasn't able to prepare an airship."

"I didn't even know that you had one," I muttered. I should have expected as much—this was another world, after all.

"Faubrey has an airship that it has agreed to lend us. Unfortunately, it did not arrive in time."

Considering how suddenly this had all happened, it probably hadn't even made it to Melromarc yet. I wondered if the seven star heroes were on it.

"Waiting for something that may never come will do us no good. What the hell is going on out there?"

"When the Spirit Tortoise reawakened, it had already taken on this new form. I suppose you were not able to make anything out from here, but the town on its shell is still there."

“Oh.” The spikes must have obscured it from view.

“This is the information our research division was able to obtain,” the man said as he passed me a thick, substantial stack of papers. I flipped through it and quickly found the report that detailed the rediscovery of the town on the beast’s shell.

But we didn’t have time to flip through reports. I’d have to delegate the reading to a smart person. “Read through it and report back to me. I’ll give a copy of this to Rishia as well. It might be the best way for her to contribute to the battle efforts.”

“Understood.”

“Pardon my intrusion, Shield Hero, but who is this woman behind you?”

“She’s a Spirit Tortoise familiar.”

“What?!”

A look of shock swept over the faces of the assembled army generals.

I couldn’t blame them.

“In another country, she is known as Ost Horai. Please see to it that you become acquainted.”

Ost politely bowed to the army officers, who only answered with pointed fingers and gaping mouths. When everyone had calmed down, we explained all that we had learned about the true aim of the Spirit Tortoise, as well as Ost’s claim that it had been taken over by someone with nefarious intentions.

“So the Spirit Tortoise is an even greater threat than we imagined.”

“Yes, but we must destroy it either way, so I don’t see how this new information affects our plans.”

“Yes, well, that’s true . . .”

“I hope to cooperate with you all,” Ost said.

“How presumptuous of you! Do you have any idea how many people have died because of you and the Spirit Tortoise?”

“Burdened with terrible knowledge, I had no choice but to procure the necessary sacrifices. However, what is now happening is no longer within the purview of my goals, and I condemn it. However, I will not apologize for actions I took on behalf of the greater good.”

The queen intervened in the conversation to mediate the growing hostilities between Ost and the army. “While this woman’s goals may not have been in line with our own, she was still trying to save our world. This is no time for squabbles over the past. She has offered her assistance in the coming battle, and we will need it.”

She tried, but it wasn’t convincing. The generals stood with their arms crossed, doubtful expressions on their faces.

“Originally, they were to be a last defense for the world. They were to save it when the heroes were not strong enough to do so. She was only a representative for the Spirit Tortoise, who required sacrifices to fulfill his mission,” I explained.

But the generals were not interested in hearing it.

“Such a woman should be butchered on the spot!”

Ost quietly shut her eyes and closed a fist around the sleeve of her robe as she endured the insults and shouts of the soldiers.

“Sacrifices . . . right.”

I turned to the army generals and muttered quietly. “Who can save the world without requiring sacrifices? Is that how war works? Who can save anything without sacrifices?”

Everyone looked confused. They turned their heads to the side and stared at me, puzzled. The look on their faces made it clear that they had no idea what I was getting at. But I was at the end of my rope—a guy can only put up with insanity for so long.

The last time we'd fought the Spirit Tortoise, I'd done my best to put on a good face and give a rousing speech, but I was quickly running out of patience with the army generals, and I thought it was about time someone put them in the their place.

"You know what? Whenever anything goes bad around here, what do you do? You summon heroes to fight for you. You think that the heroes will save you. Has it ever occurred to you that you are asking for the heroes to sacrifice themselves?"

"Heroes . . . sacrifice?"

"The heroes exist to solve your problems, right?"

I had to correct their misunderstandings, starting with the basics. These idiots clearly didn't understand that we might not share the same perspective.

"Let me be more blunt. There's no significant difference between what the Spirit Tortoise does and what you do with the heroes—you both sacrifice others to save the world. Get it?"

"How dare you!"

"Am I wrong? Don't you summon heroes here to save the world for you? How is that different from *sacrificing* the heroes to save the world? If heroes have to die to secure your own safety, would you even hesitate?"

"Um . . ."

They must have finally begun to understand what I was saying. Half of the generals fell silent, and the other half stood there with their mouths open, unable to process what they were hearing.

"The heroes have a duty to fight on behalf of the world! What's so strange about that?"

I sighed. The last time I'd been with the army, I'd given a speech where I said things like "heroes are a matter of the heart" and "heroes never give up in the face of adversity—heroes protect people!" Did I

need to recant my whole speech?

"Heroes are courageous, and heroes have the strength necessary to fight on behalf of others. But that doesn't mean I'm your pawn, does it? No matter how much power a hero commands, they are still a human being, aren't they? We aren't sacrificial offerings!"

Many people in the crowd looked uncomfortable when they heard "sacrificial offerings." This was an army that was forced to rely on external power for their own protection, which must have made them feel weak. If I wanted to hurt them, that was the note to hit.

"How is that different from the rest of you here today? You can all be sacrificed to the Spirit Tortoise to save the world, can't you? Isn't *that* obvious?"

The angry generals appeared to come to their senses.

"If you want to say that the heroes are different from the people of this world, so of course they should be treated differently, or something absurd like that, then I am not going to help fight this battle. When you're dead and gone, I'll help the remaining ones, the ones that understand what I'm trying to say, defeat the Spirit Tortoise. How does that sound?"

"Damn you."

"Shield Hero . . ." Ost said, raising her eyes to meet mine.

The queen stepped in between the army and myself and attempted to mediate. "This is not the time to debate our responsibilities. The Spirit Tortoise was originally a monster that fought on behalf of the world, though not necessarily on behalf of humans. That is no longer the Spirit Tortoise we face. The monster out there is simply out for destruction, for blood. Is there anything left to debate? Isn't it clear that we must defeat the beast?"

Everyone fell silent as they listened to the queen.

She was right. No matter how the debate proceeded, the answer was going to be the same. We had to defeat the Spirit Tortoise. The

option to sacrifice lives to the Spirit Tortoise so that the world might be saved . . . That option didn't even exist anymore.

"Even if we were not in possession of these new facts, our goals and responsibilities would not change. It is just as Mr. Iwatani has said. There is no problem with Ms. Ost."

"But what are we supposed to do? We were not able to stand against the Spirit Tortoise during the last battle, and it appears to have become more powerful in the interim."

"Isn't there only one thing that we can do? Just like last time, my party and I will lead the charge. We'll cut the damn thing's head off and buy ourselves time to find other options."

"But . . ."

I could understand their hesitation. During the last battle, I had barely managed to protect everyone from the monster's powerful attacks, and those attacks had grown much more powerful now. What if I wasn't able to withstand them anymore?

"Ost, you said that you don't know how to defeat the Spirit Tortoise, right?"

"Correct. My role was simply to pave the way for the Spirit Tortoise's awakening. I was simply to supply the heroes with hints regarding the method to break the seal on the Spirit Tortoise's imprisonment."

She wasn't going to be much help, but I suppose it was better than not having her on our side at all.

"Isn't their anything you can tell us? Anything at all?"

"When I was ingratiating myself with the royal family, I did learn about the Spirit Tortoise legends."

"Great. Go talk with Rishia—she's the girl wearing the kigurumi back in my carriage. She might be able to figure something out from your stories."

“Very well,” Ost said, leaving to return to the carriage we’d come in.

Something about the way she moved struck me as odd. She moved lightly, as if she was unaffected by gravity, when she leapt down from the carriage. Something about her seemed . . . inhuman. Was it because she was a Spirit Tortoise familiar (human type)?

I turned to address the queen. “You should probably join in on those talks.”

“Agreed. And I’m quite interested to hear more about the Spirit Tortoise legends. Hopefully we’ll be able to glean a hint from them.”

The queen had apparently made a hobby out of studying various legends of the world. In this case, I hoped that her hobby would lead us to a path forward.

“In the meantime, we have our own things to discuss. What sort of formation should we use in the attack? The monster’s attacks have grown stronger too. How are we to avoid them for long enough to make a counter-attack?”

“Good questions. To begin with, I suggest that, just like last time, we lure the monster to a place that is best suited for battle.”

“How are the evacuations proceeding?”

“The Spirit Tortoise is moving much faster than last time, and the evacuations are a little behind schedule.”

That wasn’t good, but it wasn’t so different from the last time.

“However, compared to the last time, the Spirit Tortoise appears to have taken a greater interest in the movements of the coalition army. I believe we will be able to draw its attention for long enough to allow the evacuations to proceed before the battle begins in earnest.”

“That would be ideal.”

The last time we faced the Spirit Tortoise, it seemed more

interested in proceeding on to the next population center than it did with entering a skirmish with the army. If it cared more about the army now, that might give us an advantage.

"The Spirit Tortoise's attacks have grown very powerful, but there appear to be fewer familiars in the area. The tortoise also stops from time to time, so I believe we are having a fair amount of success in drawing its attention. At the moment, the beast has yet to use the sort of powerful attacks it deployed against the Shield Hero in the last battle. We can only hope . . ."

"True. We'll be in trouble when the tortoise starts to use those attacks again."

During the last battle, the Spirit Tortoise familiars had attacked along with the Spirit Tortoise proper. With so many monsters and people in the mix, it had been nearly impossible to distinguish between friend and foe. However, its shooting attack appeared to have a limited range, which was something we could be grateful for.

Huh? Did they say that it stops from time to time?

I turned around to see what they meant, and sure enough, the Spirit Tortoise was standing still, staring off into space.

We stopped the carriage, too.

"When the beast stops moving like this, it tends to stay still for anywhere from thirty minutes up to two hours."

"Hmm . . ."

That was another thing to be grateful for. If the Spirit Tortoise moved nonstop, then the army would never be able to escape its attacks. Everything had limited stamina—carriages too. Whether horses or filolials pulled them, they had to stop from time to time.

"Make sure you keep your wits about you once we enter close-quarters combat. There's no telling what that thing might do."

"We will do as you say, Mr. Iwatani."

In the end, our only option was to force our way though and try to buy ourselves more time. We spent the rest of the meeting with the coalition army going over the details of the plan. Once we had agreed on a plan, I went back to my own carriage.

"Welcome back. Were you able to agree on a battle strategy?" Raphtalia asked.

Eclair and the old lady were already asking the queen the same questions.

Rishia and Ost were deep in conversation. They referenced a stack of papers while they spoke.

"We'll arrive at the intended battleground shortly. The battle will start when the Spirit Tortoise begins to move again."

The Spirit Tortoise had stopped walking, but it was still keeping an eye on its surroundings. It appeared to be cautious. If anyone approached it while it was still, it would immediately start moving again and attack. All of that was well and fine, but I was curious about what seemed to be happening to the landscape around the resting Spirit Tortoise.

As if to answer my private question, Ost stood and spoke. "The Spirit Tortoise is absorbing power from the earth. It is preparing to use that powerful attack you saw. You must be very careful."

"You mean the attack where it shoots those spikes from its shell."

"Yes."

Ost was the only one who could sense the beast accumulating power.

"Should we attack while it is resting like this?"

"The earlier you can attack, the better. But if you are not fully prepared, then you should not attack."

"Why is that?"

“Further down from here, in the direction the Spirit Tortoise is proceeding, the earth has less power. If we wait until it gets there, it will have a harder time replenishing its energy stores.”

“That’s great information. By the way, what is this energy, this power, that you’re talking about?”

“There are two types. One is what you might call experience. The other is a form of magic that is in the atmosphere.”

Ost seemed to know a lot about how the world worked.

“So we should wait?”

“I believe so, yes. And it will give us all more time to prepare for the battle.”

“Alright then.”

Getting prepared wasn’t too difficult. We’d already done it plenty of times before, so we just needed to go through the motions.

“Soon . . . Soon enough, we’ll be fighting the Spirit Tortoise again,” said Raphtalia.

“Yeah. Just like last time, I think we should try to cut off its head. At the very least, that will buy us time to figure out how to defeat it for good.”

We still didn't know how to defeat it permanently. Of course, it would be better if we had the time to search for a permanent solution, but I had to admit that there was a ball of anxiety in my stomach that wasn’t going away.

For the moment, there was nothing we could do but silently watch the Spirit Tortoise’s giant bulk on the horizon and wait for time to pass.

Chapter Six
Versus the Spirit Tortoise, Opening Stages

An hour passed.

"The Spirit Tortoise is moving!" Filo shouted from her post in front of the carriage. I looked out from the back to see the tortoise. It turned its bloodshot eyes on the coalition army and began to chase after it.

"The battle will begin any moment now. Mr. Iwatani, I wish you luck," the queen said. She had been speaking with Ost and Rishia, but now she climbed out of the carriage.

I'd spent the hour reading through the stack of reports we'd received. It had taken a long time to work through the documents, because they were filled with obnoxiously ornate sentences and quotations that were written in foreign character sets. I couldn't say how many different languages the reports had contained, but it was amazing that Rishia and the queen had been able to read them without much trouble. I had to ask them to read each of those parts to me, and the hour had flown by. Once I'd made it halfway through the document, I started skipping over anything written in characters I didn't understand.

As for the stories Ost had heard about the Spirit Tortoise's imprisonment, I didn't understand anything about it that hadn't been included in the report. Besides, I got tired of hearing the constant refrain of "much knowledge has been lost over the years." Sure, the beast had been imprisoned a long time ago, but how was that an excuse for forgetting everything you'd once known about it? I asked the queen how that could have happened, and she said that many records had been burned and lost throughout centuries of war.

I suppose that if you lost a nation's legends and records—especially if the nation itself vanished—there wasn't any way to recover the

information. Even the country on the Spirit Tortoise's shell had changed names and governments after weathering two wars.

But there was also a legend in the documents that said the seven star heroes' weapons had been lost for a time, until new heroes arrived and found them. There was even a legend that said, even though the dragon hourglasses hadn't existed, that the seven star heroes had demanded access to them. I suppose that no matter what world you're in, each country has its own version of history.

"So? Did you find any information we can work with?"

"Feh . . ." Rishia whimpered, somehow scared.

Had I sounded angry enough to scare her? She was terrified of everything. I guessed that her intimidated response meant that she didn't have any confidence in what she'd learned or she didn't know what to say.

"Um, well, about the particular methods needed to defeat the Spirit Tortoise . . . They say that it is possible, if you can get inside of the monster's body."

". . ."

Did she think I could just crawl up onto its back to take a look?

In the distance, the Spirit Tortoise shot a round of the spike-like missiles from its back. Explosions and flashes of light soon followed, and my shadow fell over Rishia. That was all that had happened, but for some reason Rishia thought that I was angry with her, and she started to twitch in fear.

"Feh! And they say that there was information left behind by ancient heroes, inscribed in stone . . ."

Inscribed in stone? That must have been the message I'd found from the old heroes. The messages were often written in Japanese, and there was no one else around that could read it.

But all the heroes came from different worlds, and while those

worlds all had a version of Japan in them, they were still different. That meant the grammar and vocabulary could be different too. I wasn't so sure I was able to fully understand what was written. We'd found another one of these messages in a temple on the Spirit Tortoise's back, and fortunately I'd understood a lot of it.

"Ost, can you read it?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"Did the documents include reproductions or a sketch of the message?"

"Fehhh . . ."

Well, the stones were probably so old and crumbled that any message on them would be illegible by now. I could understand how someone would have trouble making out what was written. I wished they'd finished their research before the damn Spirit Tortoise started moving again!

Rishia continued whimpering as she fumbled through the pages. But then, a moment later, she produced a sheet of paper that included a sketch. I guess she had done her best to look into it.

Luckily, I could understand some of it. The rest of the sentence was impossible to make out, as the stone it had been written on was too old and crumbled, but . . .

Goal is . . . Waves . . . World . . . Prevent.

World . . . Prevent?

What were they preventing? Destruction? Extinction? Didn't the tortoise make a magic barrier to protect the world?

"Ost, you said the Spirit Tortoise exists to protect the world with a

magic force field, right?"

"Yes, as far as I know."

But the inscription could have meant something else.

What were the waves? I still had no idea what they actually were. The more we looked into the mystery of the Spirit Tortoise, the more we were confronted with the continuing mystery.

"Couldn't it be saying that it's trying to prevent something that results from the waves?"

"I'm sorry, I don't understand the language."

I sighed. Oh well, this wasn't the time to be figuring this stuff out anyway. I decided to save the rest of our investigation until after the battle was over. At the very least, it seemed likely that the rest of the heros' message was somewhere up on the tortoise's back.

"Right, got it. Ok then, we're just going to have to force the Spirit Tortoise to stop moving long enough for us to get up onto its back and find out how to stop it permanently."

"Understood."

"Very well."

From outside the carriage, I heard Filo shout, "Got it Maaaaster!"

Rishia whimpered, and Eclair adjusted her grip on the hilt of her sword. The old lady gave an energetic shout and struck a battle pose.

"Let's do this! Filo, take us to the Spirit Tortoise! Don't stop until we are right up under its eyes—and don't let it hit you!"

We took off running at full speed, straight for the crazed Spirit Tortoise.

“You all better get inside my force field! Shooting Star Shield!”

A transparent, protective barrier appeared around me. It was very powerful, so I hoped it could stop most of the Spirit Tortoise’s attacks.

When the beast noticed our carriage barreling straight for it, it lowered its head to meet us. During the last battle it had fired energy beams from its mouth, and that had been its most powerful attack. At the moment, it didn’t seem like it was preparing to do anything like that.

A shrieking sound filled the air, and the spikes on the beast’s shell shot into the sky.

“Damn!”

Filo turned her eyes to the sky and deftly dodged left and right to avoid the falling spikes. The scenery in my peripheral vision flew by in a flash. We must have been moving very quickly. The wheels of the carriage clattered angrily over the pebbles and rocks in the path. We were borrowing it from the army, so I didn’t care if it broke.

The sense of the massive Spirit Tortoise was slowly growing to fill more and more of my vision as we approached . . . it was a novel thing. It was something you would never see in Japan. If you were to drive on a straight road directly towards the mountains, it might have felt similar.

The carriage shook violently as we ran. I turned back to see Eclair and Raphtalia desperately struggling to hold on. Ost regarded the scene in silence and then stretched out her hands. She appeared to be concentrating, and then she began to chant a magical incantation.

“I, Ost Horai, command the heavens, command the earth, defy all reason, join, and spit up blood. Oh great strength, I command you—loosen the hold of gravity on them!”

“Gravity Reversal, Float!”

Raphtalia and the others lightly lifted off from the carriage floor and floated in the air. Floating in the air, they were able to compose

themselves without being knocked around by the violent shaking.

"Wow . . ."

"I've never seen such magic."

"While there are still monsters that can use it, humans lost the knowledge of this spell long ago. We are about to enter battle, so I have used my power to levitate your comrades."

"How convenient."

I wondered if the spell's use was somehow restricted. Would Filo be able to learn it? She liked to run carriages ragged, much to the dismay of our passengers. A levitation spell would come in handy for sure.

"This spell uses my own power to produce its effects. The effects vary depending on the medium who casts the spell."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes. I am capable of manipulating the gravity fields around myself, so this spell is simply an extension of that ability."

So that explained why she had looked so strange when she jumped out of the carriage. She really wasn't . . . human.

"If we ever have the time to talk at our leisure, I would certainly teach you how to use it, Shield Hero."

"You think I can use it?"

"We will need luck on our side, but I believe I can teach you."

That sounded like a good deal to me. I wondered if she would be able to teach me some offensive magic spells as well. As things stood at the moment, I could only use support and restorative magic.

"Still, the method must be different. If you were to attempt to use your own power the way I've used mine, you could kill yourself.

Human magic is quite a bit more powerful than my own."

"Really?"

"Yes. My magic normally relies on drawing the latent power of the earth, the water, ores, and so on. It has a different effect depending on the medium."

Listening to Ost, I was reminded of the magic system in a game I'd played once, a long time ago. Though, actually, come to think of it, it sounded a lot like the sort of magic Therese had used. She had used jewels—jewels imbedded in various accessories she wore—as a medium to cast spells. When she used her spells, the jewels she'd equipped flashed in response. It must have been the same thing that Ost was talking about.

"Can you do the same thing with jewels or gemstones?"

"Yes. They are a very suitable medium for casting spells. One of the easier mediums, actually."

Well, that explained it. It must have been the same type of magic that Therese used. She'd had access to a lot of powerful spells, so it would be great if I could learn to do the same thing. With any luck, I might even be able to manage an offensive spell or two, which would make my life a lot easier. If the root of the power was the medium and not myself, then it shouldn't matter that my natural aptitude was only for supportive and restorative magic.

"Great. I can't wait to learn—if we have the time, that is."

"Yes."

"I suppose we should thank you for the unsolicited lecture on magic?" Eclair said quietly.

"Ost is the only reason we have made it as far as we have. Please keep your grumblings to yourself," Raphtalia said, giving Eclair a warning.

Filo kept running as fast as she could, turning quickly to the left,

then the right, bouncing and bounding with incredible speed towards the Spirit Tortoise. From time to time, one of the explosions or missiles would rock the carriage, but luckily my Shooting Star Shield force field was strong enough to protect us from any real damage. Still, it was a bumpy ride. You wouldn't want an arm or a leg to stick out from the barrier. That much was sure.

Were it not for Ost's magic, we would all be nauseous and throwing up by the time we got with striking distance of the beast.

"R . . . Right."

We brought the conversation to close just in time to see the massive head of the Spirit Tortoise lower down to our level and blink its bloodshot eyes at us.

"Raphtalia, Filo, finish it in one hit. Start preparing now. Eclair, old lady, you two focus on counter-attacks. Rishia, Ost, you're on support duty!"

They all nodded, and began to prepare for battle.

"ROOAAAAARR!"

The Spirit Tortoise's powerful attack began in earnest. Huge spikes rained down from the sky all around us!

"Shield Prison! Air Strike Shield! Second Shield! Dritte Shield!"

I cast Shield Prison around the carriage and deployed the other three shields in the air over our heads.

"Shooting Star Shield!"

To offer one last layer of protection, I covered the carriage with a Shooting Star Shield barrier. As I set up our defenses, Raphtalia and Filo stepped forward and prepared to use their best attacks. I stood up on the carriage's driver's seat, readied my shield, and cast a spell.

"Zweite Aura!"

The spell affected Raphtalia and Filo, raising all of the their stats dramatically.

Behind me, Ost and Rishia began to cast spells.

“Feh . . . Do your best! First Power!”

“I, Ost Horai, command the heavens, command the earth, defy all reason, join, and spit up blood. Oh great strength, I command you—grant them strength!”

“Herculean Strength!”

I felt a massive surge of power flow into Raphtalia and Filo.

Rishia’s spell was middling in comparison to the massive boost I’d felt when Ost cast her spell.

One of the Spirit Tortoise’s attacks must have made it through the barrier, because I felt something clatter ineffectually against my shield. I looked up and, sure enough, all three aerial shields were gone, and I could see the sky through a large crack in the Shield Prison.

We were surrounded by explosions. Waves of sizzling air washed over us. Luckily the Shooting Star Shield barrier was still holding, but I wasn’t sure how much longer we could count on it.

Worse yet, I could see that the Spirit Tortoise had already charged up the strongest attack it had used against us last time—the electricity beam it had shot from its mouth.

If we didn’t do something fast, it was going to hit us directly.

I quickly ran to get in front of the others and readied my shield.

The Spirit Tortoise’s mouth yawned open and a bolt of lightning shot straight out of it, like a particle beam.

There was a splintering crack, and the Shooting Star Shield barrier vanished. Instantly, I felt the full force of the beam against my shield.

Straining to take the brunt of the attack, I turned back to see Raphtalia and Filo still rushing to prepare their attacks.

"Hengen Muso Secret Knowledge! Whirlwind!"

Suddenly, the old woman was right behind me, holding her hands out towards the beast. A swirling of air or something blew over us and deflected the particle beam—if only just a little. When I say a little, I really mean a *little*.

The shield was getting very hot in my hands. I could feel my skin burning where I held it.

"Damn. I do not have any skills that can assist Master Iwatani." Eclair grumbled, clearly upset. I wanted to turn and tell her that I didn't expect support magic from a swordsman—but I didn't have the time or the energy.

"..."

Suddenly she held her sword out with both hands and shouted a magic incantation.

"Zweite Light Shield!"

For a moment—only a faint moment—I saw a shield of light appear before me. I never knew that she could use light magic!

But that was nothing to get excited about. The shield disappeared as soon as it had formed. It hadn't helped at all. "I am reasonably proficient with light and supportive magic, although it's only defensive light magic and agility-enhancing magic," Eclair said. She sounded like she was cursing herself for not being more useful.

"Your magic will prove very useful!"

Now Ost was behind me as well. She slipped her hands over my own and gripped the top of my shield.

"What are you . . . ?"

Before I could even finish my sentence, Ost was already casting a spell.

"I, Ost Horai, command the heavens, command the earth, defy all reason, join, and spit up blood. Oh great strength, I command you—grant power to the holy shield before me!"

The gemstone set in the center of my shield flashed, and the area the shield was capable of defending pulsed and expanded.

The shield was barely able to defend us, but now it seemed to cover and protect a much larger area without any trouble. It must have taken an incredible effort to maintain the spell. I looked at Ost. Sweat poured down her face.

"Ugh . . ."

I wasn't going to stand there in silence. While I was waiting for my skills' cool-down time to expire, I could use the time to cast restorative spells on Ost.

"Zweite Heal!"

I couldn't believe that the Spirit Tortoise could sustain its attack for so long. We weren't going to be able to hold out much longer. It was clearly longer and more powerful than it had been the last time. Finally, with a deafening crackling sound, the particle beam shrunk and dissipated.

"Now!"

Raphtalia and Filo had been waiting for my signal, and they immediately leapt from the carriage.

"Directional Sword of Heaven!"

"Spiral Strike!"

Raphtalia and Filo flew at the Spirit Tortoise's head, gripped their weapons tightly, and unleashed their most powerful attacks. There was a great sound of blades digging through flesh, and their attacks

connected directly with the monster's throat.

Filo was first. Her attack dug deep into the throat, unleashing a spray of blood into the air. Then she turned into a flash of light and spiraled around the monster's throat. Raphtalia was right behind her, swinging a massive sword of light through the beast's neck. The cleaved flesh turned to light and shone brightly as the deep cuts expanded.



“Hyaaaa!”

“Taaaaaah!”

They shouted as their attacks connected with the beast and kept shouting as they continued to slice through the monster’s neck.

“It’s tougher than it was last time, but we can’t give up now!”

“I’m doing my beeeeeeest!”

They both screamed, and shouted, and spun, and sliced, and appeared to use all the energy they had.

Keep it up! I thought. *You can do it! Ost and I withstood that attack to give you this chance!*

“I can’t just stand back in silence!” Eclair shouted and dashed forward, her sword in hand. She charged the sword up with her magic power and thrust with all her might. The blade only stuck a little way into the monster’s cheek, but it did do more damage than she’d been able to do in the last battle.

“Acho!” the old lady shouted. Not to be outdone, she swung her leg around and flew up in the air, forming her crescent moon attack.

“Fehhh . . .” Rishia whimpered. She was trying to contribute, but he hadn’t managed to pull off an attack yet.

Huff . . . Huff . . .

“Are you okay?”

Ost was looking very pale. She must have given too much of her energy to the shield. If she fell over now, it was clear how this would end.

“Don’t worry . . . about me . . .”

“That’s easy to say.”

“I’m alright. You must . . . quickly . . .”

I turned to look at Raphtalia and Filo.

“Raphtalia! Filo! Finish it!”

“Ha! HyaAAAAAAAA!”

“Okay! Taaaahhh!”

They shouted in unison, their voices growing higher and more strained as they expended the last of their energy, spiraling and swinging and slicing with all their might until, with a dramatic spray of blood, the head of the monster fell free from its body.

“Got it!”

“Yes!”

The head flew through the air, leaving the stump of the neck spraying geysers of blood. They landed, easy and light, and ran back to where the rest of us still stood.

“We did it!”

“Knocked its head off!”

“Great job, you two!”

“I wish I could have done more . . .” Eclair lamented.

“There’s always next time!” answered the old lady.

I held Ost on her feet so she wouldn’t collapse and looked at the tortoise’s fallen corpse. It shouldn’t move for a while.

Behind us, the army wizards were furiously casting restorative magic. It seemed to be working. All the exhaustion I’d felt a moment ago seemed to have vanished. There must have been a spell to replenish lost stamina. I think the spell worked by draining the caster

of stamina on behalf of the target, or if the target was oneself, then it worked by draining away the user's magic power.

A little color returned to Ost's face. I removed a bottle of magic water from my shield and passed it to Ost. It would replenish any lost magic power.

"This will replenish your magic power."

"No . . . My magic power is fine . . . I just used to much of my own . . . power."

Weren't the wizard's spells replenishing her life force—or her stamina? And it still wasn't returning? I reached into my pocket and pulled out the bottle of life force water that Rishia had been using in her Hengen Muso training. "Try this."

I knew there were medicines that could restore a person's life force, but I feared they might not work. Ost wasn't human, after all. That's why I wanted to try the life force water. The old lady had said that would restore lost "energy."

Huff . . . Huff . . . Ost slowly raised the bottle to her lips and drank its contents. When she finished the bottle, her face slowly started to look healthier and brighter.

"That seems to have helped . . . a little. Thank you very much."

"Don't worry about it."

Protecting people was my job. Part of that meant I had to physically protect them, but it also meant that I had to make sure people were capable of protecting themselves. I had to keep an eye on Raphtalia, Filo, and the others. I even needed to keep an eye on Rishia's condition.

The queen had to do the same thing for her people. Even though we were only cooperating for the time being, I still felt that it was my responsibility to watch out for Ost. Besides, after seeing how she'd filled my shield with an amazing amount of power, she wasn't someone that I could just ignore. If she hadn't been there, we might

have taken heavy damage.

Raphtalia and Filo had done the bulk of the physical work, but Ost had done so much for us that her role in the battle was at least as important as theirs.

"Anyway, we'd better get going while the Spirit Tortoise is still down."

We were just about to move on to the next stage of our plan, when the disturbing sound of something large and wriggling came from the direction of the fallen Spirit Tortoise.

Everyone fell silent. They locked their gaze on the corpse.

The torso rose to its feet, and strings of flesh wriggled out from the stump of the neck.

Then, with a thundering *thunk*, a new head appeared where the old one had been. It was like nothing had happened.

"Wh . . ."

What happened? Just how quickly could this thing regenerate? The last time we knocked the head off, the Spirit Tortoise had stayed down for a whole week. I knew that the tortoise had impressive regenerative abilities, but I never thought it could grow a new head in a matter of minutes. What was this thing, a hydra?

The ancient heroes had stopped the Spirit Tortoise by sealing its heart—was that because of its regenerative abilities too?

"ROAAAARRRR!"

"What?!"

The Spirit Tortoise opened its mouth and roared. Then, without missing a beat, it unleashed a particle beam just like the one we'd just survived. I immediately sent out a series of aerial shields and used Shield Prison, the same defensive system I just used before.

“Ugh . . . Argh!”

“Mr . . . Mr. Naofumi?!”

“Oh no!”

“Fehhh?!”

The prison cage broke on impact, and the force field barrier broke a moment later. I could smell the stench of my own burning skin.

“Shield Hero!”

Ost wavered and nearly stumbled into me. Raphtalia dashed to catch her.

“Don’t force yourself. You need to rest.”

“But . . . But I!”

“It’s fine! Stay back!”

She must have been overwhelmed by her sense of responsibility, because Ost ignored our pleas and reached her hand out towards me.

I could barely withstand the power of the tortoise’s beam—finally, I felt as though my entire body were burning. Time either stood still or sped up. Had it been a moment or an eternity? I thought I was going to go insane from the pain.

Huff . . . Huff . . .

My consciousness was drifting, and just before I lost control completely, I felt the attack abate.

The only other time I’d been hurt so badly was when I’d used Blood Sacrifice in battle with the high priest. This time things might have been worse. I felt burns deep within my skin . . . maybe deeper.

“Master?!”

“Mr. Naofumi?!”

“Shield Hero!”

Damn. I wanted to cast a healing spell on myself, but I couldn’t focus enough to pull it off.

Just then, a warm light fell over me. My wounds began to heal before my eyes, but there wasn’t enough time to heal them completely. Still, I was healed enough that I could finally think clearly. It must have been due to the supportive magic the queen was casting somewhere behind me. Considering how chaotic the situation was, I had to remember to thank her for being so quick to respond.

“Zweite Heal!”

I cast a healing spell on myself just before the tortoise raised its foot to crush us. I was just cognizant enough to block its attack in time. Good. I wouldn’t have been strong enough to block the attack with my Soul Eater Shield without it.

“Filo! Replenish your magic power!”

“Yup!”

I tossed a bottle of magic water to Filo, and she drank it.

“We’re not going to win if we keep attacking from the front. We have to retreat for now. Filo! Get the carriage and get us out of here!”

“Ok! Carriage!”

I kept blocking the Spirit Tortoise’s attacks while I used Shooting Star Shield. Within the force field, we kept moving to dodge the tortoise’s feet.

The ground shook tremendously each time one of the legs came crashing down nearby. Finally, the tortoise locked its eyes on us and raised its leg again to snuff us out, but that was just the chance we needed.

“Everyone, hurry back to the carriage!”

“Okay!”

“Fehhh . . .”

“How regrettable!”

Everyone jumped into the carriage, their faces downcast.

“Ost! Hurry!”

The Spirit Tortoise had its eyes on her now, and it moved to cut her off from the rest of us.

“Your ‘true body’ is a little overpowered, don’t you think?”

“I’m truly sorry.”

When the beast got serious it could really move!

The damn thing had ruined our plans!

“Haikuikku!”

Filo took off at breakneck speed, putting distance between us and the tortoise.

How were we supposed to fight something that was so powerful I couldn’t block its attacks? How were we supposed to defeat something that could regenerate any lost body parts, even its head, within seconds of losing them? It was impossible!

Orthodox methods were not going to work, so we’d have to think of something else. Unfortunately, nothing was coming to mind. We needed to retreat for the moment and sit down with the queen and Rishia. Even if we couldn’t figure out how to decisively defeat the monster, those two might be able to find a way that we could at least hold our ground. At the very least, we’d have better luck if we put our heads together.

“We’re retreating! Filo, get us out of here.”

“Okay!”

Filo sped off across the field, pulling our carriage away from the towering Spirit Tortoise.

Chapter Seven
Buying Time

We arrived at the camp and I made for the carriage where the coalition army was having its strategy meeting. I stepped inside to find all the generals sitting around, their faces pale and sour. It was a pretty desperate situation.

"We had seen the monster demonstrate some of its regenerative abilities from a distance, but I never would have imagined it was capable of what we just saw," the queen said, her forehead knit with concern.

"I must apologize," Ost said, bowing deeply.

We didn't have the time to sit around feeling sad!

"I know. I thought we could at least buy ourselves some time. What options do we have left? If we can't defeat it, we'll have to imprison the Spirit Tortoise like the ancient heroes did," I said. But considering how violent and powerful the monster was, how were we supposed to get to the ruins on its back, much less get inside of its body?

"We have discovered some information related to the imprisonment method," the queen said as she looked over at Ost.

"Is it something we can pull off?"

"I believe so. According to the investigation, it should be possible."

"Does it involve magic we can use?"

"Well . . ." the queen sighed. Things weren't looking good. We were going to need luck.

"Oh . . ."

“The spell is very demanding. If we are lucky, the wizards of the coalition army may be able to perform it if they all work together.”

“I am not sure it will truly fix our problem. It is only intended as a stop gap measure until the proper time for imprisonment arrives.”

“But the seal wasn’t broken correctly, was it? So maybe this spell will be more effective than it would be otherwise, right?” I asked.

According to what Ost had said so far, the seal on the Spirit Tortoise’s prison hadn’t been broken properly. I had no idea what method had been used, but there was a good chance that the seal itself was still intact or still held a considerable power over the tortoise.

“You’re correct that we cannot ignore the possibility. The statues in the underground temples around the world are still intact, after all.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing,” the queen said, surprised by the new information Ost had provided.

“Yes, well, they represent the true power behind the seal. There are three seals, and as long as they are not broken, the Spirit Tortoise is not supposed to be able to move as it is.”

“Well, that sounds like our best option. What other choice do we have? We should try to use this imprisonment magic and see if we can’t at least stunt the abilities of the tortoise.”

“I concur. However, I cannot guarantee that it will be effective.”

“Well, we still need to find a way to kill this thing—cutting its head off didn’t work. I think the next best option would be if Filo took a small group of us up onto the shell so we could investigate the interior of the temple we found there.”

It might not be enough to sneak up behind it and use sealing magic to blunt its movement, but what other choice did we have? It was better than nothing.

“According to the legends, the Spirit Tortoise can only be imprisoned if we are able to make our way to its physical heart.”

That would be tough, considering the magic we needed was going to require all the coalition army's wizards. The situation seemed to be getting worse and worse.

"Should we try to investigate the temple ruins beforehand?"

"It's certainly an option."

But what if we went up there and made our way through the temple ruins and came back empty-handed? I didn't even want to think about it.

"Master!"

As we sat around considering our options, Filo came running up beside the carriage and called over to me.

"What? The adults are talking about important stuff, so don't bother us if it's not important."

"But I can see the castle in the distance!"

Shit! We'd covered so much ground running from the tortoise that we were already back within sight of Melromarc castle.

"If the Spirit Tortoise continues on its current path, we will soon arrive at a place where the earth's energy flows freely," Ost said, making the bad news even worse.

Was Melromarc castle going to fall? We'd only gotten along for a short time. Now, I'd probably have to move on to another country to get support—once we dealt with the Spirit Tortoise.

"Mr. Iwatani?"

The queen startled me. I wondered if she could tell what I was thinking the way that Raphtalia and Filo could.

"Hey, master! Fitoria is trying to talk to us."

"She is? What does she want?"

“She says she wants you to stall for a little while longer. She says she’s on her way!”

“Why now? Isn’t it a little late to offer help at this point?”

Was she coming to kill me?

Fitoria was a legendary filolial. She had once said that if the four heroes couldn’t learn to get along, she would have to kill us. When the Spirit Tortoise threat first reared its head, she had decided to sit out on the sidelines. She said it was because we’d proven that we weren’t capable of cooperating.

“She’s saying that things have progressed to the point where she has no choice but to step in and help.”

“So if we can buy enough time for Fitoria to get here, she’s going to take care of the Spirit Tortoise for us?”

Could I really hope for that much? If the great legendary filolial would come and defeat the Spirit Tortoise for us, then we could enter battle with the Spirit Tortoise and try to stay alive long enough for her arrival.

“She’s saying that she’ll do all she can, but that it might be difficult to kill something that can grow new heads.”

“I can’t argue with that.” To be honest, we all faced the same problem. No one knew how to kill the Spirit Tortoise. The way I saw things, we needed all the help we could get.

“But master! If we don’t do something fast, the castle is going to be destroyed!”

I sighed. “I know. How long will it take for her to get here?”

Judging from the speed the tortoise appeared to be moving, we probably only had an hour or so before it reached the castle. And once it did, the castle and town would be in range of the Spirit Tortoise’s missile attack.

If the castle suffered a direct hit from either the missile spikes or the particle beam breath, it wouldn't stand a chance. Even worse, it could probably hit the castle with a particle beam from a decent distance if we didn't step in to stop it.

"She says she needs about an hour."

The castle was as good as gone. Come to think of it, the castle town probably wouldn't make it either. I turned to the queen. "Are the evacuations completed?"

"Not entirely. And I do not believe they can be completed before the Spirit Tortoise arrives."

That didn't sound good, but I bet that anyone still in the town would run away when they noticed the giant Spirit Tortoise stomping toward them. Granted, that didn't mean they'd escape in time. Things were looking bleak.

"We have no choice. We need to buy ourselves enough time to hold out until Fitoria gets here." There was another problem though. Who knew if Fitoria would be able to defeat the Spirit Tortoise, anyway?

"Mr. Iwatani, are you going to try and halt the Spirit Tortoise's progress?"

"Yeah."

We'd only have to hold out for an hour. But an hour seemed like a really long time.

I'd learned a few things during the last two battles with the tortoise. For one, the monster needed time to recharge after both of its major attacks. But . . . Actually, come to think of it, the beast had been able to use its particle beam two times in a row.

I wondered if the cool-down time between attacks was shortened when the monster took damage. If we were careful about how quickly we attacked it, we might be able to control how quickly it was able to counter-attack. In some ways, the Spirit Tortoise itself was a sort of special attack that needed recharging.

Whatever ended up happening, we were going to need enough time for the coalition army to get us up onto the shell. If Fitoria showed up in time to take over the main battle, that would probably be the window of opportunity we needed.

It was a gamble.

If we were just fighting to stall and buy time, then we didn't need to make sure we won. Actually, it probably made more sense to think of it as if we were leading the tortoise away from the town.

Alright.

"We're going into battle to buy ourselves more time," I said, turning to the queen. "We are going to need your support to survive. Make sure you've got restorative ceremonial magic ready when we need it."

"I will do whatever you ask, Mr. Iwatani."

"The army should focus on evacuating the area until the people escaping from Melromarc arrive. Form a regiment that always keeps the tortoise in sight."

"Roger."

I confirmed that the army had prepared a battalion of flying dragon knights. They would be our best option for getting up onto the shell. Besides, we had Filo—the fastest thing on two legs. We'd find a way up there.

If we could get inside of its body, we could try to find the heart and kill it. But we'd already lopped its head off, and that hadn't worked. Would killing the heart be effective?

Oh well. Worrying wouldn't fix anything. I went back to the carriage where Raphtalia and the others were waiting.

"Welcome back. What should we do?"

"Raphtalia, Rishia, Eclair, and old lady—you're in charge of getting

everyone out of Melromarc. There might not be any familiars around the Spirit Tortoise itself, but they could be attacking the town."

When we'd noticed the castle, I thought I had seen dark clouds of monsters off on the horizon. If my hunch had been right, someone would have to protect the citizens. And if we were only trying to stall the Spirit Tortoise, we weren't going to need Raphtalia and the others anyway.

"Feh . . ."

"Understood. If I can save even one person, I will."

"Good answer. Old lady, I'm counting on you, too."

"I know you are."

I took a deep breath and turned to Ost and Filo. "You two are coming with me. Filo, if things look bad, you're in charge of cutting its head off and getting us out of attack range."

"Okay!"

"Ost, I'll need your support, just like last time." If she could dramatically increase the defensive capabilities of my shield, then she was an essential part of our strategy. "But do me a favor and keep an eye on your stamina. I'll try to stay on top of keeping myself healed. This is going to be a long fight. We need to do all we can to save our strength."

"Very well. I will do my best to pace myself."

I looked back and forth between the castle and the Spirit Tortoise and realized that I was about to step into the longest hour of my life.

"Mr. Naofumi, I realize that I may not be of much use, however . . ." Raphtalia said when she noticed me watching the tortoise. ". . . Can't I help you directly in this battle?"

"We're just trying to survive its attacks. You all have more important jobs to do."

“But I . . .”

“I appreciate the concern, but I . . .”

Raphtalia understood that I wasn’t going to change my mind, and she laid her hand over her heart and closed her eyes. I could tell that she was worried about me. The truth is that I didn’t want to fight the Spirit Tortoise either. The last thing I wanted to do was stand there and suffer through an endless series of the beast’s attacks.

Because they’d never really learned how to power up their weapons and stats, the other heroes hadn’t been nearly as powerful as I was. Had the Spirit Tortoise vaporized them instantaneously? If we were in modern Japan, the battle was like humans fighting Godzilla with their bare hands. But this was a tortoise, so it was really more like Gamera, wasn’t it? Ha!

Godzilla didn’t actually exist though, so I suppose I was getting a little ahead of myself.

“Please take care of yourself.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to? I always take care of myself.”

“No, you don’t.”

She shot me down. Was I so untrustworthy? It made me wonder how she thought of me. What was I to Raphtalia? Did she think I was the kind of guy who would sacrifice myself to save others?

Ha! Give me a break!

“I’ll be fine. If things look bad, I’ll run. All we have to do is buy ourselves some time.”

And an hour wasn’t that long. “The most important thing you can do is to get as many people out of that castle as you can. That is the highest priority.”

“But I . . .”

“Raphtalia,” Eclair interrupted. “We have a responsibility to follow Master Iwatani’s orders. If we don’t, what good are we to anyone?”

“Eclair is right. Don’t worry about me. Just do what you can to save as many people as you can.”

“Alright. I understand,” she said, nodding sadly.

Raphtalia and the others climbed into a carriage that was heading for the castle, and she watched Ost and I climb up onto Filo’s back.

“Please. Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Raphtalia, get over it already! Are you my mother?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

If anything, I was closer to being a parent than she was. But here she was, worrying about me. Mothers worry about their children, but not the other way around. I wished I didn’t have to worry her.

“Filo, and you too, Ost, please watch over Mr. Naofumi. Don’t let him do anything foolish.”

“Okay!”

“I will protect the Shield Hero with my very life.”

“Hilarious. I’m the Shield Hero, and you’re protecting *me?”*

Just who did she think I was? Didn’t all this start with her asking me to defeat her?

“Alright! Let’s get going!”

Filo took off running for the Spirit Tortoise. As we pulled away from the others, I saw Raphtalia’s carriage charging toward the castle, along with half of the army.

“Me and master! Master and me!” Filo shouted, oddly chipper, as she shot like a bullet over the fields toward the towering tortoise. She never worried about anything. I was counting my bottles of medicine, and then before I could even blink we had arrived at the feet of the beast.

“ROOOAAAAARRR!”

When it noticed how close we’d gotten, it roared loudly and moved its massive feet in our direction.

“Zweite Aura! Shooting Star Shield!” I shouted, casting a supportive spell along with setting up my protective barrier.

The ground was shaking all around us. I looked up to see a raised foot hovering over us.

I wasn’t going to stand there and get stomped! We ran out of range from the foot before the barrier could break. When it hit the ground, the earth split open.

Enormous clouds of dust shot up all around us, blocking out the sun. I ran over to the foot and threw my whole body around it.

“ROOOAAAAARRR!”

When the tortoise realized it couldn’t raise its foot the way it intended, it seemed surprised.

The thing was stupid.

But even if I had surprised it for a moment, I wasn’t anywhere near heavy or strong enough to stop it from raising its leg when it decided to. We clung to its front leg where, luckily, its head couldn’t reach us. Still, it craned its neck around and tried to find us.

“ROOOAAAAARRR!”

Suddenly, a massive spike fell down in front of us, and a monster’s name appeared before my eyes.

Spirit Tortoise familiar (spike type)

Legs shot out from the spike and it came dashing straight at us.

"If that's all it's got . . . ha!" Ost shouted, stretching out her hands towards the charging spike. The familiar's legs stopped moving.

A gap opened in the battle, and it was immediately filled with fire raining from the sky. It was the queen and her wizards casting magic from a distance. The flames fell down on the now-still spike type, and then . . .

"Taaah!"

Filo shot into view like a bullet and kicked the monster away from me.

The spike type flipped through the air and stuck into the ground where it fell, unable to move.

"Excellent!" Ost shouted, then immediately began to chant a spell. What was she doing?

"I, Ost Horai, command the heavens, command the earth, defy all reason, join, and spit up blood. Oh great strength, I command you—grant he who stands before me strength!"

"Herculean Strength!"

She used the immobile spike type as a medium to cast support magic on me?

"These monsters utilize the same type of energy as myself. If I can steal it from them, I can produce powerful magic effects without depleting my own energy."

Was she connected to them because she was also one of the Spirit

Tortoise's familiars?

"Can you steal the energy of the main body?"

"Sadly, no. I think it is impossible."

I think I understood her strategy. She could keep the familiar monsters immobile and use them as a source of magic. That way she'd be able to support us in battle without running out of energy herself.

I was impressed. But there was no time for that. I saw the tortoise's leg muscles begin to contract. Crap! If I stopped paying attention for a split second, I wouldn't be able to keep my grip on the leg. Still, Ost's support had definitely made it easier.

The Spirit Tortoise was confused as to why its leg wouldn't rise like it normally did, and it began to rage. It spent its energy on me, trying to shake me off. Perfect. It had forgotten about the castle.

Yes!

Then I felt a vibrating energy building in the body of the tortoise, which could only mean one thing. It was about to use its special attack.

"Filo!"

"Yup!"

Filo ran around to get behind me.

"I've taken a lot of power from the familiar. We should not have much trouble this time," Ost said, coming to place a hand on my shield.

The spike type was writhing across the field, but before it could get back on its feet Ost absorbed more energy from it, and it immediately stopped moving.

The Spirit Tortoise opened its mouth and was about to shoot a powerful particle beam at its own legs!

I was pretty sure that I'd be able to defend against the attack, but I didn't want to take any unnecessary risks. I switched to the Shield of Wrath. Instantly, I felt a flame of rage flicker in the back of my mind.

"Master."

Filo's arms and legs were wrapped in black flames.

I could still hold out. I could hold out because Raphtalia and Filo believed in me. Wanting more of a defense, I quickly used a series of shield skills, putting a few more layers between us and the Spirit Tortoise.

Everything filled with blazing light, and a moment passed, before I heard the explosions.

I held the tortoise's leg with one hand and protected my party with the Shield of Wrath in the other.

And when the attack hit, it didn't hurt.

The Shield of Wrath was amazing. It withstood the attack without taking any damage.

I held the shield and braced myself for the remainder of the attack when, all of a sudden, a countdown timer appeared in my field of view.

4:37

The numbers fell with each second.

What did it mean?

The tortoise's attack subsided when the counter read 4:15. Great—we survived the first round of attacks. Furthermore, it had been easy enough. I breathed a sigh of relief, and then I realized that I couldn't

control my body.

“Master?”

“Shield Hero?”

What was happening? I quickly checked my status, only to find that I was completely out of SP!

How? What was going on? Where did it all go?!

Did the Spirit Tortoise’s attack also drain all my SP?

I quickly switched to the Soul Eater Shield, and my SP began to regenerate automatically. I pulled out a bottle of soul-healing water and drank it. Then I used Shooting Star Shield again.

“Shooting Star Shield!”

The strange counter that had appeared, when I had the Shield of Wrath equipped, wasn’t there anymore. I was starting to get a bad feeling about all of this.

Could the countdown have been numbering the amount of time that I, or Filo, were free from the control of the Shield of Wrath? If so, what would happen when the counter reached zero?

The Spirit Tortoise quickly regenerated the charred stumps of its legs and once again moved to smash us.

“Not again!”

Just like last time, I rushed over to get a grip on one of the feet to stop it. If I had used the Shield of Wrath when I grabbed the foot, then Dark Curse Burning S would activate and hurt Ost and Filo. I had to wait until the very last second if I was going to try and use it.

Immediately, as if the Spirit Tortoise had been waiting for the chance, it lowered its head and prepared to use its particle beam attack.

How could it be? How could it use the attack again so quickly?! Even worse, there weren't any familiars that Ost could harvest energy from!

Cold sweat dribbled down my forehead.

If the attack also drained its victims of their SP, then this second attack would use the tortoise's recovered SP as well as all the SP it had drained away from me. The Shield of Wrath hadn't been damaged in the attack, but I'd lost all of my SP. If I stuck with the Soul Eater Shield, then I would certainly be hurt in the attack. But the SP draining effect would be nullified, which would mean that the tortoise would need time to replenish its SP stores before it could use another attack like that.

Is that how it worked?

"Dammit! Shield Prison!" I used a skill to form a cage of shields around the tortoise's head, but it shattered the second it materialized. I should have expected as much. How could any cage form around something so large?

Taking that logic one step further, if I couldn't use Shield Prison on it, then iron maiden probably wasn't going to work either.

I'd have to switch to the Shield of Wrath to survive the next particle beam attack.

But if I did, I'd lose all of my SP.

I could switch back to the Soul Eater Shield to counter, and . . .

"Master! Are you okay?"

"Ugh . . ."

Should I jump on Filo and try to escape?

The tortoise's attack was nothing to laugh at. If it hit the army, none of them would survive.

“Ost! Filo! We have to ride this one out!”

“Okay!”

Both of them ducked behind me and I used all my defensive skills like before, surrounding the three of us with layers and layers of protection.

. . . ?

The light that filled the Spirit Tortoise’s throat was much brighter than it had been.

“Shield Hero! The density is . . .”

“I know!”

Crackling lightning sizzled and snapped over the entire body of the Spirit Tortoise, even its shell. When the whole mass of the monster was crackling with electric energy, it opened its mouth and unleashed its attack.

“Argh!”

The lighting shot at us, around us, through us, for 45 seconds. The burning was far greater than the attack we’d just survived.

Ost was using her magic to increase the power of my shield, but I could tell I was taking an enormous amount of damage. The pain was unlike anything I’d ever experienced back in Japan. It was like being burned and electrocuted at the same time.

For a second, I think I lost consciousness.

Once I realized what was happening, I cast restorative magic on myself. At the same moment, the troops in the distance cast supportive magic on us. My wounds were healed, but the deep exhaustion remained.

“I’m going!” Filo shouted.

“Good luck. If you see any familiars out there, knock them out, but don’t kill them. Ost can use them to replenish her energy.”

“Okay!”

There was no rule that said the Shield Hero couldn’t do other things besides defend against attacks. Filo kicked at the Spirit Tortoise’s head and drew its attention. It opened its huge mouth and tried to bite at her, but she was too fast to get caught.

The tortoise looked irritated as it continued to chase after Filo. While she kept the monster distracted, the rest of us focused on recovering from the last attack.

“Yikes!” Filo shouted as she slipped back into the protection of my Shooting Star Shield barrier. We kept it up for a little while, but soon enough the Spirit Tortoise was ready to use its particle beam attack again. Its mouth opened wide.

“Filo! If this thing tries to stomp us again, you grab Ost and get her out of here.”

“Okay!”

Filo’s magic had finally recovered. She closed her eyes and focused. Her feathers all stood on end. If she was ready to use magic before the Spirit Tortoise could use its particle beam, then her magic power must have recharged faster than its did.

Huff . . . Huff . . .

“Ost, don’t you do anything stupid! I don’t need you yet. I’m using a shield strong enough to survive the attack!”

“But I . . .”

“If we mess up now, it’s all over. We’re going to endure this next one.”

“I . . . very well.”

The attack was ready. The Spirit Tortoise unleashed its particle beam, and I quickly switched to the Shield of Wrath and we made it through the attack mostly unscathed.

Without missing a beat, the tortoise regenerated its charred legs and moved to stomp us again.

"Now!"

"Okaaay!" Filo shouted and dashed across the battlefield to grab Ost. In a flash, they were out of range. I met the rapidly falling foot with my Shield of Wrath. Dark Curse Burning S activated automatically, and I was immediately enveloped in swirling black flames. The flames roared high into the air, searing the beast's leg and face with cursed flames.

"Like *that?!*"

The cursed flames that came from the shield took a very long time to heal, so I was hoping that they might help counteract the Spirit Tortoise's regenerative abilities. If it worked, it would be easier to stall for Fitoria.

The face and legs were so burned they were turning to ash, but then they regenerated as if nothing had happened.

"ROOOAAAAARRR!"

The Spirit Tortoise's life force was unbelievable!

"Master!"

"Yeah, I know."

I switched back to the Soul Eater Shield to save time.

The battle was feeling longer and longer.

The air was filled with electric crackling energy. A new set of spikes grew from the beast's back and launched into the air before raining down around us.

Spirit Tortoise familiar (electric spike type)

Um . . .

“I’m goin’ again!”

“Wait a second!”

She had already shot across the field to kick the familiar. I tried to stop her, but she was too fast. Her claws swung through the air and hit the monster.

“Yaowwie!”

Filo was shocked, literally. Electricity crackled through her feathers.

“That hurt!” she yelled, burping up a cloud of smoke as she ran back to me.

“Why did you do that?”

I didn’t really need to ask. I was pretty sure that if she hadn’t stopped it, it would have attacked us. The Spirit Tortoise must have been irritated that I was down there, constantly holding its feet in place.

I turned to see Ost with her hands outstretched. She had just finished replenishing her energy stores by stealing it from the electric spike type.

“Ugh . . .”

A short while later, we had survived another one of the particle beam attacks. I turned to Filo. “Filo, when you see a chance to get away, go to the queen and find out how things are looking. This battle is harder than I thought. Make sure they get the town and castle

evacuated! If we're not lucky, the Spirit Tortoise is going to make it to the castle before Fitoria can get here."

"But what about you, master?!" Filo shouted, on the verge of tears.

"I'm okay. Thanks to Ost, I think I can hold out a little longer."

"Leave it to me, Shield Hero. I realize this is a difficult request, but if you can protect a familiar from the Spirit Tortoise's attacks, it would help."

That was a good idea. If we kept a familiar alive, then Ost could use it to power our defense.

"Got it. If we keep one around, we'll have an easier time surviving the attacks. Get it, Filo? So don't worry about me."

"Okay."

The Spirit Tortoise above us seemed to sigh with disappointment. I was using the Soul Eater Shield, so it hadn't been able to drain off any of my SP.

With any luck, we'd make it out of the next attack alive.

Filo turned her back on the Spirit Tortoise and took off running.

"Haikuikku!" she shouted, and she shot off like a bullet.

"I, Ost Horai, command the heavens, command the earth, defy all reason, join, and spit up blood. Oh great strength, I command you—heal his soul!"

"Soul Light!"

Ost stretched her hands out to me while she cast the spell, and I could feel my SP replenishing. As it came back, I felt more alert than I had.

I didn't even know that there were spells like that. It was sure to come in handy.

I quickly used the Shooting Star Shield barrier again and grabbed the leg of the tortoise to impair its movement. After all the electric attacks, the ground itself seemed on the verge of giving out. It was littered with deep rifts and craters. And with the constant shaking, it was harder than ever to keep my hold on the Spirit Tortoise's foot.

Things were looking bad.

Every once and a while, a spike from the monster's back would fall down nearby and turn into a familiar. The newly conscious monsters then ran to attack us. Their attack power was in another league altogether, compared to the bat types we'd fought before.

There weren't very many of them though, so even as I tried to use the Soul Eater Shield's counter effect to replenish my SP, it didn't go very smoothly. We were only able to survive the powerful attacks because of Ost's support magic.

The air was filled with clashing and clanging as the Spirit Tortoise familiars threw themselves against the Shooting Star Shield barrier. If I had never had that meeting with the other heroes—if I had never learned how to power up my shields and attacks—then I never would have made it as far as I had. The monsters would have broken through the barrier long ago.

As things were, we were teetering on the verge of defeat for the entire battle. I was getting worn out. I wished there was some way to gain an advantage.

"Here I go!" Ost shouted. She began to cast another spell.

"I, Ost Horai, the source of all strength, command you! Read and comprehend all that is under the sun, and show your power to me!"

"Gravity Field! Extreme Gravity!"

A semi-transparent black sphere shot through the air and slammed into a nearby familiar and crushed the monster into the ground. Well, well, I was growing more and more interested in the unique magic that Ost commanded. But there was no time to stand around feeling impressed.

“Filo, the source of all power commands you. Hear the truth I speak, and destroy them with the angry sky’s fierce tornado!”

“Drifa Tornado!”

Filo’s spell summoned a powerful tornado that ripped the crushed familiar to shreds. Ost’s magic had put cracks all over its surface, so finishing it off had been simple.

“I’m back!”

“What did you find out?”

“She’s on her way, but she needs a little more time!”

“Damn.”

“Oh! And she said to use this medicine for your stamina. She says the restorative magic becomes weaker if you use it too much!”

Filo was carrying a satchel that she hadn’t had when she left. She took some medicine from it and passed it to me. It looked like a cough drop.

I popped it into my mouth to find it tasted like mint. Sure enough, I started to feel as if some of my energy had returned.

“She said that she saved some of these for you!”

“What is it?”

It was rucolu fruit. It was like super-concentrated alcohol. But for some reason alcohol never affected me. Instead of making me drunk, the rucolu restored my magic power and SP.

“Great. Just great,” I said, popping one in my mouth. I felt like it worked better than the medicine. I checked my status to make sure and found that my SP and magic power had been completely restored.

I turned to Ost and said, “We got some great restorative medicine, so you don’t have to worry about my SP anymore. Focus on something

else.” Of course, it was also possible to restore SP with a bottle of soul-healing water.

With my ability to concentrate restored, I felt like I had a better shot of making it out of the next round alive.

“Understood.”

The Spirit Tortoise opened its mouth to shoot another particle beam.

What was the best way to defend against it?

“Shield Hero . . . The black shield . . .”

“Huh? Got it!”

We’d survived as long as we had because of Ost’s magic. I decided to do what she said.

“I, Ost Horai, command the heavens, command the earth, defy all reason, join, and spit up blood. Oh great strength, I command you—protect them with plundered power!”

“Drain Seal!”

I used the Shield of Wrath to protect us from the particle beam, which meant that the Spirit Tortoise had been able to drain my SP during the attack.

I prepared to eat another rucolu fruit and checked my status, only to find that I still had all of my SP. Ost’s spell must have done something to affect it.

“I have cast a protective spell on you, Shield Hero. I believe this will prevent the Spirit Tortoise from draining your SP with its attack. What do you think?”

There was a spell that could prevent something like that?

The Spirit Tortoise’s throat was filled with crackling electricity, but

it wasn't charged enough to use its attack, which must have been because it wasn't able to use my SP anymore.

The battle with the Spirit Tortoise continued in this vein for a long while, and for the entire time, I hoped I would never have to do anything like this again. I took turns defending with the Shield of Wrath and the Soul Eater Shield.

The barbarian armor I wore had seen better days. It restored itself automatically, but it wasn't fast enough to keep up with the incessant onslaught.

It was a rough battle.

Huff . . . Huff . . .

The countdown that appeared when I used the Shield of Wrath had fallen to 00:30. When I switched to the shield, Filo looked like she was doing all she could to control a pestering *something* in her head. At the same time, the festering rage and hate in the back of my mind was growing stronger.

"Ma . . . Master! I can't . . . I can't control it."

Filo and I were both on the verge of losing ourselves to raging insanity. I wasn't sure how much longer we could hold out. I realized I wasn't going to be able to use the Shield of Wrath anymore.

"I know how you feel! I'll stop using the shield! We're going to be alright!"

"Please wait a moment," Ost said. She softly shut her eyes and focused her mind. Then she reached out and touched my shield.

Black flames erupted from the shield and scorched her hand.

"What are you—"

"I, Ost Horai, command the heavens, command the earth, defy all reason, join, and spit up blood. Oh, strength of this raging shield, rid us of the beasts that best us!"

“Black Dragon Flame!”

Roaring flames burst from Ost’s palms and covered the face of the Spirit Tortoise, turning it into a blazing inferno.

“ROOOAAAAARRRR!”

The insane, rabid Spirit Tortoise suddenly looked confused. It’s face distorted into an expression of agony, barely visible through the wall of searing black flames.

The spell had a cost though. Ost’s hands were covered in horrible burns. Worse, they seemed to be cursed. They were stained black.

“I used the hatred in the shield. I believe I may have bought us a little time.”

“You . . .”

My eyes shot to the countdown. It had risen to read 3:00.

I was amazed. I thought Ost had the best, most convenient spells of anyone I had ever seen. I suppose that we’d be enemies under normal circumstances, but I couldn’t help but be impressed. And it was clear that we were on the same side. She was obviously doing all that she could to limit the damage the Spirit Tortoise was causing.

“Alright! This is still going to take some time!”

“Right. Filo, how long until Fitoria gets here?”

“Um . . . it’s kinda noisy so it’s hard to hear. But I think she’s saying she needs another 30 minutes!”

Seriously? We were only halfway through this?

At least we’d managed to stop the Tortoise’s attacks . . . is what I was thinking when those very attacks began to intensify.

Spikes shot into the air with a loud *swoosh*. I turned to Ost, and she silently nodded. We’d been holding out for a while, but we had

finally arrived at the place where the earth's energy flowed more freely.

"I guess . . . I guess we still need to keep this up," I sighed. To be honest, I was ready to give up and get out of there. But when I saw how close we had gotten to the castle, I realized we couldn't give up. There was a huge town at the foot of the castle, after all.

If the town was in range of the tortoise's exploding spikes, then it didn't stand a chance. The whole town would vanish. We had no choice but to keep our heads down and keep on fighting!

"Ugh . . ."

After suffering through a few more of the Tortoise's special attacks, I was on the verge of losing consciousness. My barbarian armor was battered beyond recognition. And the Spirit Tortoise, having noticed our strategy, had stopped sending familiars after us. Without the monsters around to replenish her energy, Ost could barely keep up with the necessary spells.

We'd already gone through our stock of life force water, and because I was using skill after skill, I'd been forced to eat all of the rucolu fruit, too.

"I hate to say it, but we might have to retreat."

"But if we do, the destruction will . . ."

"Think of all the time we've bought. We can't help anyone if we die here either. When it comes down to it, we need to cut our losses and get out."

Under constant barrage from the Spirit Tortoise, I'd completely lost my sense of time. I asked Filo how much more time Fitoria needed, only to find out that she wasn't able to contact her anymore. The incessant magic and skills must have been so powerful that they were having an effect on the earth's energy fields.

The support from the queen and her army was slowing down, too.

Every once and a while they would manage to cast a powerful offensive spell, but they were never able to do any significant damage to the tortoise.

What was left for us to do? I promised Raphtalia that I wouldn't do anything stupid, and I was running out of sane options.

Ost's hands were stained black from the cursed flames. She had used the rage in the shield to cast spells three times now. The spells she'd cast to limit the SP drain from the tortoise's attacks were growing less and less effective.

What were we supposed to do?

How many times had I thought, "I can only survive one more attack?"

This was by far the hardest battle I'd ever fought—even harder than the battle with the high priest. I was stronger than I'd ever been, but it wasn't doing anyone any good.

I was running different escape options through my head when it happened.

A cloud of dust stood over the horizon behind the Spirit Tortoise, and it was moving in our direction.

"Ah!" Filo shouted, jabbing a wing at the cloud.

The ground started to shake, and a furious wind blew over the battlefield. Something sky blue fluttered in the wind. It was . . . It was a filolial queen feather—just like Filo! And it was a color that I'd seen before.

"Sorry it took so long! Good job holding out! Fitoria will make sure your effort was worth it."

That's right. It was Fitoria, and she was running full speed for the tortoise.

As if it could sense the gravity of the situation, the Spirit Tortoise immediately ignored us and turned to face the approaching threat.

Fitoria crossed her wings in front of her, and then, *twitch, puff*! Her whole body started to grow.

A moment later and she was large enough to look the Spirit Tortoise in the eye. Of course, the Spirit Tortoise was still much larger, as it walked on four legs.

“Hyaaaaa!” Fitoria shouted. She leapt high into the air and brought her claws down with force on the beast’s head.

With a sickening crunch, she smashed the head beneath her foot.

Yeah! I was amazed by the show of power. Maybe she really could win?

But then . . .



The head popped back into place with ease. Then it opened its mouth and shot its particle beam straight at Fitoria. It wasn't fast enough. Fitoria twisted out of the way and let the centrifugal force carry her around for another swift kick that sent the Spirit Tortoise's head flying.

But the head never tore free of the neck. Instead, the whole neck stretched along with the head, then snapped back into place.

It was the second monster battle I'd seen, and it wasn't going to disappoint. Last time, it was a dinosaur. This time it was a tortoise. I felt like I was watching a kaiju movie.

But I couldn't afford to forget where I was. If we didn't get out of the way, we'd end up trampled. "Filo! Fitoria made it, so let's get out of here! Retreat! If we don't, we'll get pulled into the battle!"

"The support has finally arrived," Ost said, wavering. I grabbed her before she could completely collapse, and we climbed up onto Filo's back.

"Let's go!"

"Okaaay! Haikuikku!"

Filo's swift legs carried us off like a shot, back to army that had supported us during the fight.

Chapter Eight
The Search

“The legendary filolial… She really does exist.”

Fitoria and the Spirit Tortoise continued their titanic battle in the distance. We had safely made it back to the coalition army line, and let me be blunt: we were looking very worse for the wear. My armor was barely holding together. It was littered with dents and holes.

“Let’s hope she can put an end to all this.”

Fitoria unleashed an amazing series of attacks, one after the other, with impressive speed.

“ROOOAAAAARRR!”

The spike-like missiles on the Spirit Tortoise’s shell shot high into the air, and Fitoria followed them with her eyes. Jumping back to get some distance, she deftly dodged each careening spike and its ensuing explosion.

Again, I was impressed.

“Crash! Charge!” Fitoria shouted as she opened one of her wings. Then the carriage that she had been pulling grew to an enormous size and began to transform!

The carriage became a chariot. Fitoria ran full speed, the chariot in tow, and slammed into the Spirit Tortoise. Then she bounded up over the stunned monster and delivered a crushing blow to its head and front legs.

“. . .”

She strained against its shell but wasn’t able to push it back any further.

Pulling back to get her bearings, the chariot morphed back into a carriage. The moment that it was free from her attack, the Spirit Tortoise regenerated its lost limbs and head, and it immediately opened its mouth to shoot another particle beam.

"Master! I have a message from Fitoria!"

"What is it?"

"She says that she can't break the shell. She says that she'll keep it busy, but that we need to find a way to kill it."

I sort of wished that she would just talk to us normally, though considering her size, her voice would probably be too loud to understand. It probably would have just sounded like some deafening noise.

"Can't she use a flock of her filolial friends to attack en masse?"

"She says she had to hurry to get here, so she's all alone!"

Oh well. I guess I couldn't expect a large flock of filolials to keep up with her. She was really fast. Furthermore, what was I thinking—expecting normal filolials to put up a fight with the Spirit Tortoise?

"Mr. Naofumi!"

Raphtalia and the others came running back from the direction of the castle.

"How are the evacuations going?"

"The castle town itself is mostly evacuated. I heard that the battle was going to move on to the next stage, so I hurried back."

"Good idea. Looks like we won't be relaxing for a while."

Fitoria was going to keep the Spirit Tortoise occupied, but if we didn't figure out how to kill the tortoise for good, then we'd end up right back where we started.

I was getting tired of looking at that damn turtle!

I turned to face the queen. “You heard what Filo said, right?”

“Yes. And just like we suspected, I suppose our best option is to sneak inside of the Spirit Tortoise’s body and attempt the sealing procedure. The other option, though it is certainly not a sure bet, would be to search out the remainder of the ancient heroes’ message and hope that you, Mr. Iwatani, are able to read it.”

“I guess we’ll just have to do both at the same time.”

As we discussed our options, the battle continued in the distance.

“What the?!” I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. The Spirit Tortoise had more than one head! Worse yet, they were all shooting particle beams at Fitoria.

There was one piece of good news, at least. From where I stood, it looked like the beams themselves were less powerful than they had been. Perhaps it was because they were now shooting more than one at the same time.

“We better get going.”

Ost climbed down from Filo and stood on wobbly legs. She stared at the Spirit Tortoise is disbelief. She had either fallen into despair, or she was upset over what her “true body” was doing.

“Do you think we can get up onto its back?”

“It will be difficult. But, Mr. Iwatani, closely observe the Spirit Tortoise with me.”

“Huh?”

I did what I was told and squinted at the tortoise. When I looked really hard at the new, ragged shell, it was mostly covered in spikes. But I could just make out the remains of mountains still covering the shell, down where the spikes extended from the hard surface.

Maybe, if we climbed up those mountains, we could find a cave that would lead us inside.

I also watched the tortoise's attack pattern as it grappled with Fitoria. It attacked with its head, its legs, and with the spikes on its back. From what I could tell, it didn't have any attacks that would hurt a human-sized enemy on its back. Would it be able to hurt us if we got onto its back? We'd be in trouble if it suddenly stood up on its hind legs, or if it spun around, or if it flipped over onto its shell. If Fitoria kept up her attacks to the point where the Spirit Tortoise would try anything, then we might end up getting crushed in the battle.

"Because the Spirit Tortoise is currently distracted by its battle with the legendary filolial, I believe we may be able to get onto its back if we approach from behind."

"It'll be dangerous, but I guess we don't have a choice." I turned to Filo. "Did you hear that, Fitoria? We're going to try and climb up onto the shell. We're going to look for its heart or whatever it is. Can you keep it busy while we're up there?"

"Um . . . She says she'll do what she can, but you better hurry."

Then there was no time to waste. If possible, I wanted to make sure that the battle didn't get too intense while we were on the shell, but there was no point in mentioning it. "Alright! Everyone, we're going to climb onto the shell while the tortoise is moving and head for its heart! All of you, stick with me!"

"Everyone! For the sake of the world, let us all do as the Shield Hero, Mr. Iwatani, says!"

The crowd cheered.

"Everyone! You have seen Mr. Iwatani defend us from countless attacks! Did it not rouse your soul to action? Now is our time!"

I had one question for the queen. "Just checking, but are you coming with us?"

"I had thought that I might be needed to distract the Spirit

Tortoise, but the current situation no longer calls for it. While the legendary filolial occupies him, I will accompany you in this endeavor."

"Great," I said, turning to check on Raphtalia and the others. They were clearly exhausted. Of course they would be. I was exhausted myself, and I wanted to get a few days' worth of sleep. But there was no time for that.

"Feh . . . Master Itsuki . . ." Whenever Rishia was scared or worried, she couldn't help herself from whimpering Itsuki's name. I still found it hard to believe she could see so much good in him.

"Mr. Naofumi, are you feeling alright?"

"It's nothing I can't handle, but when all this is over, I'm going to need to get my armor worked on." It was still holding together, but just barely. If the battle went on for much longer, I'd have to think about changing into something else—not that I wanted to wear one of those kigurumi. Actually, I doubt the kigurumi I had would help much, considering the enemy. Maybe it would make more sense to steal the Filo kigurumi that Rishia was wearing.

"Feh?!" Rishia jumped, somehow intuiting my thoughts, and pulled the kigurumi tighter across her body. Then she held her hand out to Ost, who was still wobbling on unsteady feet.

"It's alright. We all share the same goal. The battle's end draws near."

"Right."

"If we are climbing up onto the Spirit Tortoise, perhaps the time has come where I can be of assistance," Eclair said, gazing at the monster battle that raged on the horizon. Her eyes were wide.

"The Spirit Tortoise has changed considerably since the last time we fought it. There's a chance that the mountain caves leading to the inside of its body have changed too."

"Good point."

“And there’s no telling what sort of Spirit Tortoise familiars we are going to find in those tunnels. We’re going to need your help to make it through. Make sure you’re prepared.”

“Right.”

“I’ll be right there with you!” the old lady shouted.

“Yes. It’s time. Mr. Naofumi, let’s go!”

“Yeah!”

The battle with the Spirit Tortoise had reached the point of no return. We had no choice but to sneak around behind it and climb up onto its shell. It was time.

Chapter Nine
The Spirit Tortoise Cave

We made our way up onto the shell without much trouble. The giant spikes dominated the landscape, but the mountain range that covered the shell was still formidable. Trees and shrubs grew between the boulders.

The legends spoke of a cave in the mountains that would let us inside of the monster's body. We were able to find a cave the last time we were on the shell, but it hadn't led anywhere.

Unfortunately, the shell was swarming with familiars, and we had to battle large groups of them to progress. We ran into huge groups of the bat and yeti types, but I couldn't figure out where they were coming from. Luckily we didn't see any of the parasitic types. But that was the end of our good luck.

It was exhausting searching the mountains and the spikes for hidden caves. It was like we had gone mountain climbing with the coalition army in tow. To make matters worse, the tortoise was still locked in battle with Fitoria, and the constant motion made progress difficult.

"Ost, do you have any ideas?" I was hoping that she would be able to lead us to the cave. She'd told us about the cave that theoretically led to its heart.

"I suspect it may lie in that direction."

"Then that's where we'll go. You all back there, make sure you keep up!"

"Yes, sir!"

I followed Ost's lead down a winding mountain path.

Raphtalia and Eclair stayed behind us, striking down any familiars

that got too close. The queen and Rishia followed them, casting support magic on the group when necessary. But there were so many familiars, and they attacked the group so fervently, that the army was still losing soldiers.

"Filo!"

"Yup!"

She saw the monster I was warning her about and swung her claws to send it flying.

"Mr. Naofumi!"

Screams rang out from the group behind us, and Raphtalia immediately rushed off to find the source of them.

"We have been able to stall the tortoise's movement, but the vast numbers of familiars continue to be a serious threat. The longer we spend up here, the more people we are going to lose."

"If only we could have come with a smaller, specialized group . . ." I sighed. If the army soldiers couldn't survive a battle with the familiars, what chance would they stand against the heart? Could they even survive the journey? From what I could tell, there was an inexhaustible supply of monsters on the shell. It was going to be difficult.

I was fretting over their chances when a splinter battalion of the army came running up behind us. They had been traveling separately from the main group. "We've found a cave. We believe it may be the place we are searching for, the cave to the heart," a soldier reported. He was pointing far off into the center of the mountains. I squinted in the indicated direction, and sure enough, I thought I could make out a dark opening in the rock.

I think I might have found the same cave the last time we'd climbed up on the tortoise's back, but the mountains had all changed shape since then.

"I'll take the lead. Let's get going!"

“Roger that!”

“Everyone! Follow the Shield Hero!”

The army soldiers raised their weapons and shouted their agreement.

We followed a tattered mountain path to the cave opening, battling hordes of familiars the whole way. Finally, we stood before the entrance. I led the way in.

“Be careful.”

“You too,” Raphtalia said and used her magic to summon a glowing ball of light. We needed it to see where we were going.

I led the way inside, followed by Raphtalia, then Ost, Eclair, Filo, and Rishia. Then came the queen, the old lady, and the rest of the troops. Once inside, I recognized it as a cave we had found before, but the layout had changed considerably since then.

The walls were covered in monsters that looked like eyeballs, which hadn’t been there the last time. They were called Spirit Tortoise familiars (installation type). There were other monsters too—large and bulbous maggot-like things—but nothing that we couldn’t handle.

The main obstacle we faced wasn’t the monsters in the cave. No—it was the cave itself. It split into tunnels that led in different directions and wandered, maze-like, without any clear indication of the right way to go. The walls were not made of living flesh. They were made of stone and dirt. It made me wonder if the tunnels would really lead us into the body of the Spirit Tortoise. I started to wonder if we wouldn’t have better luck crawling into the monster’s mouth, not that I really thought that would be any easier.

“Do you know the way?”

“I brought materials that we compiled after the last investigation,” the queen said, unrolling a map to show me.

“That’s great.” Without a map it might have taken days to figure

out where to go. That was time we didn't have. Just as I'd thought, the map showed a number of branching maze-like tunnels. And it also seemed to indicate that there was another entrance on the other side of the mountain, where the town ruins lay.

"Should we see if this path will take us to the ruined temple?"

"That's a good idea. Perhaps there is some kind of hint in the ruins. We need all the help we can get."

There was another problem, too. The map wasn't complete, and it didn't show how to get to the Spirit Tortoise's heart. Either they hadn't finished mapping the tunnel system or the path to the heart was only open when the Spirit Tortoise was reawakened and on its feet. I decided it was probably best not to depend on the map too much, as there was no telling how accurate it was.

"Huh?"

The map indicated that we would soon come to a large open space. It seemed like a good spot to split into different search parties. We had plenty of people, after all. So many, in fact, that it was getting more and more difficult to lead them through the narrowing tunnels.

If the soldiers were as strong as Raphtalia or Filo, then it wouldn't have been a problem. But of course that wasn't the case. I decided that it would be best to have the army wait in the large chamber while we split off to find the best way forward. I held up the map and told the soldiers where we were heading, but . . .

"What? Wasn't it supposed to be here?"

"That's what the map says."

We'd followed the map exactly, but instead of opening into a larger chamber, the path had morphed into a winding tunnel unlike anything on the map.

"The map must be wrong."

"How strange. It's been accurate up until this point," the queen

said and frowned.

Did the caves change shape when the Spirit Tortoise reawakened? The gnawing sense of doubt in my gut was getting worse. What was going on? We had no choice but to follow the new path. Luckily, there was only one way forward, so we didn't have to worry about choosing the right path. Had we come to a fork in the road, it would have been better to find a place for the army to wait.

But that wasn't the case, so the whole group continued down the long winding path.

Eventually, the tunnel opened up into a large chamber of some kind. Was it the same chamber we'd been searching for? Maybe the major rooms and chambers in the cave system stayed the same, but the paths that connected them changed. Anyway, I was glad we'd found the chamber we were looking for, except that . . .

"Damn. Those are big."

The chamber was certainly large, but there were familiars in the room that utilized all the space.

Compared to the innumerable familiars we'd fought on our way there, these were much . . . larger. The way they filled the room made me think that they were positioned there purposefully to ward off any invaders that made it this far. Had this all been an RPG, I would have called it a mid-dungeon boss fight.

And this was the Spirit Tortoise. So they were probably going to be pretty powerful.

The worst part was the number of them.

"One, two, three . . . There's kind of a lot of them."

In the end, I counted seven or eight. Sure, we could have handled one of them, but with seven or eight to deal with, I worried about the soldiers.

"What should we do, Mr. Naofumi?"

There was also the possibility that more might spawn as we defeated them. There was only one way to find out.

"There aren't too many of them, so let's try and take them out on our own. I'd like the soldiers to stay back for now. Let them know."

"Roger!"

"Okaaay!"

"Feh . . . I'll do my best."

"Then let's do this!" I shouted and led the charge toward the familiars.

The monsters were different than the gorilla or yeti-like familiars we'd faced outside. They were more like . . . turtle men? They seemed to be around four meters tall.

When I got closer, their names appeared: Spirit Tortoise familiar (guardian).

"Hya!" Filo shot at one of them and kicked its shell. The shell fell off with a loud *crack* and the monster slammed into a wall.

"Yahhhhhh!" Raphtalia swung her sword and lopped off a guardian's head. I knew I could count on her.

Rishia helped Raphtalia and Filo by casting weak offensive spells to draw the guardian's attention. I tried to draw their attacks, too. Whenever one rushed at me, I used Shooting Star Shield to put a barrier between us. All in all, I was impressed with our teamwork—we'd get a passing grade for sure. But teamwork had never been our real problem. Our real problem was flat-out strength, and we just needed to improve our stats for that.

Anyway, I had to focus on the battle.

"Ha!" Ost stretched out her hands, and one of the guardians immediately froze in place.

Eclair, the old lady, and Rishia seized the opportunity and rushed in to finish the beast off.

“Icicle Needle!” the queen shouted, casting a spell that slowed a guardian down to a crawl. She was pretty good.

“How disappointing,” Raphtalia clipped as she flicked blood from her sword and then plunged it into a guardian, killing it instantly.

She was right—the monsters were weaker than I’d expected.

Considering how strong the Spirit Tortoise was, who could blame me for expecting a tough fight? Was I all worked up over nothing?

No. I had to worry about the soldiers behind us, after all. A little paranoia was just what I needed.

“Yup! I know! They’re kinda hard though!”

“Maybe that’s because you’re only attacking the hard part on the back?”

“But the rest is so soft!”

“Don’t waste your energy.”

The two of them bantered over the most trivial things! It was like listening to two little geniuses bickering.

“Both of you are so strong!”

“Rishia, you’ll be strong too. How are your Hengen Muso studies going?”

“Feh! I’m doing my best!” she shouted, jabbing her sword into a guardian.

“That’s it! If you imagine that you are attacking our holy saint here, there isn’t an enemy alive that you cannot defeat!”

“You old bag.”

Why would she encourage Rishia to attack me? Obnoxious old woman . . . Then again, I couldn't argue with the results. Rishia's sword went straight into the guardian's chest. Yikes—is that what she wanted to do to me?

Before long, we'd cleared the room.

"I guess there aren't any more coming."

"I guess not."

I had half expected an endless stream of monsters to fill the room when we finished with the guardians, but apparently that wasn't in the cards.

"Wow," the soldiers who were all flabbergasted by our display of strength muttered to themselves in disbelief.

It wasn't that we were particularly strong though. It's that the soldiers were so weak. I wondered what the average level of the troops was. If they were at level 60 or something, that would be *really* pathetic.

"My queen. Zield Hero."

A shadow appeared. I didn't even know there was one around.

The shadows were special secret agents under the queen's command. If you picture ninjas, you won't be too far off. Judging from their bloodstained short swords, they must have been fighting the guardians alongside us.

"What is it?"

"We will uze this chamber az our base of operations."

"Sure. I didn't even know you were here."

"We've been entrusted with the zafety of the troops for this operation."

“Do as you will.”

“Yeah.”

They said they were here to protect the troops, but weren’t they part of the troops themselves? They must have been there to fight, too. Were the Spirit Tortoise familiars so powerful as to deserve all this? I guess it made sense to think of the coalition army troops as a special unit assigned to our mission to imprison the Spirit Tortoise. For a mission like this, they probably chose troops for abilities other than their skill in combat.

“Listen up, soldiers! We’re going to use this camber as our base of operations while we search for the Spirit Tortoise’s heart! Your orders are to protect this chamber while we search for the heart!”

“Roger!” the troops shouted in unison. The air of tension and dread that had followed us dissipated as they spread out to fill the chamber. They began to cautiously relax. They must have been even more terrified and exhausted than I’d thought.

Had they done anything that warranted so much exhaustion? Had they done anything like what I’d done when I had to endure all the Spirit Tortoise’s attacks? Maybe I was different because of the shield. And maybe Raphtalia and Filo were just strange. Whatever the case may be, we had a lot to think about after we defeated the Spirit Tortoise.

“Shadow, do you know what the average level of a coalition army soldiers is?”

“The special troops azzigned to this mission have an average level of 65.”

“That’s even worse than I thought,” I said, turning to the queen. “You’ve got to do something about this. These troops are so weak they are worthless. Raphtalia is only in the 70s, so why is she so much stronger?”

“The level of strength that Raphtalia commands would normally require many years of training.”

Really? Did my maturation adjustment ability really make that big of a difference?!

Maybe Rishia was normal after all, and anyone that didn't have access to those adjustment abilities could only hope to command a certain level of strength? I shook the thought away. Things couldn't be that bad. Besides, Itsuki had conspired to remove her from his party because she was so weak. And thanks to the Filo kigurumi, she was even stronger than she had been at that point.

I considered asking the old guy from the weapon shop to mass produce the kigurumis, but we only had the materials to make two more. Mass-produced Filo kigurumis, hm . . . Maybe we could do it if we plucked all of Filo's feathers.

"?!"

Filo's feathers suddenly stood on end, moving in a wave from her head to her tail. She looked scared.

"What is it?"

"Something feels weird!"

Had I been speaking out loud? She could be sharp when she wanted to. We probably couldn't pluck her feathers if we tried.

"The shadows are stronger than the other soldiers, aren't they?"

I wanted to think so, but I couldn't send them out to look for the heart if they were going to end up killed by a bunch of little monsters. Come to think of it, I'd never actually seen a shadow in battle.

"We are trained for battle and assassination, so we should prove uzeful in battle."

"Great. Half of you stay here and protect the soldiers. I need the other half to help us find the heart."

"Underztood. However, the shadows have zuffered heavy losses in these recent battlez. I hope that your expectations are realiztic."

“They are,” I said. The planning was just about finished.

We still had a long way to go. I’d send the shadows searching for the heart and let the troops rest until then. In the meantime, we would conduct our own search..

“Eclair, old lady—you two stay here with the troops and fight off any monsters that show up.”

“Understood!

“Roger that!”

“Filo, you go with the shadow search party. Use your nose! I’m counting on you.”

“Okaaaay! No problem!”

As for the rest of them . . .

“Raphtalia, Ost, Rishia, and the queen, you all come with me. We’re heading out the other side of the cave and going to the ruined temple.”

“Alright.”

“Agreed. We need to find the heart, but we also need to find out how to put an end to this.”

“Feh . . . I’ll do my best.”

“Very well. Your wish is my command, Mr. Iwatani.”

I was a little hesitant to bring the queen with us, but when it came to legends and culture, she was more knowledgeable than anyone I knew. We needed her. Besides, she had a lot of bodyguards and was very powerful herself. It was easier to protect her than the army troops.

Chapter Ten
Strangers

"Hya!" Raphtalia shouted, slicing a monster that leapt at her in half.

"They just keep on coming! There weren't so many of them outside, so I guess I got careless."

We were working our way through the tunnels to get to the temple ruins, but we were running into so many familiars that our progress was slowing down. The cave system must have been a nest for the familiars. That was the only way to explain it.

Even worse, the map was proving mostly useless. My patience was starting to wear thin.

It was fun to explore dungeons in an RPG, but we didn't have the time to waste on exploration. We only had the time we did because Fitoria was still locked in battle with the Spirit Tortoise. And it even had more heads than it had when I'd fought it. She was out there fighting for us, in a hailstorm of exploding missiles. It was no time to go exploring.

We had to rely on intuition and luck as we trudged through the tunnels on our way to the temple. And then we came to a fork in the road.

I turned to the queen and asked, "Which way do we go?"

"The tunnels themselves may have changed, but I believe we are still moving in the right direction."

"I believe it may lie . . . over there," Ost said. She pointed in the opposite direction of where we thought the town ruins were.

"That's the opposite direction. Are you sure?"

“Somehow . . . I feel like I can see the way through, very faint, there . . . sorry.”

Do we trust Ost’s intuition, or do we trust in the direction we knew the town to be in?

It was a tough choice, but Ost was actually one of the Spirit Tortoise familiars. She had to be connected to it some way. If so, then it made sense to put our faith in her. Besides, she’d proven herself trustworthy by now. If she betrayed us now, I’d personally see to it that her punishment was severe.

“Alright. Let’s follow Ost for now.”

“Very well. Let us go,” Ost said, and we followed her down the path she chose.

It didn’t take very long to realize that I’d made the right decision. Within a couple of minutes, the tunnel turned sharply and we were once again walking in the direction of the ruined city. Had we taken the other tunnel, it probably would have turned sharply too, but that would have dropped us out on the other side of the mountain.

So I was feeling confident about the choice I’d made, but then we came to another intersection . . . and it was filled with skulking familiars.

“Hey!”

“Icicle Frozen!”

Before the monsters could even notice us, Raphtalia was on them with her sword, and the queen cast a spell. Ost used her magic to slow the monster’s movements, and Rishia plunged her sword into a stunned monster.

“Let’s see . . . . where is this tunnel going to take us.”

Ost finished one of the monsters off, and I looked over at her to see a flock of flapping bat-type familiars come rushing around a corner, followed by a group of people.

“Are those adventurers?”

What would adventurers be doing in a place like this? There were three of them.

One of them was a man, and he was a little taller than me. He held a spear in one hand and was wearing heavy armor. All in all, he carried himself gracefully.

The next person was a very white girl with pigtails. She didn’t look childish exactly, but she had a very sharp, alert air about her. She wore light armor, and she didn’t seem very comfortable in it. I got the impression that she hadn’t been doing this for very long. She was shorter than me, but . . . something about her just felt *off*.

The last person was a woman, and she wore her hair in a short bob. She looked very sophisticated, like she came from a good family or something. She looked like a wizard with a royal bearing. Her hair was . . . red?

All in all, it was a pretty odd-looking group of people.

A lot of adventurers had been drafted to join the coalition army. But the battalion that had been assigned to join us on our mission had been carefully chosen by the crown. I couldn’t imagine anyone from that battalion breaking orders to follow us down these tunnels.

“You might be after fame and fortune, but I strongly suggest you get out of here as quickly as possible.”

“Oh, um . . . Understood.”

“Mr. Iwatani, a minute please. Something about this doesn’t seem right, does it? What are adventurers doing in a place like this? Did they sneak in here last week and become trapped when the Spirit Tortoise reawakened?”

Her idea was worth considering. They could have been exploring the Spirit Tortoise after we first defeated it. When the tortoise reawakened, they might have run into the tunnels to escape from the swarms of familiars. I could imagine something like that happening.

“ . . . ?” Raphtalia seemed to be bothered by something. She stepped forward.

“What is it?”

“It’s just . . . these people appear to be using magic to hide something.”

Raphtalia was naturally inclined to use light, dark, and illusion magic. If someone used that sort of magic to hide something, she was more sensitive to it than other people would be.

The queen was concerned. “That’s very strange, isn’t it, Ms. Raphtalia? Is there anything you can do about it?” I would have asked the same thing if the queen hadn’t said it first.

“I can try,” Raphtalia said before she addressed the strangers. “Forgive me, but I suspect you are hiding something from us. Please give it up.” She quickly began to cast a spell.

But the strangers immediately jumped back to get distance from her.

“Damn!”

They must have had something to hide. But it was too late!

“I am the source of all power. Hear the truth I speak. Show me their true forms!”

“Anti-Mirage!”

Light poured from her outstretched hands and illuminated the tunnel. The magic light expanded to fall on the adventurers, and when it did the spell they had been using broke.

I was speechless when I saw their true faces.

“Y . . . You!”

Three adventurers? Ha! I should have known there wouldn’t be

three adventurers just walking around here.

A man stood at the front. He seemed nice and dependable. It was hard to ignore the massive scythe he carried. A woman stood behind him. Her skin was white like a ghost, and long black hair fell over her shoulders. She carried a set of folding fans. Another woman stood behind them both. Her hair was as blue as the sea, and a gemstone shone from where it sat at the center of her forehead. She wore bangles on her arms—bangles that I had given her.

I'd never forget their faces. They were our enemies, and we had to defeat them.

"Damn! Guess there's no use hiding if they can see us. I didn't want to run into kiddo here."

"L'Arc, you knew it."

"After all the precautions we took . . ."

That's right. The strangers in the tunnel were none other than L'Arc, Therese, and Glass. But what were they doing here?

Glass appeared from rifts in the air during the waves of destruction. But L'Arc and Therese had been here before the wave came, so they must have been able to come and go as they pleased.

L'Arc and Therese were dressed the same way they had been when we last met. But not Glass—she looked so different that it was hard to recognize her at first.

Her hair was pulled into pigtails, and she was wearing a European-style set of light armor.

Each time we'd met she had been dressed in a Japanese-style kimono, so you can understand how strange it felt to see her dressed like this. She might have changed her hair and her clothes, but she still carried herself the same way.



Not missing a beat, I jumped forward and readied my shield. “Great timing. I’ve got questions for you. What are you doing here? How are you connected to the waves? Better start talking!”

They answered by readying their weapons.

“Glass, this isn’t the place—” But before L’Arc could finish his sentence, a hole opened in the wall beside us and a Spirit Tortoise familiar (installation type) appeared. Then it kept happening. In a flash, the wall was covered in holes, and they quickly filled with squirming familiars. The eyes blinked and then started to shoot heat beams at us. To make matters worse, they seemed to be ignoring Glass and her cohorts. They only focused their attacks on us!

“Shooting Star Shield!” I shouted, creating a barrier to protect us from the volleys of heat beams. The timing of the attacks almost made it seem like they were protecting Glass and the others. They seemed to be attacking us on purpose, as if directed by an unseen hand.

“So that’s how it is.”

There was only one explanation for everything. Glass and the others were behind the Spirit Tortoise’s reawakening.

“Damn! They don’t let up!” L’Arc snapped, glaring at the attacking familiars.

What was he trying to say?

“Hya!” Raphtalia shot forward, swinging her sword to deflect the familiar’s attacks, and then charged at L’Arc and his friends.

“I suppose there is no stopping it,” Glass said, slapping open her fans and meeting Raphtalia’s charge.

Dashing forward, I covered Raphtalia with the Shooting Star Shield barrier. The tunnel was very narrow, which made it difficult to maneuver through. The barrier blocked her movement and separated

Glass from her friends.

“Glass!”

“Madam!”

L’Arc and Therese shouted to Glass.

What’s the matter? Were they afraid of splitting up?

And yet Glass’s attacks were weaker than before. I had been expecting her to shatter my barrier with a tap from her fan, but it didn’t happen. Something was strange. She had been so powerful when we fought on the islands.

“Kiddo! This isn’t the place to—”

L’Arc was trying to yell something, but it was lost in the nonstop barrage of familiar attacks.

“Would it be safe to assume that these strangers are responsible for the changes in the Spirit Tortoise?” the queen asked in between casting spells.

It certainly seemed likely. The familiars were only attacking us, after all—what else was I supposed to make of that?

“Shield Hero!” Ost shouted. She had been doing all that she could to halt the motion of the ever-increasing hordes of familiars.

“What?”

“I cannot affect the motion or the energy fields of these monsters! They are being directly controlled by someone!”

“Makes sense to me!”

Glass and the others must have been using the familiars to attack us for them.

“But we don’t have time for this!”

L'Arc and Therese flashed their weapons and looked like they were concentrating. They were about to use attack skills on us!

I couldn't let that happen! I immediately used Shooting Star Shield and Air Strike Shield to protect us. When the shield appeared in the air before us, it nearly filled the whole tunnel. It was hard to see around it, but at least that meant I had less area to worry about defending. I just hoped they weren't about to use magic on us.

But my fears were unfounded. L'Arc, Glass, and Therese's skills went off without a hitch and hit their targets, filling the tunnel with streams of sparks. They must have intended to hit the familiars too, because I could hear the monsters screaming and dying.

My Shooting Star Shield barrier shattered, and their attacks slammed into the Air Strike Shield. It was holding, but it wouldn't last long. Before it could break though, I saw a familiar appear on the ceiling above us. It opened its eye and prepared to shoot a heat beam straight at us!

But then, before it could attack, the ceiling around it cracked open.

"Hey, kiddo! Watch out!"

"Is that what . . . ?"

I couldn't hear the rest of what they said. The ceiling gave out completely, and the tunnel caved in over us. I was able to use Second Shield before the boulders fell on us though, and it protected us from the falling rocks. The dust was so thick that I couldn't breathe. We had to back down the tunnel to get out of the dust.

Cough!

"Damn them."

The tunnel was too narrow to have a real battle.

We could barely manage fighting off small familiar monsters like bat types and installation types, much less hold out own against Glass and the others. There wasn't even enough room for the queen and

Rishia to support us with magic. As for Ost, she'd tried—and failed—to stop the monsters' movement.

But there was one thing I'd learned for sure from the battle: Glass and the others were involved in the whole Spirit Tortoise mess. I even thought there was a good chance that they were behind the whole thing.

"What should we do?"

"The tunnel caved in. Do you think we can get it cleared?"

From what I could tell, they'd caused the tunnel to collapse so that they could escape.

"It won't be easy."

"That's what I thought." I didn't know if we could get it cleared. Even if we did, there was no guarantee that it wouldn't just collapse again. The ceiling was solid rock, but it had broken so easily.

I wondered if the queen could use her ice magic to stop further collapse, but that would require very precise magic use, and I wasn't sure if that was possible in such a narrow space.

"I guess we either need to take a detour or turn back."

"If we head back a little way, we might find a path that will lead us back to the other side of the cave in," Ost suggested.

Should I trust her intuition again? She did share a connection with the Spirit Tortoise, after all.

The dust in the tunnel slowly cleared while we debated our options, and when it was finally clear, I was shocked to see Glass and L'Arc still standing there!

"..."

They were smiling silently. Their eyes were shining red, and they held creepy weapons that seemed to be formed from tortoise shell.

When they saw us, they came running in our direction.

“Ugh.”

I used my free hand to block Glass’s fan and L’Arc’s scythe and stared at them in disbelief. They had terrifying, distracted smiles plastered on their faces when they met my gaze.

What was going on? They were different from before, and they were moving strangely too.

Suddenly, monster names appeared in my field of view.

Spirit Tortoise familiar (mimic type)

Mimic?! So it wasn’t actually Glass and the others?

If these monsters looked like them, could they fight with the same strength too?

“Mr. Naofumi!”

Raphtalia swiped at them with her sword while Ost and the queen began to chant incantations. One step behind them, Rishia was in the middle of casting a support spell on me.

“. . .”

The fake Glass jumped back to avoid Raphtalia’s sword, while the fake L’Arc ignored me and ran to swing his scythe at Raphtalia.

“What do you want!?” Raphtalia shouted at the L’Arc copy.

“That’s not the real L’Arc. They must have run away and been replaced while we couldn’t see!”

“Mr. Iwatani! Ms. Raphtalia! Duck! Icicle Sword!”

A swirling cloud of ice crystals shot from the queen's hands, then coalesced to form an enormous blade that flew at L'Arc. Raphtalia and I saw it just in time to duck under the flying blade.

The fake Glass and L'Arc held their hands out in unison and stopped the twirling blade with their palms. They must have been pretty damn powerful to pull that off.

How were we supposed to fight such powerful enemies in such a small space?

"..."

The fake Glass spun her fans and was quickly enveloped in a swirling cloud of tremendous heat. I'd seen her do that before, and I was pretty sure it was the start of her special attack, Circle Dance Zero Formation, Reverse Snow Moon Flower.

I think the attack was aligned with a particular element, though I didn't know what it was. Furthermore, I had no way of knowing if attacks from the Glass copy would be the same.

How could she use an attack like that in this narrow tunnel?! The ceiling looked like it was on the verge of further collapse. If I didn't do something, the tunnel would cave in again. If I let it cave in, it might kill these monsters for us, but then again it might kill us along with them.

"...!"

The copy of L'Arc prepared to use an attack.

I knew what sort of attacks L'Arc used too, and I'd seen that pose before. It looked like Flying Circle, which turned his scythe into a rapidly spinning disc of energy.

Just as I'd expected, the fake L'Arc started to spin his scythe horizontally over his head. But it never turned into a circle of energy. Instead, he simply threw the spinning tortoise shell scythe at us.

Both fake Glass and fake L'Arc's attacks slammed into my shield—

a direct hit.

But they weren't very powerful and certainly nothing I couldn't handle. Luckily, these mimicked versions of our enemies didn't seem to be as powerful as the real thing.

I blocked their attacks easily enough, but they still did a lot of damage to the tunnel.

The fake L'Arc held his hand out the wall, and the rocks there instantly transformed into a fresh scythe in his hand.

That could be a problem.

"I, Ost Horai, the source of all strength, command you! Read and comprehend all that is under the sun, and show your power to me!"

"Gravity Field! Extreme Gravity!"

Ost finished the incantation, and a large semi-transparent black sphere shot through the air and slammed into the enemies.

". . . ?!"

L'Arc and Glass's mimicked versions suddenly discovered that they couldn't move well. They stumbled and fell. It looked as though they were being sucked toward the ground.

Raphtalia was in the gravity field too, but she was completely unaffected by it.

I could only use restorative and supportive magic, so that might be why I thought of things in these terms, but was it supposed to be an interference spell? It would be really terrible if someone cast that spell on me.

In the games that I'd played, the spells that lowered enemy's stats or afflicted them with ailments were always a little . . . disappointing. Of course, it depended on the game. There were plenty of games where even support spells seemed mostly useless. But in a serious battle, where a split second could be the difference between life and

death, these status ailment spells were never much use at all. They didn't do any real damage on their own.

"Hyaaa!" Raphtalia rushed at the fake Glass and plunged the glowing blade of her magic sword deep into her chest.

"Ying-Yang Sword!"

A gushing sound ran through the tunnel as Raphtalia plunged her other sword deep into the heart of the mimicked Glass, who . . . who lost the ability to maintain her shape.

It was disgusting to see. The human form warped and melted. Eyeballs opened where the stomach should have been, and the legs grew to an absurd size. They were so large they were filling the tunnel!

Raphtalia realized that she hadn't killed it. She pulled her sword out and ran back to where I stood.

"There's no room to fight."

"I know."

My mind raced to find a way out of the ever-worsening situation. The eyeballs in the stomach of what used to be the fake Glass opened. They were filled with glowing red light. It looked like they were about to start shooting heat beams at us in that narrow tunnel!

Goosebumps ran up my arms. The attack would be powerful. I could feel it in the air. I could probably block it, but I was afraid to think of what it would do to the tunnel. The air around the monster began to glow red, too. It was like the caves themselves were lending their power to it.

"Shield Hero! Watch out!" Ost shouted.

"I know! It sure looks like it's charging up for its strongest attack!"

Dodging it wasn't going to help. It was going to fire a heat beam straight down the tunnel, so there would be no way to run from it. Things might have been different if there were a sharp turn in the

tunnel, but unfortunately, it was mostly straight. Maybe we could dodge it, but I could tell the beam would be very thick and wide.

The morphing creature that used to look like Glass was growing large enough to fill the tunnel itself, and it was covered in glowing eyes.

". . . !"

The fake L'Arc spun his scythe and threw it at me.

I stopped it with my shield, which I thought would be good enough. But I was wrong. The scythe suddenly sprouted hands that grabbed a hold of the shield.

These attacks were getting annoying.

Then the scythe shot roots into the ground and anchored itself to the floor. It could only mean one thing. The scythe was trying to hold me in place so that the heat beam could finish me.

I quickly switched to a different shield.

I'd been using the Soul Eater Shield since the battle with the Spirit Tortoise, but its attributes clearly weren't giving us any advantage over the mimicked forms of L'Arc and Glass. So I decided to switch to the Whale Magic Core Shield, which had slightly better stats than the Soul Eater Shield, as well as water-aligned attributes.

Whale Magic Core Shield (awakened) +6 45/45 SR

abilities unlocked; equip bonus; skill "bubble shield," naval combat 2

special effect: water attribute: heat beam shield (medium), magic assistance, magic recovery (small), underwater time extensions

mastery level: 70

item enchantment level 6: fire resistance up 15%

karma penguin familiar spirit: water attribute: equipment ability up

status enchantment magic defense +25

The surface of the shield was round, polished, and difficult to get a grip on. As expected, the scythe monster's grip on it loosened.

"Raphtalia!"

"I'm on it!"

The fake Glass monstrosity was ready. It fired the powerful heat beam straight through the fake L'Arc monster and straight at us.

"Air Strike Shield! Second Shield! Dritte Shield!"

Three shields appeared in the air, stacked one in front of the other.

Just before the shields blocked my view, I saw the heat beam vaporize the fake L'Arc in a flash. Because it looked like someone I sort of knew, it made me more upset than I would have expected.

Then I couldn't see. I could hear the heat beam beating against the floating shields. It seemed to go on forever. I couldn't believe the monster could maintain an attack like that for so long. The Air Strike Shield had already run out of time. Soon Second Shield and Dritte Shield would disappear, too. Granted, the Air Strike Shield's effective time wasn't particularly long. I ran up to peek out between the shields, and it didn't look good.

The disgusting beast that used to look like Glass was still firing its heat beam, and it didn't show signs of stopping anytime soon.

If this were a game, the amount of time it could use a heat beam would be limited. Even science fiction games that had heat beam weapons had a time limit on the attack. But this wasn't a game, and it

looked like this monster could maintain a dense, powerful heat beam for as long as it wanted.

I turned to see how things were looking behind me.

Raphtalia, the queen, Ost, and Rishia . . . Which one of them had a skill that stood a chance of killing the monster? Raphtalia? She'd have to get up close. As for magic users, the queen or Ost might stand a chance. The queen could attack directly with her magic, which made her the clear favorite. Ost's magic was interesting but weird, and as for Rishia . . . Sorry, but she wouldn't stand a chance.

"Mr. Naofumi! What should we do?"

"It won't kill us. The problem is how do we kill that thing before it brings the ceiling down on us? And if we can't kill it, how do we escape?"

I could hold the shield for a while. Thanks to the water attribute, the heat beam didn't affect it too much. Raphtalia stood by me and extended the tip of her sword outside of the protective range of the shield. There was a loud sizzling sound, and the blade started to smoke.

"Think you can make it?"

Raphtalia was using the Usauni Sword, the one that the old guy from the weapon shop had worked on. If she messed up somehow and broke the sword, it would significantly affect her ability to fight from this point on.

"I think . . . yes. I think it will be okay."

"Good."

"Should I try to attack with a spell?"

"Do all you can."

"Very well," the queen said and started to chant a spell.

Damn. I was sure I could hold out, but the heat beam started to intensify. I saw cracks form in the ceiling. It would only be a matter of time before it collapsed.

"Icicle Sword!" the queen shouted. She placed her hand on the backside of my shield, and a blade of ice grew out of the front and shot forward like a bullet.

It didn't make it far before evaporating in a puff of steam.

"That didn't work. What about you, Ost?"

It didn't matter if she used gravity to slow the enemy down. She could probably use normal earth magic too—but if she threw a boulder at the thing, it would just end up vaporized like the Icicle Sword.

"Feh . . ."

"It's fine. I don't expect anything from you."

"Fehhhh . . ."

Ugh. I was trying to tell her that I didn't expect her to have some special spell to get us out of there. Calm down already, jeez.

"There's only one option left. The Air Strike Shield has already disappeared, so we just need to get up there, next to the monster. When we get there, Raphtalia, it's up to you. Kill it with one hit."

"Understood."

We should have just gone with this plan from the beginning.

"Air Strike Shield!" I shouted. The shield appeared right in front of the monster. That would render its attack mostly useless while the shield remained in place. I angled it slightly downward. That sent the beam down toward the ground—I'd hoped that would protect the integrity of the ceiling.

We ran forward. I couldn't help but imagine the beam deflecting

and vaporizing my feet. That was a situation I would rather avoid.

"Shooting Star Shield! Let's go!"

I made sure that we were inside the barrier—I didn't want to lose my legs—and we made our way up to the monster. When we got there, Raphtalia flipped her sword, readied the attack, and brought it down hard on the monster's head.

". . . ?!"

The writhing mass that had once looked like Glass split in two. But that wasn't the end of it. The two pieces started twitching and it looked like they were about to regenerate their lost halves.

"I, the source of all strength, command you! Read and comprehend all that is under the sun, and shoot them through with diamond spikes!"

"Drifa Diamond Missile!"

A huge ball of burning flames shot from the queen's hands, and a large diamond spike shot from Ost's. The two attacks slammed into the two halves of the monster where it writhed on the ground.

". . . ?!"

The attacks hit before the pieces could regenerate. One went up in flames, and the other was stuck to the ground with diamond spikes. They stopped moving.

"Whew. I think that does it. Is everyone okay?"

"I'm alright."

"I do not appear to be harmed."

"I'm . . . fine."

"Feh . . ."

I'd done all I could to protect them, but . . . I looked to where the monster had once stood.

The tunnel had completely collapsed around it, and we faced a dead end.

The tunnel itself was quiet. There were no installation-type eyeballs blinking at us from the walls. "Guess we need to find a detour. Who knows when we're going to run into Glass again?"

"What were they doing here?"

"Who knows? Maybe they're behind this whole thing."

Ost looked angry. Her hand curled into a fist. I couldn't blame her. In a way, it was their fault that she hadn't been able to carry out her original plan.

"And yet . . . Mr. Naofumi? Don't you think they were acting a little strange?"

"Yeah, I do."

It's not like I wanted to be friends with them or anything. From how things stood, it sure looked like there was a good chance that they were behind all of this misery. But I couldn't deny that they had been acting strangely.

Oh well. There was no use in speculating. We'd have to find out the truth the next time we saw them.

"Feh . . ."

"Whining again? I swear, Rishia . . ."

She really was useless—that's what I really wanted to say, but I didn't. She seemed to know what I meant anyway, because she just stood there sniffling. Maybe, if she realized how powerless she was, it would encourage her to do the work necessary to get stronger. Maybe.

"It's alright. You'll prove yourself someday," Ost said kindly.

“Right . . .” Rishia sniffled. They could sit there and comfort each other all day for all I cared.

“Time to back up and find another way out of here.”

The search was back on.

Chapter Eleven
The Heroes' Inscription

After wandering through the tunnels for a while longer, we found ourselves at the exit facing the temple. We did not run into Glass or L'Arc on the way.

The town around the temple had been utterly destroyed. Aside from parts of the temple and its surrounding buildings, I couldn't find any standing structures. Everything else had been destroyed by the emergence of the towering spikes.

"This is . . ."

The temple before us did not look like the same building we'd found the last time we climbed up on the shell.

"It is another temple. They must have been connected by the Spirit Tortoise cave."

"I guess so."

"I suggest we take a look around," the queen said, walking toward the half-ruined temple grounds. Ost and Rishia went with her.

"From the way things look, the temple we found the last time must have been completely destroyed when the Spirit Tortoise reawakened."

The sketch had been a rubbing of an inscription on the wall. But there wasn't anything left standing that resembled it. There were only piles of debris.

"You mean the pillar? Or the writing we found on the wall of the other temple?"

"That writing seemed to be based on the inscription from the stone pillar. The ancient heroes must have referenced the pillar to make it.

The pillar itself was famous. The legends speak of others as well, but . . .”

But they had all been reduced to piles of rubble.

I remembered the message we’d found. A hero named Keichi had written it.

“Can I see that?”

“Of course. We will search through all this to see if there isn’t something that you can read, Mr. Iwatani. Everyone, remember, something that might just look like a pattern or a design to you may actually be the writing of the heroes. Keep your wits about you.”

We started to look through the pieces of the stone pillar. Every few minutes, the air filled with the splitting sound of spikes launching into the air. In the distance, I sometimes caught sight of Fitoria jumping to avoid them. It was a surreal sight to behold.

The pieces of stone were covered in elementary drawings that seemed to depict the Spirit Tortoise, along with some writing. But the pieces were mostly too small to contain any useful information.

“Can you read it?”

“How does it look?”

I sat there in the rubble trying to arrange the pieces like a jigsaw puzzle, but the destruction was so complete that it was nearly impossible to assemble a large enough section to make out anything of value.

“I found something!”

Rishia shouted. She was holding a piece of the stone pillar over her head.

Yes! It was large enough that I could make out some of the words on it.

Goal is . . . Waves . . . World . . . Prevent . . . That was the same part that the sketch had contained.

With the real article in my hand, I was able to make out two more words: head and heart.

Think! What did Keichi's writing say?

Something about the brain . . . about how to kill the monster. It was so degraded I couldn't make out much more.

But it had said how to *kill*, not how to *imprison*.

That had to mean that someone knew how to kill it before they built the temple. The knowledge had existed for hundreds of years. And even though they knew that, they decided to seal it away—to imprison it.

But why?

Even Ost said that she didn't understand.

I guess it was sort of obvious. If she were part of the Spirit Tortoise, she'd probably be the last person to know about a special way to kill it.

I couldn't figure it out. Time to move on. There was only so much I could hope to learn from one sentence.

Head, heart . . . those words had only shown up here.

I had one idea, but it was like something you'd find in a game or a manga. I had no idea if it would actually work.

"Heh . . . It can't be."

"Mr. Naofumi! Have you figured it out?"

In a flash, everyone crowded around me.

“Not really. It’s so broken I can’t read it. To read it, we’d have to try and reassemble the whole thing. It’s all so old we’re likely to never figure it out. But to guess from the words we have here . . .”

Everyone nodded and listened closely.

“It makes me think that we might be able to kill it, if we destroy the head and the heart at the same time. That’s the only idea I have.”

“. . .”

Raphtalia looked more confused than encouraged. The queen snapped open her fan and placed it over her mouth while she considered what I said. “Do you think it will work?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then let us keep it as a backup option, in case the imprisoning doesn’t work.”

Ost hadn’t said anything. She looked concerned.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know. But for some reason, I feel like the Shield Hero’s conjecture is correct.”

“But?”

“. . . But I don’t think that he’s solved the entire puzzle.”

“You mean there might be another place we have to destroy?”

If so, we’d never pull it off. It would mean that we’d have to destroy everything we found inside the tortoise’s body in hopes that it was the right thing. All the organs, the magic parts, and maybe even its soul. We wouldn’t know that we had destroyed the right parts until the Spirit Tortoise was dead.

“Let’s do what we can!” Rishia said, attempting to cheer up Ost.

“You’re right. We have to kill my true body as soon as possible!”

She was right. There was no telling how much longer Fitoria could hold out. We decided to head back to the chamber where the coalition army was waiting.

On my way back, I realized that there was a good chance Glass and the others had run into the waiting troops. I hoped that wasn’t the case. They’d said that their goal was to kill the heroes, but if they were controlling the Spirit Tortoise and killing swaths of the population indiscriminately, there’s no telling what they were capable of. So we hurried back to the troops, quickly dispatching any familiars we encountered on the way.

Luckily, we found the troops where we’d left them, safe and sound.

“Mr. Iwatani! Your majesty!”

“Holy saint!”

“Shield Hero!”

Eclair, the old lady, and the troops were thrilled to see us return.

Filo and the shadows still hadn’t returned from their search. If Glass and the others were still in the tunnels, then I would feel better to have everyone back together.

“What did you find?” Eclair asked. She looked very eager.

“The heroes’ inscription was so damaged that I couldn’t read it. But the small portion that I was able to read gave me an idea.”

The troops cheered when they heard that.

I told them about the plan to destroy the head and the heart at the same time. They weren’t as excited when they heard the details. I

couldn't blame them. Who knew if it would actually work? And besides, we didn't even know where the heart was.

"Also . . . We ran into Glass—the enemy from the waves—on the way to the temple. I think she might be behind all of this."

"Really?!"

"Yeah. But they were acting a little strange, almost like they were worried. So I'm not sure they are really responsible." It was a possibility that I couldn't ignore, but I wasn't confident it was true. Not yet. They must have been related to all of this somehow, but I didn't know for sure how. Anyway, if they were behind all of this, we were sure to see them again soon—like right in front of the heart.

They would try to stop us from killing the tortoise. So if they were hiding, they would eventually show themselves. The worst-case scenario would be if they attacked the troops and I wasn't there to protect them.

There was no point in worrying about it. We just had to be careful. If I stayed there to protect the troops, we'd never find the heart. And yet of course I didn't want them to show up when I was somewhere else. There was no good option. They really knew what they were doing.

I was used to it. Nothing had been easy for me since the day I found myself in this world. Oh well! You can't catch a tiger without going to its den, as they say.

"So put whoever is strongest in charge of protecting the troops. We're going to join the search for the heart."

"Yes, sir!"

Eclair, the old lady, and the troops all snapped to attention.

I turned to the queen. "You should stay and command the troops."

"Very well. If anything happens, I will send a shadow to inform you, Mr. Iwatani."

“Good. You too, Rishia. Honestly, I’m a little worried about it, but I’m counting on you.”

“I know! I’ll do my best!”

With the queen, Eclair, the old lady, and Rishia there, I hoped they could hold their own for a while. If Glass and the others showed up, we’d just have to hurry back to meet them.

“I’m baaaack! It was a dead end!”

“We have returned,” said a shadow.

Filo and the shadows came jogging into the chamber. They didn’t bring any good news. They reported on the paths they’d investigated, and we started the search again.

“I guess it’s good that the queen had an old map of the caves, but . . .” I sighed. If everything had changed since they made the map, what good was it? At least we had Ost, whose intuitions had generally been proving themselves accurate. But she wasn’t any help in the search for the heart. She led us to a number of dead ends.

We made notes on the map as we walked through the tunnels, but we weren’t any closer to finding the heart.

“Hm . . .”

We ran into familiars sometimes, but Raphtalia and Filo got rid of them without any trouble. Every time we hit a dead end, we would trek back to the main chamber and check on the troops there. We had to make the trip back to the chamber plenty of times.

According the troops, familiars came to attack them while we were gone, but Rishia took the initiative and killed them. I don’t know how she could do that with such low stats, but I assumed it was because of the Filo kigurumi.

“Dammit.”

We kept wandering back and forth, and I became more and more nervous, thinking that Fitoria couldn't fight the tortoise forever. Besides, if the tortoise hadn't been artificially created, shouldn't the walls have been made of flesh or something?

What was the problem? We couldn't even find the entrance. What if we were in the wrong cave? The map we had wasn't accurate anymore, but the tunnels didn't seem to lead deeper underground at all. The map indicated that we should be at the lowest levels.

"Shield Hero." A shadow appeared and updated the map. From the way it looked, the entire cave was nearly mapped. Why hadn't we seen Glass or the others yet? I followed the sprawling lines on the map and was shocked by what I saw.

Every path was a dead end.

"What is going on here? Are the legends wrong?"

"I do not know. We were zure to zearch for hidden passages."

"Hey, master!" Filo shouted. She was kicking at the ground. Watching her, Ost seemed to remember something. I decided to sit back and see what happened. It looked like Filo might have found a path that would take us further underground.

"Should we make another pass? Or do we need to start digging?" If we had to dig, we were going to need tools—but hey, I had access to digging skills.

"Hey."

"We will check with the army to zee what tools they have."

"Hey!!"

"What is it?" Filo was shouting to get my attention, so I looked over at her.

"Dontcha think the floor here is kind of . . . weird?" Filo asked as she kicked at the ground.

I had checked the area to make sure there wasn't a trap door, but nothing had sounded hollow.

Ost's eyes grew wide and she came running over to me, shouting, "Shield Hero! Shield Hero!"

I guess there really was a trap door. But Filo still hadn't said anything else, and she wasn't answering us. I couldn't figure it out.

"It's alive."

"Yeah, well, we are in a cave on the back of a giant monster. Of course it's alive."

Ost looked at me and nodded.

. . . ?

"That's not what I mean!" Filo shouted and kicked the floor hard—and the whole thing wobbled and flexed.

"Huh?"

There was a very strange sound echoing through the tunnel.

"This is one of the mimicked familiars."

"What? You mean the same kind of monster that pretended to look like Glass is right here, pretending to be the floor?"

"Yes."

"Really? I guess we'll just have to kill it then," I said. I wasn't sure how we were supposed to attack a monster that was hiding in the ground. We had to find a way. Judging from what we'd seen of the cave system, we were going to have to find a way to get deeper underground if we wanted to find the heart.

We could hack our way through—but there was no telling how long that might take. If only there was an efficient way to punch a hole through it. I scratched my chin, and then I remembered that I had

once seen a recipe in a book for acid water. I'd used the shield to try out the recipe, so I had a bottle. With any luck it would work like the weed killer we used on the bioplants. I decided to try it.

If only Ren or Motoyasu were there. Their offensive skills would have come in handy.

"Filo, Ost—stand back."

"Okay!"

I pulled a bottle of the acid water from my shield and gave it to Raphtalia.

"Pour this on the monster. If I do it, it might trigger a counter-attack."

"Alright," she said, taking the bottle and pouring its contents out on the ground.

". . . !"

The floor started to wiggle, writhe, and melt.

And there, just beneath the ground, was a monster—and it wasn't just the Spirit Tortoise's back. It was puffy and sticky, like a rice cake. It looked at us through enormous eyes, and its back was covered with a giant shell.

"I zee. It really iz one of the mimicking familiarz. We never would have found thiz."

"How could you have? It was hibernating. I never would have spotted it."

We never would have found it without Filo. If the shadows couldn't find the monster, that proved how good at hiding it was. But was it really the same kind of beast that had mimicked the appearance of Glass and the others?

"Let's kill it!"

“Okay!”

“Yes!”

“I will azzist you!”

Everyone jumped forward and killed the beast. When it died, it shrunk up like a slug sprinkled with salt before vanishing in a puff of smoke.

“Zo the path forward waz hidden here.”

When the monster vanished, it was clear that it had been blocking the entrance to a tunnel that led further underground.

If the path had been hidden so thoroughly, then how many of the other dead-end paths we’d found had actually contained mimic monsters? There was no point in worrying about it—we had to continue down this path.

“Let’s go.”

Everyone nodded and followed me down the new tunnel.

It wasn’t long before the air and the texture of the walls began to change. It seemed to be getting warmer too. Eventually, the rock walls vanished and were replaced with pulsing walls of flesh.

“This is pretty creepy.”

“I agree. It’s disgusting.”

“It feels like being inside my mouth!” Filo shouted. She really had a way with words.

“It looks like we’re finally inside the tortoise’s body.”

“It certainly does seem that way.”

The ceiling was still made of rock. Things were going to start getting serious. The floor beneath my feet was soft, and I could feel it

pulsing with a heartbeat.

First things first—we had to find the heart. I tried to think of a plan, when a white bulbous monster came flying at us. It looked like a blood platelet I'd seen under a microscope once.

I blocked it with Shooting Star Shield, and then Raphtalia and Filo jumped forward to kill it. From what I could tell, the tortoise's immune system was deploying familiars at us.

"If there are more of these, it's going to be hard to get all the troops down here."

From time to time we passed puffy maggot-like monsters that wriggled on the ground. We sprinkled them with acid when we passed by. There were a lot of familiars in the tunnel. I hoped that meant we were getting closer to the heart and that they were there to protect it. The only thing that would complete the picture would be Glass and L'Arc. If we found them standing in front of the heart, arms crossed, wouldn't that just be great?

If that happened, what were we supposed to do? The army troops wouldn't stand a chance against enemies like that. We'd have to deal with the enemy first and then swing back to get the troops.

Ost suddenly raised her head. She looked worried.

"What is it?"

"I . . ."

She was acting strange. I stared at her to see what the problem was, and I saw the cursed burns on her hand disappearing before my eyes.

"What the . . ."

"I am a Spirit Tortoise familiar, too. As we approach the heart, my regenerative abilities are improving."

"How nice for you."

“My magic power is returning as well.”

I hoped that Ost’s improving fortunes would help us in the battles to come.

“Zhould I return to inform the troops of our dizcovery?”

“Not yet. We haven’t found the heart yet. Let’s hold off on telling them until we can be sure we’re going the right way.”

“Underztood.”

A little further down the path, we came to a curtain of red sinews blocking the way forward. I’d seen this sort of gimmick in games before. You normally had to cut the right one to move on. I looked over at Ost for a hint, but she shook her head. I guess I couldn’t expect her to know everything about the inside of her true body. I didn’t really know what happened inside of my own body, after all.

You can cook food in a microwave without knowing how the microwave works—if you know what I mean. So of course, she didn’t know. I shouldn’t have expected her to.

“Raphtalia, cut that one.”

“Oh, alright.” She swung her sword and sliced through one of the sinews.

The fleshy wall split and opened, leading to another path.

“What a lucky choize you’ve made!”

“I just had a feeling. I’ve seen this sort of thing before.”

“Very imprezzive.”

We continued down the tunnel, only to arrive at a similar setup, only this time the sinews were blue. If we cut them, we’d probably get a new path forward, just like last time.

“Raphtalia.”

“Yes!”

She sliced through the sinew just like before. The path ahead of us opened up, but the path we’d come from closed again, and the red sinews grew back. What a pain. To make matters worse, when we cut the sinews it seemed to activate the immune system. Hordes of the immune system monsters flooded the tunnel.

If they didn’t let up soon, we’d have a tough time making any progress.

I could hear a loud pulsing heartbeat coming from the other side of a door, and a cord of blue sinews grew nearby. Raphtalia cut them.

But this time, the door ahead of us seemed to block itself further, and the door behind us reopened. I was starting to get irritated. If we didn’t find the right sinew to cut, we would never find the heart.

“Shield Hero,” Ost said, stepping forward and raising her hand.

“What?”

“Leave this to me.”

“You can do something about this?”

“Yes. Just a minute.”

She held her hand out to the closed door of flesh, and it suddenly started to twitch in spasms. Finally, it opened.

“Wow . . .”

A part of me wished she had done that sooner, but I decided to assume that she had just figured out how to do it.

“. . . ?!”

The room was filled with a loud pulsing. The path must have led to the heart chamber! But Ost’s power over the door began to wane, and the door of flesh strained to release itself.

“Let’s go!”

“Yes!”

We dashed through the door and moved on.

Soon we came to a knot of white sinews, and when we cut them, the path behind us opened. The sinews were capable of regeneration. It took about 30 seconds for them to grow back. Ha! I guess we just had to hack our way through.

“Shadow. We might need you to focus on keeping the paths open.”

“Underztood. Should I ztart now?”

“Not yet. In a little while, if we run into Glass, you separate from us and keep your distance.”

“Underztood.”

Finally, we came upon a strange artificial object that seemed remarkably out of place. It was a dragon hourglass, and it was filled with blue sand. It was also smaller than the giant hourglass back in Melromarc. It was very strange to see the elaborately designed hourglass sitting there inside of the Spirit Tortoise’s body.

“A dragon hourglass?”

“It’s blue.”

“That iz how it appearz.”

“Where’s all the sand?” Filo asked. She was right; it looked nearly empty, like it was only 20% filled.

“This is . . .” Ost muttered to herself while she approached the hourglass.

“This is filled with the soul energy of those who became sacrifices to the Spirit Tortoise. When this hourglass is filled, the Spirit Tortoise can create the barrier that protects the world.”

“. . .”

So we were looking at the source of the Spirit Tortoise’s energy?

“So? Where’s the person that is supposed to have control of the tortoise?”

“I believe we may find them in the core. This is only a projection of the true hourglass, which is held elsewhere.”

“What? Do you know where it is?”

“Yes. Destroying the head and heart will only stop the movement of the beast. After that . . .”

The story was getting more and more complicated.

What was all this about a core? Is that were we’d find Glass and the others?

There was a familiar symbol, not from this world, written on the hourglass: 7.

Ost had explained that before. She said that it meant the power level was equal to the seventh wave. I reached out to touch it, but my hand slipped right through the glass, unable to make contact with anything. It was definitely different from the dragon hourglasses back in Melromarc.

“I guess there’s nothing for us to do here. Time to move on.”

“Alright!”

“We can return to inveztigate thiz later.”

“Great. I guess we need to find this ‘core’ thing now.”

“Yes. If we cannot free the tortoise from whoever is controlling it, these people will have died in vain,” Ost said, hard and determined.

We walked past the hourglass and found the heart a bit further

down the tunnel.

It stood more than six meters tall and was divided into two colors. Each side had an eyeball.

“So this is the heart.”

Glass was nowhere to be seen. I guess we would be likely to find them at this ‘core’ that Ost was talking about.

“It zeems to be the heart. It is very ominous indeed.”

This was what we had to imprison.

The eyes looked at me when I spoke, and they didn’t look very welcoming. Sure enough, a second later and they were shooting heat beams at us. I blocked them with Shooting Star Shield.

“. . . !”

The eyes opened even wider and started to shake. Suddenly, the room was flooded with familiars. I had no idea where they came from. I got the unsettling feeling that the heart was capable of summoning an infinite amount of them.

It wasn’t going to be an easy fight. We’d left all the troops back in the chamber, and we were supposed to be just investigating now. So we didn’t need to fight it yet.

“Let’s try to weaken it a bit. Shadows, you stay back. Ost, back us up.”

“Yes!”

“Okay!”

“Underztood.”

“I’ll do all I can to weaken it.”

Filo and Raphtalia jumped out from behind my force field and

sprinted straight at the heart.

“Zweite Aura!” I shouted, casting the spell on both of them. It dramatically improved all of their stats.

“Ying-Yang Sword!”

“Puchikuikku!”

They each attacked one of the eyes.

“. . . !”

The heart freaked out. The whole chamber shook violently.

Suddenly, a huge mandala-like magic pattern appeared on the floor around the heart. It was preparing to do something drastic.

“Raphtalia! Filo! Get back!”

Ost was behind us, fending off the familiars. I couldn’t ask her for anything.

“Understood.”

“Okay!”

Both of them ducked back into the force field and rushed to get behind my shield so they could prepare their next attacks.

The heart formed a black ball of magic and shot it straight at us. When I blocked it, the force field shattered with a loud *crack!*

The black ball slammed into my shield, and the light around me bent and warped.

My body suddenly felt very heavy! It must have been that gravity type of magic that Ost was fond of. I felt heavier and more tired than I ever had, but my defense ability was unaffected, and I could still bear it.

“Hyaaaaa!” I shouted, shoving the shield to the right and sending

the ball careening through the tunnel.

The heart wasn't using any of the super powerful attacks that the tortoise used outside. Of course it wouldn't be able to—not without hurting itself. That was good news. I could use the Whale Core Shield to mediate the effects of the heat beams.

I was mulling over my strategy when I noticed a bunch of the clumpy white monsters crawling over the heart. The whole surface was nearly covered with them when, *bam*, the clumps exploded out from the heart to cover the whole room.

"Shooting Star Shield!"

"Raphtalia, Filo! Can you kill the heart?!"

"I can try!"

"Yup!"

Both of them started to charge up their most powerful attacks. While we waited, I protected them and Ost used her powers to hold off all the familiar monsters. Whenever there was a space, she sent an attack spell flying to buy us more time.

Raphtalia's tail puffed up. Filo looked ready, too. Then Raphtalia's sword burst into light while Filo crossed her arms in front of her.

"Filo! Can you talk to Fitoria?"

I had an idea. It was time to act on my theory. If we prioritized the attack, we might be able to put an end to all this. Fitoria could crush the head at the same time that we killed the heart.

"Huh? Um . . . yeah, I can talk to her."

"Then let's attack at the same time."

"Okay! Fitoria says she understands!"

"Then let's do it! Maybe it will work!"

I turned to face the heart and focus.

“Herculean Strength!” Ost cast support magic on both Raphtalia and Filo. Hopefully, they would be powerful enough. If it didn’t work, I’d have no choice but to use the Shield of Wrath.

“Directional . . .” Raphtalia crouched down low and ran for the heart.

Filo followed her. “Spiral Kick!”

She turned into a ray of light and shot herself straight into the heart.

The heart tried to defend itself. A force field appeared and stretched from the ceiling to the floor, and Filo’s attack ricocheted off of it. But Raphtalia was right behind her, swinging her sword. The force field exploded with the sound of shattering glass.

“Sword of Heaven!”

Her sword flashed with spinning, complex Taoist-like patterns in its wake.

With a great gushing sound, Filo’s attack punched a hole in the heart. Before blood could spray from it, Raphtalia brought her sword back around and sliced deep into the flesh.

The heart’s eyes shot open wide, and the heart split in two—

“. . . !”

Behind me, I head Ost gasp. I turned to see her clutching her chest in pain.

“Are you okay!?”

“Yes . . . I’m fine. But that is not good enough.”

“You . . .”

“To kill my true body is to kill me.”

She had done all of this, knowing that she would die if we were successful. It must have taken an unbelievable amount of courage to do what she’d done. I don’t think I could have done it.

Why was the world worth protecting? I wasn’t going to ask that now. I could see how fervently she was committed to saving as many people as she could, even if it meant giving up everything she had. She was nothing like the ex-princess Bitch. Bitch would sacrifice anyone to get what she wanted.

Ost would do anything for the sake of the future. She thought her very life existed to safeguard the world for others. I certainly didn’t want to die for the sake of the world. No, thank you. But Ost’s goal was that exact thing: to sacrifice herself for the good of everyone else.

I couldn’t help but respect that.

She helped us so much in such a short amount of time. She’d put our needs ahead of her own from the minute we met, and she’d earned my trust.

Killing the Spirit Tortoise would mean killing Ost. But that was what she wanted. Just like always, this world forced me into the worse situations imaginable. I turned to face the heart.

“Filo!” I shouted as Filo came around after finishing her attack. “Did Fitoria mess it up?!”

Had I been wrong?

“She says she crushed the head!”

“. . .”

Then it must not have worked. Either that or the monster had another heart? Maybe it was the core that Ost had mentioned. Maybe we needed to crush the core too.

A loud sound echoed through the walls. I assumed it was the sound

of the head falling.

But Ost was still standing.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Already regenerated, the heart resumed its shape.

“Dammit. We'd better retreat. My theory was wrong, so we better get the troops down here.”

“It was just a feeling, but I felt a slight energy flow. The sealing spell might be necessary to defeat my true form.”

“Really?”

“. . .”

She fell silent. She must not have had the confidence to say for sure.



We had no choice but to try.

“Got it. Filo, we’re falling back!”

“Okay!”

“Shadow, I’m going to need your help. Just like we talked about.” It was going to be a rough battle, but the shadow nodded as if he’d been waiting for it. “Underztood!”

“Sorry.”

“It iz my job.”

We retreated. Running back down the tunnel, we left the heart behind.

We had no choice but to try.

“Got it. Filo, we’re falling back!”

“Okay!”

“Shadow, I’m going to need your help. Just like we talked about.” It was going to be a rough battle, but the shadow nodded as if he’d been waiting for it. “Underztood!”

“Sorry.”

“It iz my job.”

We retreated. Running back down the tunnel, we left the heart behind.

Chapter Twelve
The Spirit Tortoise's Heart

"Are you alright?!" Rishia came running over to meet us with the troops.

"We found the heart."

"Oh!" the troops exclaimed in unison.

They hadn't yet realized the problem. How were we supposed to get them to it?

We weren't going to have much luck if we just tried to march them down the tunnel.

"How are you all holding up back here?"

"Monsters attacked nine times while you were away. There have been a few casualties."

"The troops will have to come with us. The monsters' attacks are only going to get stronger, so make sure you're prepared for that. I can't protect everyone all of the time. I'll do what I can, but make sure you can protect yourselves!"

The group of troops cheered and nodded.

Now, although their strength didn't exactly fill me with confidence, I had to take them down to battle the heart. How many of them was I about to lose?

A variety of anxieties ran through my mind as I led the troops toward the underground tunnel we'd found earlier. On the way there, I told them about how the heart had attacked us and about the different attacks it had used. I told them that I would use Shooting Star Shield, Air Strike Shield, and Second Shield to defend them and that I wanted them to wait for a break in the barrage before they tried

to counter-attack.

“I wouldn’t have expected any less from you, Shield Hero. Thank you for planning this strategy to protect as many of us as possible.”

“Yeah, well . . .”

If I was going to protect them, I had to assume that the heart would retaliate with stronger attacks than I had yet seen. I just wanted to make sure they were prepared to face it.

“There were also a lot of white clumps that seemed to be monsters, too. We didn’t have time to figure out how they attack, so be on the lookout.”

“Roger!” the troops shouted.

We ran into plenty of familiars on the way, but we were able to handle them with the combined strength of Raphtalia, Filo, Ost, Eclair, the old lady, Rishia, and the queen and her troops.

When we’d progressed to the point that the walls of stone were replaced with pulsing flesh, the troops were noticeably repulsed. And when the sound of the thumping became more obvious, they all grew grave and serious.

We made it to the series of doors that opened and closed with red and blue sinews. The troops never really figured out what they were supposed to do about the doors, but we pressed on and made it through anyway. Raphtalia and Filo watched the rear of the line and defended it from any monsters that attacked from behind.

The biggest problem we ran into was when the parasite-like monsters suddenly appeared by tearing through the walls of flesh. They were on us in a flash, and we weren’t able to respond as quickly as I would have liked. We lost a few troops, and the morale of the survivors suffered for it.

A terrible fate awaited anyone caught in one of the immune system’s monster attacks. People were sucked up and melted down right before their friends’ eyes. Some of the troops with weaker

stomachs threw up when they saw it.

“Keep moving! If you stop here, you’ll end up as feed for these things! Your fallen friends wouldn’t want that!”

I protected the troops while Raphtalia and Filo took care of the monsters.

Finally, we made it to the last door, where I’d posted a shadow on the other side.

“Hey!” I shouted, and the door opened. “Have any trouble while we were gone?”

“If I had, I couldn’t have opened thiz door for you.”

“Good point.”

They were very good at hiding and hadn’t gotten into any trouble while we were gone.

“Alright, listen up! The heart is just over there. Are you ready to cast the sealing spell?”

“Yes. But you’ll have to weaken the heart if the spell is to be effective.”

I guess that made sense. Raphtalia and Filo were strong enough to have defeated it once before, and now we had more people with us. I didn’t expect too much trouble. And with Rishia, the queen, and all the troops working on the spell, I felt like it had a chance of working.

“Once we begin the incantation, it will take a little while until the spell can be cast.”

“I’ll keep the heart busy.”

Another battle of attrition. How wonderful.

“Is there any way you can prepare for the spell ahead of time?”

“Unfortunately not. The spell is only effective over a certain range, and we are not able to move once we begin the incantation.”

So we had no choice. Fine—I had my shield, and this is what it was made for. “I’ll protect the troops while you perform the incantation ceremony. The rest of you kill any monsters that appear to attack us. Raphtalia, Filo, you two focus on weakening the heart.”

“Understood!”

“Okaaay!”

“Roger that!”

Rishia peeped out from the hood of her kigurumi. “What should I do?”

“You can . . .” I had to be careful about what I entrusted her with. She was more useful than the troops were, but I couldn’t ask her to team up with Raphtalia either. She moved faster than she used to, and she was a better attacker too, but I still didn’t feel comfortable putting her on the front lines. Her nonstop whimpering didn’t help. “You can help with support spells from the back lines. Don’t come to the front. The most important thing you can do is keep an eye on the battle and let me know when anything unexpected happens.”

“Oh, um . . . Alright.”

That was all I could think of for the time being.

We found the hourglass a little further down the tunnel. The troops didn’t know what to make of it. They were clearly scared of it.

Huh? It looked like it had a little less sand in it than it had the last time we saw it. Maybe I was just imagining things. The tunnel was shaking, so some of the sand had probably just shifted and settled.

Enough. It was time to finish this.

“That’s . . . that’s the heart.” The troops were speechless when they saw it. It was a pretty terrifying sight to behold, after all.

The heart noticed our arrival and filled the chamber with an enraged roar. The eyes opened wide, and the whole heart began to beat harder. It must have remembered us.

Good. We'd be the last people it ever saw. We weren't retreating this time.

"Let's go!" I shouted. The troops shouted back and immediately began to prepare the ceremonial sealing spell. Filo and Raphtalia dashed to the front line and started to attack the heart. The non-wizard troops pulled out their weapons and fought off familiars that got too close to the others.

I kept on eye on the incantation and used Hate Reaction, Air Strike Shield, and Second Shield to protect the troops from the swarms of familiars. Sometimes I used Change Shield when the familiars got too close.

I was using a lot of SP, but I was able to keep my head above water by using Soul Eat from time to time. The SP recovery (small) effect didn't do a lot, but it helped. The heart let lose a massive volley of heat beams. That meant that it was time to switch to the Whale Magic Core Shield.

"Mr. Naofumi! There are too many familiars!"

"I know! They aren't letting up!"

The last time we'd fought the heart, we'd only traded a couple of attacks, so the whole thing ended very quickly. Because of that, we hadn't had time to judge the amount of support the heart was getting from the familiars. They came swarming from every direction. From the floor, the ceiling, the walls—everywhere! At the same time, the heart was busy blasting us with heat beams. There were too many things I had to block at once.

The heart's eyes shot over to the wizards deep in their ceremonial magic preparations. It glared at them.

What now? Was it going to blast them with a heat beam?

The floor underneath the heart changed color, and I quickly realized it was the same mandala-like pattern from before. It was about to use its gravity attack! The pattern started to spin rapidly.

No!

I ran over to stand before the wizards and I readied my shield. Just in time—the eyes opened and emitted a huge heat beam.

“Ugh!”

A few people were caught in the blast, and they instantly vanished, leaving no trace. I caught the brunt of the blast with my shield, and the force of it pushed me back a few paces.

“Ugh.”

The beam was huge. If this were a game, it would have been a special finishing attack. It was the strongest attack the heart had used yet. Luckily, it was still considerably weaker than any of the Spirit Tortoise’s attacks we’d faced outside. But you’d be a goner if it hit you directly.

I hoped it wouldn’t go on forever, like the mimic monster’s attack had.

“AARRGH!” I changed the angle of my shield and forced the beam upward. The heat beam seared the fleshy ceiling of the chamber, and a spray of blood rained down on us.

We were inside the body of our enemy, and that was a fact I had to take advantage of. Still, it would only be a few moments before the flesh regenerated and made it as if nothing had happened.

“Mr. Naofumi!”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

The attacks we’d suffered outside of the body were stronger. The

heart's attacks were nothing I couldn't handle.

"Are you ready to cast the sealing spell yet?"

"We need a little more time!"

"Alright! Anyone who still has fight in them, attack the heart and weaken it! Remember, we aren't trying to kill it!"

"Okay!"

"Okaaaay!"

Raphtalia and Filo had been waiting for my signal to use their special attacks.

"Ying-Yang Sword!"

"Puchikuikku!"

With the damage the beam had done to the ceiling and the weight of Filo and Raphtalia's attacks to deal with, everything started to shake violently.

Weren't they ready yet?

The monster was so full of life energy that it restored itself almost instantaneously. How were we supposed to "weaken" a monster like that? All I could do was have everyone focus on attacking it. But I was starting to get a bad feeling.

"How's that?"

"Take this!"

Raphtalia and Filo flew forward and sliced through a number of the sinews that were connected to the heart.

". . . ?!"

The heart immediately began to have trouble beating. You could tell with a single glance. That ought to give the wizards enough time to

cast their spell.

“We’re ready!”

“Great! Do it!”

“Roger!”

The wizards all shouted in unison. “We are the source of all power, and we command you. Hear this truth and heed it. Drive a wedge to stop the Spirit Tortoise, one of the four spirits of destruction!”

Did it work?

The heart began to twitch. White blobs covered the surface and then shot out in all directions!

“High ceremonial magic?”

The blobs flew through the air. There was no time! I quickly cast Shooting Star Shield, Shield Prison, Air Strike Shield, and Second Shield to protect the wizards.

“Ugh!”

“Ahhh!”

“Damn!”

I wasn’t fast enough to save them all. Some of the blobs made it past me.

I kept my shield up and turned to survey the damage. It was worse than I’d expected.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m sorry, we failed . . .” one of the wizards said, his head hanging.

“There’s still time! Report!”

“We’ve lost some men! I’ll report back when I know more!”

How were the front lines doing? I turned back to find Raphtalia and Filo clearly exhausted. Their shoulders were heaving with heavy breathing. They found a break in the fight and came running back to me, their faces pale.

“Are you alright?!”

“Raphtalia! What happened?!”

Eclair ran to Raphtalia’s side to support her, and they both shuffled over to me. In contrast, Filo looked like she was doing better. The old lady must have dodged the attack completely.

“I’m . . . alright . . . but I . . . My magic power is . . .”

“Yeah, um . . . That thing stole our magic power!”

Damn. This was not going well. The heart had the same draining attacks that the head had.

The report from the wizards was ready.

“A number of men have died after losing their magic power!”

“Can we still hold the line?”

“Yes. Thanks to you, we can still use the sealing spell.

“Good.”

The drain negation effect was proving more useful than I’d expected. We were suffering losses, but we were still able to hold our own. We didn’t have to retreat just yet.

“I know it’s tough, but get the next spell ready!”

“Roger that!”

If the heart attacked with any sort of pattern, it would use its heat beams next. Sure enough, it started to charge up for the attack.

I ran to protect the wizards and prepared to deflect the beam

again.

“. . . !”

“Damn.”

The attack was even stronger than it had been the last time! I was still able to endure the brunt of it with the Whale Magic Core Shield, but this newest attack was by far the strongest yet. I could feel the skin on my hands starting to singe. It felt terrible.

The white blobs had returned to the heart, and they seemed to be driving the increase in power of its heat beam. The shield was holding out, but it was so hot that it was starting to hurt me. I began taking damage.

“Ughhhh.”

I struggled to deflect the beam upwards. With all the additional power behind it, it was proving difficult. I was afraid that I couldn’t control it. It reminded me of trying to open an umbrella in a powerful windstorm. If I couldn’t control the angle, I might end up vaporizing the troops!

“Hey! Don’t you hurt master with the energy you stole from me!” Filo barked and prepared to suck magic power back into herself.

“Everyone keep the monsters away from Filo!”

“Alright!”

“Understood!”

“Oh . . . Okay!”

Raphtalia and Eclair, along with Rishia and the old lady, all ran over to form a circle around Filo. They killed any monster that got close.

“Schwooooooooop!”

Filo started sucking in a lot of air, so much of it that I could feel the wind she was causing on my skin. Any white blobs that were trying to return to the heart stopped in mid-air and switch directions. Filo was pulling them all in, and they couldn't get back to the heart.

Finally, the intensity of the heat wave began to weaken.

"Oh! The holy saint's monster is very impressive! I did not think that she would have mastered aspects of Hengen Muso in secret!"

It was no time to stand around feeling impressed!

"Hey, old lady, if you can do that too, do it already!"

"Very well!"

The old lady began to suck in air just like Filo was doing.

Huh? The more air she pulled in, the more the old lady's skin started to change. She looked like she was getting younger.

"Nice job, you two!" I shouted. Filo, now round as a ball, was waving at me.

"Take it back!" Filo shouted. She sharply exhaled in the direction of the heart, and something that looked like a concentrated ball of air shot through the room.

"Hengen Muso Technique! Full Moon!"

The old woman spun her arms in circles before pulling her palms together in a pose that I'd seen plenty of times in fighting games. A ball of magic formed between her hands, then shot across the room at the heart.

To be more specific, it was just like that move you get when you hit down, right diagonal, and right on the controller.

". . . !"

The heart formed a force field around itself to block the attacks. At

the same time, all the familiars in the room turned and flew at the ball of magic, trying to stop it before it could reach the heart. But they weren't strong enough. The ball ripped them to pieces without even slowing down.

For a minute, all the powers in the room were focused on the ball of magic, locked in a draw. If the wizards were going to use the sealing spell, now was the time.

"Do it now!"

"Alright!"

"We are the source of all power, and we command you. Hear this truth and heed it. Drive a wedge to stop the Spirit Tortoise, one of the four spirits of destruction!"

An enormous mandala of light appeared in the air surrounding the heart. It had been so focused on dealing with the old lady and Filo's attacks that it was shocked to find itself surrounded by swirling patterns of magic.

"High ceremonial magic: Seal!"

The mandala multiplied until there were many layers stacked on one another, then finally contracted around the heart.

" . . . ?!"

Thump . . . Thump . . . Th . . . ump . . . th . . .

The heart beat slower and slower. Then it stopped all together.

"Yes!"

The whole room erupted in cheers.

"We did it!"

Whew . . . but it was disappointing. Ost seemed to feel the same way, and the queen wasn't able to hide the worry written all over her

face.

If we'd bought ourselves some time here, then at least we could focus on finding the core.

"I'll give these back, big sis!"

"What? No! Filo! I don't want them!"

The white blobs flew out of Filo's body and slammed into Raphtalia.

When they hit her, color began to return to her pale face. But Raphtalia didn't look happy about it. She squirmed, like a bunch of bugs had crawled up into her clothes.

She'd shoot them at Eclair next.

"Unnecessary! None of my magic was stolen. Give it to someone else!" Eclair shouted. But Filo wasn't listening, and she shot more of the white blobs at her.

Raphtalia threw one of the white blobs to the floor and started angrily chasing Filo around the room.

"Hey! Filo! I won't forgive you for this!"

"Uh oh! She's gonna get me!"

"Ha ha ha!"

Whew . . . Well, we'd finally managed to imprison the heart.

As far as I understood what Ost had said, the real seal had never been properly broken, so I guess it was safe to say we'd pulled it off."

"So we're safe for a little while?"

"It's hard to say," the queen said, hiding her mouth behind a fan.

She was right. Besides, Ost looked very grim.

“Filo, has Fitoria said anything yet?”

“Um . . . It sounds like the tortoise has stopped moving outside.”

So I guess we . . . won?

I didn’t even have time to finish the thought.

“Master?!” Filo stopped running and shouted at me. She looked scared.

Thump! Thump!

The heart started to beat again.

A sickening, shattering sound filled the room and the seal around the heart broke. The heart’s eyes opened wide and immediately shot a huge heat beam at us.

I ran to block it before it could hit the troops.

“What a sore loser!”

“Yeah!”

“It didn’t work?!”

“The spell was successful, but the heart was able to break free somehow!”

Damn!”

What were we supposed to do? We destroyed the heart and head at the same time and it didn’t work. We used a sealing spell on the heart, and it didn’t work.

There had to be another way. I couldn’t give up.

Think! What else could we do?

We had already tried everything that the reports had suggested. There was only one other thing we hadn’t tried—finding the core.

“Ost! Are you sure you don’t know where the core is?!”

“When the sealing spell restrained the heart, I felt a glimmer of . . . something. It may show us the way.”

“What?! Where is it?!”

“Beneath the chamber we are in now, there is another. The core can be found there.”

It was underneath the heart!

“Do you think I can punch a hole in the floor if I deflect the heat beam downward?”

“I don’t think that will work. The core will not be so easy to reach.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?”

Ost closed her eyes, then opened them again, with a look of determination. She pointed at the heart. “Shield Hero, friends, troops, I have an idea!”

“What is it?!”

Why did she have to drag this out for so long?! I was getting tired of blocking the heat beam.

“Destroy the heart and head at the same time, then use the sealing spell on the dying heart. If you do both, the path to the core will open.”

“Are you sure?!”

“Yes. It will work.”

I wasn’t sure I believed her—but I didn’t have a choice.

“Alright, let’s do it! Filo, tell Fitoria what we’re doing! Make sure she’s ready to crush the head! Raphtalia, get ready!”

“Okay!”

“Alright!”

I turned to face Eclair, Rishia, and the old lady.

“Eclair and Rishia—you two keep the familiars away from the heart. We can’t have them interfering. Old lady, if the heart tries to drain our magic power, you stop it.”

“Understood!”

“I’ll do my best!”

“I won’t disappoint you, holy saint!”

Last but not least, the hardest problem remained.

“Queen, you and the wizards get ready to cast the spell again. We’ll have to get the timing just right, so make sure you’re ready!”

“As you command, Mr. Iwatani.”

Everyone accepted their orders, but they looked exhausted.

I was exhausted too. I needed a break—we’d been fighting all day. But it wasn’t time to relax yet. The fight wasn’t over.

We had to finish it.

Raphtalia and Filo prepared to use their special attacks. I kept holding my shield against the brunt of the heat beam and then turned to check on the wizards.

The familiars were swarming, and Eclair and Rishia were keeping them away. The heart shot out hundreds of those white clumps, but the old lady used her skills to keep them from hitting any of us. The wizards and the queen were furiously chanting incantations.

Filo had been focusing with her eyes closed, but now she opened them and shouted, “Raphtalia! Big sis!”

“I know!” Raphtalia said. She filled her sword with magic and

jumped up onto Filo's back. "Let's end this. Ready, Filo? Directional Thrust of Heaven!"

"Spiral Strike!"

Filo raised her wings and charged at the heart. Raphtalia sat on her back, her sword leveled in front of them both. They shot through the chamber like a bullet and pierced the heart. Even with all the powered-up stats I had, they moved so quickly I couldn't see them.

Filo landed on the other side of the room with a deafening crash. Raphtalia flicked blood from her blade. The white blobs in the room all exploded and rained down on everyone like snow. The heart split open and sprayed everything with blood.

It was an awesome sight, but the Spirit Tortoise wasn't dead yet.

When the heart split open and sprayed the room with blood, the wizards had just finished their preparations. The queen stepped forward and shouted, "We are the source of all power, and we command you. Hear this truth and heed it. Drive a wedge to stop the Spirit Tortoise, one of the four spirits of destruction!"

"High ceremonial magic: Seal!"

The heart was trying desperately to regenerate itself when the sealing spell activated. Wrapped in the swirling magic, the regeneration began to slow.

"Ost!"

"I, Ost Horai, command the heavens, command the earth, defy all reason, join, and spit up blood. Oh self, I command you. Open the oath to my depths!"

Her hands were stretched out to the heart, and then, as if it were trying to swallow her, a square hole opened in the floor in front of the heart. Stairs filled the hole with a loud *thunk!*

"This . . . This must be the path to the core."

“Great! Let’s go!”

“Wait just a moment,” Ost said, hesitating at the entrance.

“What is it?”

“Whoever has taken control of the Spirit Tortoise is down these steps. Anyone who cannot command an exceptional amount of strength will only slow us down in the battle to come.”

“I know what you mean, but am I supposed to just send them back?”

“No. But . . . Shield Hero, I do not believe we will be able to protect everyone from this point on. Please understand.”

Her eyes were serious, imploring. It was the same look she’d had the first time she appeared to me. She truly wanted to end all this. She was telling me that it wouldn’t help to bring the troops. She was trying to save them.

Maybe she was right. Whoever was down there, they were strong enough to take control of the Spirit Tortoise. Most of the troops with us could barely defeat a familiar. What hope did they have against this new enemy?

“Alright.”

“Shield Hero?!” the troops shouted in disbelief.

“Troops, retreat to a place where there are no enemies and wait for us to return. As for your protection . . .”

I would need Raphtalia and Filo for sure. And obviously, Ost had to come. Should I have Eclair, the old lady, and Rishia protect the troops?

“Mr. Iwatani, leave the rest up to me,” the queen said. “Your priority must be to stop the Spirit Tortoise as soon as possible. You do not need to concern yourself with the rest of us.”

“Okay.”

Honestly, I sort of wanted to leave Rishia behind. But thanks to the Filo kigurumi, she was proving herself more useful than she had in the past. And she’d been studying Hengen Muso tactics, too. Maybe she could offer an attack when we needed it most.

There was no need to split us up any more than necessary.

“Alright, everyone! Let’s get going!”

“Okay!”

There, before the slowly regenerating heart, we split into two parties and went our separate ways.

Chapter Thirteen
Who Pulls the Strings

The stairs went on forever. We'd been descending a dark, fleshy hallway for about 10 minutes when the tunnel began to level out. Finally, I saw light at the end of the tunnel. Something felt strange about it all. It was like my shield was pulsing in my hands.

I looked at Ost for confirmation. She was gazing at the light, determined.

If we didn't defeat whoever was at the end of the hallway, then we wouldn't be able to stop the Spirit Tortoise. But if we did defeat the tortoise, then Ost would die too. Everyone knew it, and they trudged on in silence.

I pinched my cheek to bring myself back to reality. We had to keep our priorities in mind.

"Everyone! This is it! Don't give up!"

"Alright!"

"Yup! Imma do my best!"

"Feh . . . We'll get out of this alive!"

"That's the spirit! There's no better time to put your training to use!"

"That's right!"

Ost nodded. "It's time to stop my true body! Shield Hero, everyone, let's go!"

"Yeah!"

We ran for the light, and when we reached it, we found ourselves

in a large room—much larger than I'd expected. The walls were solid, yet they seemed somehow alive. I couldn't put my finger on it. It was like they were made of marble, but they was pulsing. When my eyes adjusted, I couldn't believe what I saw.

"What the . . ."

The first thing I saw was a strange object hovering in the air. It must have been the core. It was a giant shining green crystal, and it spun very slowly on its axis. The light it gave off must have been the collected souls of those who had lost their lives in the rampage.

But I couldn't look at the core forever. Something behind it drew my attention. There were three large transparent crystals set in the far wall, and locked inside of them were . . . the three missing heroes!

"Sh . . ."

"Ugggg . . ."

"Uhhhh . . ."

They seemed to be unconscious, but they all had pained expressions on their faces and were muttering in agony.

"What is this?"

"Master Itsuki!" Rishia ran to the crystal where Itsuki slept, but something fluttered down and knocked her away before she could get close.

"Ahh!"

It was . . . a sheet of paper!

The paper was covered in electric sparks of some kind. It had knocked Rishia to the ground.

"I can't believe my eyes! To think you would make it this far—not that I ever doubted you. Nice work!"

That voice. I felt like I'd heard it before, when we were searching for the heroes.

I searched for the source and found it. A man stood before the faceted green crystal.

He was about as tall as me.

His hair looked . . . white? But it also seemed to have a sheen to it. Maybe it was silver. It was long and shaggy and hung around his white face. His face itself wasn't so bad looking.

But meeting him for the first time, I immediately knew that we weren't going to be friends. It was his eyes that made me feel that way. They were stagnant, rotten—like the eyes of a dead fish. The air around him was dark and gloomy.

He reminded me of the sort of person you never wanted in your group of friends—the sort of person who only thought of themselves. He felt like the sort of person who talked nonstop about what *they* liked but never contributed to anyone else's conversation, all the while telling themselves it was because they were smarter than everyone. His face looked very self-satisfied.

He wore a long coat, which made him look a bit like a scientist. He wore a strange belt around his chest that almost looked like it was made of test tubes. It's hard to find the right word to describe him, but he sort of looked like an alchemist. Not that I really knew what an alchemist looked like—I'd only seen them in anime.

He wore leather gloves and shoes and seemed to be the kind of guy that worried incessantly about his appearance. I'd learned a bit about medicine formulation since I arrived in this world, but I still didn't know anything about alchemy. I'd seen books and tools related to it in stores though, and I could tell that the person standing in front of us was the real deal.

I couldn't ignore the evil look in his eyes or the strange book he gripped in one hand. A gemstone was affixed to the cover, one that I'd seen somewhere before. I didn't like the look of it.

“When you first blew this thing’s head off, I have to say I was a little nervous. But then you just went on your way without even looking for this place! I had to laugh at that. You heroes are so stupid.”

“. . .”

He was probably trying to piss me off, so I didn’t pay him the courtesy of responding. I didn’t have to listen to everything he said to know that he was not a nice person.

“Welcome to the deepest part of the Spirit Tortoise. What do you think?”

“Master Itsuki!” Rishia said, climbing back to her feet.

“Oh, you know those guys? I was a little freaked out when the four heroes tried to get in here—but they were so weak it was funny! Ha! Are all the heroes from your world this dumb?”

“What are they doing here?” I asked, pointing at the three heroes.

“Oh, you don’t know?”

Their weapons glowed faintly, as if they were trying to . . . resist something?

But no. That wasn’t it.

“You’re stealing their power.”

“Bingo! You might be an idiot, but you must be the smartest of the bunch! Ahaha!”

He broke into peels of vulgar laughter. It bothered me. I guess from his perspective, we did seem stupid. We’d defeated the tortoise once, only to let it reawaken and go on another rampage. Our ignorance had cost thousands of lives.

How was I supposed to know? I didn’t know anything about this world, much less how to defeat the Spirit Tortoise.

I was just the Shield Hero—all I could do was defend!

“You should have seen the way I caught them. The Sword Hero kept right on attacking me after all of his party was dead! He was like a boar! And the Spear Hero took off running the minute his support started to fail. I just had to chase him down and scoop him up! And the Bow Hero—he had a falling out with his friends. They tied him up and left him alone! Ahahaha!” He went on laughing like a hyena.



That was why we couldn't find any trace of the heroes. He'd captured them all. Worse yet, they were the reason that the Spirit Tortoise was stronger after its reawakening—the tortoise was feeding off the power of their weapons. The heroes might not have known how to use them, but their weapons still contained a great deal of power.

I knew how powerful their weapons were because of how powerful my shield was—I'd just survived attacks from the Spirit Tortoise, even when it was blasting me with the strength of the other heroes' weapons.

"What do you want!?" Eclair yelled, stepping forward.

I wanted to know too. How could he have possibly benefited from all of this? Wasn't the Spirit Tortoise supposed to *protect* the world?

It might have to do that at the expense of the people living on it, but that didn't mean it was out for destruction for its own sake. But this man was using it to kill as many people as possible. To what end?

"Hm? Oh, it has nothing to do with you people—not to you residents of this dying world."

"So you're not going to answer me?" I asked.

He just laughed and nodded.

The audacity! Nothing to do with us? He was killing us!

I had to calm down. Getting upset here wasn't going to help.

He called us *residents of this dying world*. That had a strange ring to it, didn't it?

"Though I have to say I'm impressed. You were doing such a great job of slowing my progress, and then you brought out that crazy monster."

Everything that the Spirit Tortoise saw through its eyes was projected onto the wall of the chamber. At the moment, it showed Fitoria fighting against the Spirit Tortoise's many heads. I'd had a hard enough time holding my own against one head. Fitoria was really powerful. I had to agree with him—she really was a crazy monster.

But she was on *our* side.

She was amazing, but I could tell that she was starting to tire. She was doing all she could to buy us time. It was time to get things moving.

"That damn thing is in my way! I can't get any more energy! It's starting to get on my nerves!" the man said, flipping open his book and glaring at me. "But I'll have a better chance with all four of the heroes behind me. I was wondering where I was going to find you. Luckily, you showed up when you did! Ahahaha!"

The creep broke into another fit of laughter. What was wrong with him?

"You'll have to get through me," Ost said.

"Oh. Who do we have here? You . . . Who knew you could do that? These protective beasts are so stubborn. Why can't you just do as you're told?!"

"What good is a protective spirit that cannot carry out its duty? None at all! That is why I have decided to help he who holds the holy shield. That is the bond that connects the spirit of the shield to the Spirit Tortoise!"

"Uh-huh. So that's why the familiar attacks didn't work against the Shield Hero. I was wondering what was going on."

What were they talking about? There was a connection between my shield and the Spirit Tortoise? Sure, they were both pretty focused on defense, but they made it sound like there was a deeper connection.

"I would have invited you here once you were a bit weaker, but

there's no fighting fate, is there? You've brought all these pretty ladies with you, too! I'll brainwash them and keep them as souvenirs or something—so don't worry about them." He flipped through his book and a number of pages came loose and flew through the room—straight at me! "Die!"

I deployed the Shooting Star Shield barrier and defended. But the barrier shattered the moment the pages touched it. He must have been very powerful.

"Hya!"

"Tya!"

Raphtalia and Filo dashed to attack the pages.

It was a very large room, but Filo turned into her human form to match her new enemy.

Their attacks produced showers of sparks, but they weren't powerful enough to do any damage to the pages. They must have taken some of the momentum away from the other pages, because I was able to defend against them without taking any damage.

"Ha!"

"Acho!"

Eclair jabbed at the pages with the point of her blade, and the old lady tried to bat them out of the air with a roundhouse kick. Rishia chased down pages that Eclair and the old lady had missed and attacked them to try and rob them of their power.

"Shield Hero!" Ost shouted. She began to cast a spell

"Well, well. Look how desperate they are to protect you! As the Shield Hero, aren't you embarrassed to have all these protectors?"

Incensed at his stupid insults, I stepped forward. I had to assume that he was trying to taunt me, because his battle strategy was flawed.

“I’ll show you what a Shield Hero’s attack can do.”

Everyone seemed to think that all I was capable of was defense. But I was going to show this creep that there were other ways to hurt someone besides attacking them.

“Raphtalia! Filo! Don’t worry about me. Focus on attacking him!”

“Okay!”

“Understood!”

I’d used this strategy once before—during the battle with L’Arc.

“Air Strike Shield! Second Shield!”

I summoned one shield behind him and another one directly in front of his torso. Now, he couldn’t move forwards or backwards, and that left him wide open.

“Ohh! Damn!” When he realized what was happening, his face twisted in shock, but he used the pages of his book to block Raphtalia and Filo’s attacks. How long could he hope to keep up something like that?

To be honest, I was starting to like this strategy I’d come up with.

The air around him was filled with flutter pages, flitting back and forth between offensive and defensive maneuvers. With Raphtalia and Filo determined to get at his throat, it would only be a matter of time before they broke through.

“Hya!”

“Tya!”

Book pages flew around behind him and broke the Air Strike Shield.

“Too bad. Dritte Shield!”

I quickly summoned a third shield to take its place. Raphtalia and Filo were attacking him from both sides, and I used a third shield to cover the loss of the first one. I kept an eye on him—if he tried to escape by jumping up and over the obstacles, I'd use Shield Prison.

I don't want to pat myself on the back, but it was a pretty good plan. I felt good about it.

Maybe I was born to irritate people like this. It was inherent in my personality. And I like it that way.

"Ha! Too bad I already know how many shields you can make! You can only use three shields at once—how pathetic!"

Raphtalia and Filo only needed a few more seconds.

But the enemy turned to break my shields. He wanted to shatter my pride.

He must have been watching me through the eyes of the tortoise the whole time I'd been fighting it. He'd probably been watching ever since I first started fighting the familiars. That made me want to use a skill that he'd never seen before.

"Change Shield!"

I quickly turned the shields into versions of the Whale Magic Core Shield, which had a counter effect called Heat Beam Shield (medium).

When the fluttering pages attacked the shields, they responded by targeting the main enemy and firing laser-like heat beams at him. And they were right on top of him!

And yet . . . yes! It looked like the counter-attack even activated when they were hit with a ranged attack.

The heat beams slammed into the enemy, filling the room with a deafening roar.

"Damn!" the man spat and shot a hate-filled glare at me.

At the same time the last pages fell, Raphtalia and Filo finally slammed into him.

Vween! A transparent shell appeared around him, and their attacks clattered against it, useless.

"Well, you got me to use my barrier very quickly."

"That's . . ." Ost stopped casting her spell and muttered to herself in disbelief.

"You think you'll get control of the battle that easily? Ha! Composition Form One! Bird of Flame!"

Pages from the book flapped and gathered in one spot before transforming into a flaming bird that flew straight at Ost.

"Watch out!" I shouted, and I was in front of her in a flash, stopping the bird with my shield.

Damn. It was more powerful than I liked.

I was using the Whale Magic Core Shield, which had fire-resistant properties, and the attack was still hurting me.

This guy was really strong. No wonder he'd managed to destroy so much.

But that didn't mean he was going to win. We were really strong, too.

What was that barrier that had blocked Raphtalia and Filo's attacks?

I looked to Ost for an explanation, and she turned her eyes away. What was she looking at? I followed her gaze. I thought it would be the enemy, but I was wrong.

Now I see. That's what she was after.

"He . . . He's using the Spirit Tortoise's energy to produce his

defensive barrier. Breaking through it will require an enormously powerful attack."

"Right. Raphtalia! Filo—"

"Ha! You think it will be that easy? Don't you have any other ideas? Only fools try the same thing twice!" the crazy man shouted, holding out his hands to the crystal core. It started to glow, and the heroes encased in crystal behind him writhed in pain.

And then 10 new enemies appeared from the wall. They were familiars, and they were wearing full suits of armor.

Spirit Tortoise familiar (neo guardian type)

Ugh. They looked really strong. They each had a single eye that was visible through the slits in their helmets, and they were carrying all different kinds of weapons.

I counted swords, spears, bows . . . It was immediately clear where each of them were getting their energy.

They came stomping at us from across the room, their armor clattering loudly.

"It'll take you some time to prepare for those special attacks you like, won't it? Then I won't let you have that time."

"It's not that much time."

"We can take care of you!"

"Fehhh!"

Eclair, the old lady, and Rishia all ran to meet the approaching familiars. Eclair and Rishia each took on one, while the old lady managed to hold her own against two. They were at their limit dealing

with four. Rishia couldn't handle one of them—she was on the verge of Eclair saving her when Ost cast a spell in the nick of time.

The remaining six familiars were still heading straight for us. Could I hold them off? I didn't have a choice! I stopped a neo guardian type with my shield. There was a loud clang when it slammed against me.

They weren't too strong for me. I could stop them, but I couldn't do it without getting hurt in the process. They must have been the most powerful familiars that the tortoise could make.

Shit! Two of the familiars had gotten behind me. They raised their bows and fired lightning shots at me. Crap! I immediately switched to the Soul Eater Shield and blocked the shots. If I could get the timing right, the Whale Magic Core Shield would be more useful. I'd have to stay on my toes.

The enemy burst into laughter when he saw how I'd been caught off guard.

"Ahahaha! How much more of this can you take? Come on! Use that brain of yours! Let's have some fun!"

Damn. The odds weren't looking good!

To make matters worse, more book pages flew around the room and tried to disrupt Raphtalia and Filo's preparations. With all the chaos in the room, with all the threats coming from every direction, there was no way they were going to be able to use their attacks.

Unless we used our most powerful attacks, we'd never make it through the barrier.

This guy wasn't the sort of enemy that we could beat if we just leveled up a little more. But that didn't mean we were out of options yet.

I could use the Shield of Wrath to burn everything in sight. Maybe Raphtalia and the others could retreat to the stairwell to survive it.

I already used the Shield of Wrath when I was fighting the Spirit Tortoise, so the enemy knew that I had that option available. There was always the chance that he could survive the attack. Besides, the other three heroes were stuck in the room.

They looked very weak, and I didn't want to accidentally kill them with an overzealous attack. This guy had important hostages.

The other option was Blood Sacrifice.

The problem with that was that I'd have to score a direct hit, and I wouldn't be able to defend myself in the meantime. He could kill me while I prepared to use it. How could I get enough time?

I could use Shield Prison and Shooting Star Shield to defend myself while I charged up for the attack. But no, he'd already broken through the Shooting Star Shield barrier, so I knew I couldn't count on it.

I was starting to run out of ideas.

How were we supposed to punch through his barrier?

What if I charged up all my rage into the Shield of Wrath and then Ost used it as a base for an attack spell?

That might work, but it would take just as much time to prepare. Still, I felt like it was the most realistic option I'd come up with yet.

Ost had her hands full supporting Eclair and Rishia in their battles with the familiars. If I had Raphtalia and Filo take over with the familiars, then he'd know what I was planning.

I looked over at Ost to see what she thought, but the man saw me and started laughing.

"Aha! That's not a very good idea. Don't you care what happens to the other heroes?"

"Ugh . . . these guys are . . . strong!" Eclair and the old lady were beginning to lose ground. Rishia could barely manage to stay alive.

And the enemy had the other heroes as hostages.

How were we supposed to win this fight?

Damn it! Things kept getting worse!

If we had no choice but to accept a slow massacre, then I might as well use the Shield of Wrath now.

Yes. I made up my mind. But then . . .

“Flying Circle Disk!”

A blinding disk of light flew past my face.

A shining arrow followed it a split second later.

“Circle Dance, Destruction Form. Tortoise Shell Split!”

An enormous crackling ball of fire flew straight for me. I flipped up my shield to deflect it, and it didn’t hurt me at all.

Those flames . . . I’d felt them on my shield before. It flew past me and set the neo guardian types ablaze.

I turned to see where the attacks came from. I could hardly believe my eyes.

It was L’Arc, Glass, and Therese.

Chapter Fourteen
Liberation

Damn it! Things were already looking bad, and now we had even more enemies to fight! Now we were stuck between two major threats —what could be worse? They must have been waiting for the right time to spring their attack. We'd played right into their trap. They had waited until we were trapped in the deepest chamber. That way there would be no chance of escape.

Come to think of it, the mimicked forms of Glass and L'Arc had appeared just in time to guarantee their escape from the tunnel. Could this have been their plan all along?

"You . . ."

Everyone on my side of the battle bristled with caution. There was no way out. Could I use Portal Shield to escape? I concentrated on the idea, and that was when I noticed a blinking icon next to the skill name. Unavailable.

"Ha!" L'Arc leapt at me. I decided to block his attack and then send Raphtalia and Filo after him. Yes. I readied my shield.

But L'Arc flew right past me and swung his scythe into one of the approaching neo guardian types.

"You alright, kiddo?"

"What?"

Glass was slowly approaching us with those dance-like steps of hers. Therese never stopped shooting balls of fire at the familiars.

"L'Arc, aren't you working with this guy?!" I shouted. I was sure they were on the same side, but now L'Arc jumped ahead of me and leveled his scythe at the approaching familiars.

“Come on! You really don’t know what you should and shouldn’t do, do ya, kiddo?”

“What do you mean? Aren’t you trying to destroy the world? What does it matter to you what we do?”

“Heh. Even if that does end up happening, we still have to protect what we can, right? The vassal weapon is crying about it,” L’Arc said in between thrusts with his scythe. It was making a strange sound.

Actually, so were Glass’s fans.

“As one who possesses a vassal weapon, you’ve entered a space you should not have. Therefore, we must join forces with our enemy, Naofumi, to defeat you, Kyo Ethnina, he who holds the book of the vassal weapons,” Glass said, stepping up to stand beside me.

“Huh? What the hell is going on?”

Everything was changing so quickly. I couldn’t keep up.

So this guy Kyo was Glass’s enemy too? They were going to fight him? Because he’d done something he wasn’t supposed to?

“Get it, kiddo? You can stand back for a bit.”

“Answer my question!”

“I already told you! We’re on the same side—for now.”

“You’re not very good at explaining things, L’Arc. Mr. Naofumi, please listen to me. This man you are currently fighting is from our world, and he holds the book of the vassal weapons. The vassal weapons we hold demand his punishment. Therefore, he is our enemy,” Therese explained.

Glass spoke next. “Unfortunately we don’t have the time to explain everything. To make it simpler, even if one is from another world, they must not be permitted to take control of the protective beasts. Therefore we must join forces with you to stop him, despite how unpleasant it may be.”

What about how the mimicked familiars that had seemed to protect Glass and L'Arc when we'd met in the tunnel? Was that the enemy trying to confuse us? Come to think of it, L'Arc and the others hadn't attacked us. For a second, it had even looked like they were trying to attack the familiars that were after us. I guess I hadn't imagined that.

"I thought it would take you longer, but you got here pretty quickly," Kyo barked angrily.

"Yes, no thanks to all the trouble you sent after us. You even managed to keep us from teaming up with Naofumi's party earlier on, didn't you?"

"You expect me to tell you anything?"

"That's all the answer I need."

"Damn it." Kyo spat.

That was stupid. Didn't he realize that by pretending not to answer, he was telling them what they wanted to hear? He was obviously just pretending to be intelligent. I didn't like him, not one bit. He really *was* Glass's enemy.

"Oh man, after we saw you, kiddo, things got pretty rough. The floor caved in and we ended up in a really weird place," L'Arc started to complain. But I didn't have time to listen to him.

Kyo's mouth twisted into a cruel smile, and he summoned more neo guardian types from the walls. At the same time, the three heroes squirmed in their crystal prisons, their faces growing more and more pale.

They looked like they could die at any moment.

L'Arc and his friends were going to help us, but the familiars in the chamber were increasing exponentially.

"Let's go! Hya!" L'Arc swung his scythe and dispatched two of the neo guardian types at once. "Argh!" He strained to bring the scythe

back around.

“Come on! You’re stronger than that!”

L’Arc was a strong fighter. He could even manage to get through my defenses. Raphtalia could have taken down two of the familiars without too much trouble, so it was hard to believe that he had to strain himself to pull it off. Was he just pretending to be on our side?

“Ah, I guess you don’t know. I’m only that powerful during the waves. Now I’m just a level 75 vassal weapon possessor.”

“What?!”

If the vassal weapons were like the heroes, then it meant he was weaker now than he was the last time we’d fought him. Of course, that’s just what he was telling me. I didn’t know if it was true.

“And Glass over there is only around level 40.”

“L’Arc! Why are you telling them all of that?!” Glass snapped.

Her skills were still powerful enough to kill a neo guardian type with one hit, especially using Tortoise Shell Split.

“It’s because we haven’t spent enough time in this world.”

“L’Arc!”

“Oh, shut up, already! Don’t you see that we need this kid’s help if we want to win?”

“Ms. Glass! Stay alert!” Therese shouted.

Glass quickly turned around to find a neo guardian swing a sword at her. She quickly flipped open her fan to block the attack.

They were right. She wasn’t as strong as she had been the last time.

What did he mean when he said they hadn’t been here long? Was that why they were weaker? I’d have to worry about it later—at least

they were on our side. This was our chance. I quickly sent L'Arc an invitation to join the party as a support troop.

"Thanks, kiddo! Glass, hurry up and accept it!" L'Arc accepted first, followed quickly by Glass and Therese.

"Did you pass the army troops on the way down here?"

"Yeah. But without Raphtalia around to see through our spells, we were able to get by them without getting caught."

The troops had probably thought it was weird, but if L'Arc and the others pretended to be from the army, then they wouldn't have stopped them. They just had to walk with confidence.

"Alright. That's all I need to know. Shooting Star Shield!"

It would probably break immediately, but that was fine. At least it would stop one attack.

If we could just get a quick break from the onslaught, L'Arc and the others could get a few attacks in.

"Hya!" L'Arc swung his scythe at one of the neo guardians.

"Acho!" the old lady shouted as she charged one of the neo guardians with her shoulder. It must have been a defense-rating attack, because the familiar went flying.

"Tya!"

"Ha!"

Raphtalia sliced at one of the monsters, and Eclair followed up with a thrust to finish it off.

"Tah!" Filo shouted, clawing at a familiar with all of her body weight behind it.

We were actually holding our own.

“Alright! Filo, Raphtalia—” I didn’t have to finish the sentence. Both of them jumped back from the front line and started to charge up their attacks, when . . .

“You think I’ll let you get away with that?!” Kyo shouted, filling the air with fluttering pages from his book. He muttered a spell to himself and threw a glass bottle at the ground. It shattered with a big puff of smoke, and the whole room filled with green light, followed by a creepy, dull sound. It was like the buzzing of insect wings. “Expanding Composition Form Six! Invigorate!”

The fallen neo guardians all noisily climbed to their feet. They moved faster, and more powerfully, than before.

“Oh no!” L’Arc shoved Glass out of the way and blocked an attack.

“L’Arc . . .”

“Damn it. These things have gotten stronger!”

Three of the neo guardians turned to attack him at once.

“Air Strike Shield!” I shouted, deploying a shield to protect them.

“Thank you, Naofumi.”

“Thanks, kiddo!”

“Save it for later!” I shouted. We weren’t out of this yet. I cast Second Shield to protect Eclair. Behind them all, Ost and Therese seemed to be doing okay on their own, or so I thought. A neo guardian in the distance leveled an arrow at them. They might have been able to dodge it, but I didn’t want to take the risk, so I used Dritte Shield to block it.

I was surprised that the Shooting Star Shield barrier was still in place. Filo and Raphtalia were still focusing on preparing their skills, so they couldn’t defend themselves. I’d have to do it for them. The chamber was absolute chaos. Familiars were everywhere, and the air was filled with fluttering book pages. If we used a big powerful skill, there was a chance that some of our allies might get swept up in it.

Therese was using a convenient type of magic that distinguished between friend and foe, which helped a little, but the spells weren't strong enough to turn the tide of the battle.

I had to start thinking about retreat. But if we escaped, the other heroes were as good as dead, and who knew what that madman would do next? No, escape wasn't an option.

"Ahaha! Come at me! Give me all you've got! Ahaha!" Kyo burst into a fit of laughter but kept his dead eyes trained on me.

The odds weren't looking good. Worse yet, our enemy was using the three heroes and the Spirit Tortoise itself for an energy source. So we were getting tired, and he wasn't.

If we could destroy the core, maybe we'd have a chance of stopping one of this energy streams. But the core was too well defended.

Well defended?

"L'Arc!" I locked eyes with him, then raised my shield, pointed, and motioned to Kyo with my eyes.

Understanding what I meant, L'Arc nodded. "You'll try anything won't you? Alright then!"

I ran over and jumped into the spot L'Arc was defending. He jumped back a few paces, made the tip of his scythe shine, and then ran forward and jumped, using my back as a springboard.

"Hyaaa!"

He flew through the air, gaining a lot of ground—but not enough to reach the core or Kyo.

Kyo giggled and sent a group of neo guardians to surround the spot he expected L'Arc to land. They each raised their weapons.

"Shield Prison!"

I summoned a cage of shields in the air above them, and L'Arc

landed on it, then leapt at Kyo, bringing his scythe down hard.

Crack! The barrier that had protected Kyo shattered and fell to the floor.

That's right. The barrier had a very high defense level, which meant that L'Arc's defense-rating attacks were all the more effective.

"Now!"

At my signal, the two people behind us who had been casting spells switched gears and attacked.

And of course, the rest of us didn't let up with our attacks.

"Shining Stones! Rain of Thunder!"

"The source of all strength, the Spirit Tortoise, commands you! Read and comprehend all that is under the sun, and show your power to me!"

"Gravity Field! Extreme Gravity!"

Ost produced a black magic ball—much larger than the times she'd done so before—and shot it at Kyo.

But the incantation sounded different this time. She'd used a different name. Was she . . .

"Damn you!" Kyo shouted.

The fluttering pages in the air snapped into place and lined up in layers before him, just like I did with my shields, to block Therese and Ost's spells.

"Hya!"

L'Arc had another chance! He spun his scythe and sliced at Kyo. Kyo shot his hand out, and the air before him crackled with magic, repelling the scythe blade. Then, reflexively protecting its commander, a neo guardian ran to attack L'Arc.

L’Arc wasn’t going to go down so easily. He knew when to pull back, and he did, jumping away to get some distance.

“Well, well. That was really something. I didn’t know you could use defense-rating attacks.”

“I’ve had trouble with those attacks before. I’m the Shield Hero, so I know a thing or two about dealing with high defenses.”

“Ha! Aren’t you smart? Let’s see how you like this!” Kyo opened his hand and the barrier reappeared. Then another appeared. Then another. Soon there were layers upon layers.

L’Arc and Glass gasped.

“I’d like to see you get through all of these!”

“Old lady.”

“What?”

“Raphtalia is going to stop charging up and take care of all the small fries. You focus on those barriers.”

“Understood! Filo—I’ll leave this up to you!” she shouted, slipping from the battle line and running over to Kyo.

“You’re wasting your time.”

“Acho!”

A neo guardian reached for her, but she jumped onto its shoulders and used it as a stepping stone. High in the air, she could almost reach the barrier—but not quite. Everyone had their limits.

“Air Strike Shield! Second Shield!”

Just like I’d done for L’Arc, I sent out shield after shield, sometimes to protect her, sometimes to form a platform that she could use to get closer to Kyo. L’Arc was approaching from the other direction, hacking his way through hordes of neo guardians.

“Take that!”

“Acho!” She slammed the barrier with a defense-rating attack and it shattered. Then the one beneath it shattered too. She kept crashing through them.

“What?! How can . . . How is she doing that?”

“What does it matter? You didn’t think we were out of ideas yet, did you?” I taunted him.

He glared at me, his eyes burning with hate.

His ego was fragile. He let himself get worked up over the slightest taunt! If he had to endure even a fraction of what had happened to me in this world, his head would probably explode.

“Acho!” the old lady shouted, shattering the final barrier with her elbow.

L’Arc was right behind her. He swung his scythe, and it slammed into Kyo.

“Filo!”

“Yup!”

Or I thought the scythe had hit him. In a last, desperate attempt at defense, the fluttering pages shot down to block L’Arc’s attack. A shockwave expanded out from Kyo. It was so powerful it sent the old lady and L’Arc flying. They slammed into the wall.

Damn. Our timing was off. Filo hadn’t finished charging her attack in time.

“Spiral Strike!”

She moved so fast she was a streak of light. She shot through a neo guardian, and kept flying until she blasted through Kyo.

She appeared again on the other side and . . . yes! A huge hole sat

where Kyo's stomach used to be.

"Filo-chan! That was really something!"

"Yay!" Filo said, striking a victory pose. I wasn't ready to celebrate just yet. Kyo tottered and looked like he was about to fall to his knees. But then, with a gushing sound, the flesh on his torso regenerated to fill the hole, and he stood there as if nothing had happened.

"I didn't think anyone could hurt me."

What kind of monster was he?

Restorative magic existed in this world, so it wasn't completely unbelievable that someone might be able to heal their torn flesh. We'd have to hit him where it really hurt next time. In his chest or his head.

"Fascinating. You really surprised me with that one. But I'm smarter than you are, so it's going to take more than that. Look, I'm as good as new!"

This guy couldn't speak a sentence without insulting someone. Why did he think he was so smart? If the attack had hit him a little differently, he would have died—and we would have won.

"Good as new? Sure. Let's see how many times you can pull that off. We can all see how this is going to end," I said, flashing him a confident smile.

He was the sort of person that freaked out when you ignored him. He'd take any sort of attention he could get. Fine then. I'd entertain him with my answers and wait for him to show his back.

"But I'm getting a little tired of playing with you. I probably can't get any more energy out of this place, so maybe it's time to wrap this up," he sneered condescendingly.

When he finished playing his hand, I hoped that he would shut up.

He formed another series of protective barriers around himself and held his hand out to the Spirit Tortoise core.

The air in the chamber began to vibrate.

What was going on?

“Ugh . . .”

“Ahhh!”

“Damn . . .”

Nearly everyone in the room fell to the floor. They squirmed, unable to move.

I could barely stand myself. Was it a gravity attack?

“Shooting Star Shield!”

The force field appeared and then shattered a moment later.

“That’s not going to work! It’s an offensive gravity field! I’m using the Spirit Tortoise’s best attacks against you now! Almost no one can move in here!”

I looked around the chamber, but there were a few people still standing: Ost, Glass, the old lady . . . and Rishia, who stooped but was still on her feet. Everyone else was pinned to the floor, unable to move.

The gravity field was so strong that not even Raphtalia or Filo could move to escape it.

The neo guardians and Kyo didn’t seem to be affected at all.

“Not . . . Not yet!” Glass shouted defiantly at a neo guardian that stalked toward her.

Anyone that could still move rushed to protect their friends from the neo guardians. I stayed on my feet to protect Raphtalia and the others. The old lady protected L’Arc and Filo, and Ost protected Therese, Rishia, and Eclair.

“Shield Hero!”

Ost cast a spell and a force field of some kind appeared around her. Then Therese, Rishia, and Eclair slowly climbed to their feet. I grabbed Raphtalia by the shoulders and dragged her into the force field.

“We made it.”

Kyo was smiling at us. He looked like he might burst out laughing.

“I wonder how long you can hold out?”

“Ugh . . .”

Ost was tiring. Her face was growing pale. It didn’t look good. No one could keep up their normal activity under the sort of pressure that the gravity field was exerting on us.

Not even the old lady or Glass.

Huh? I saw Glass drinking from a bottle of what appeared to be soul-healing water.

I suddenly remembered what had happened during our last fight on the islands. L’Arc had dumped a bottle of soul-healing water on her, and she ended up insanely powerful as a result.

I’d thought something wasn’t quite right when L’Arc had said she was only round level 40. But now I understood that she was boosting herself with that medicine this whole time. I pulled a bottle out of my shield and tossed it to Glass. There were still enough materials stored in the shield to make more if I needed to, but I didn’t have the time.

“You have my thanks.”

She covered herself in the water and immediately began to move easier and faster. She slapped open her fans and jumped forward.

Her attacks seemed to carry the same weight they had when we fought on the islands. She physically smashed through Kyo’s barriers,

knocking aside any neo guardians that got in her way.

“Well now . . . look at that . . . the spirit strives . . . come on then . . . come on.”

Her attacks landed powerfully as she beat her way across the room, but she began to slow down. Before she reached Kyo, she seemed to be losing power and speed.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. The spirits have no endurance.”

What was this “spirit” he kept talking about? Glass?

Huff . . . Huff . . .

“I’m not done yet.” She opened her fans and looked like she was about to use her special move, Reverse Snow Moon Flower.

What could I do? Was I supposed to just sit there and watch?

Ost reached out and touched my shield, resting her weight against me.

“Lend me your power. As the Shield Hero, lend us that magic power. Let us move in this gravity field. Let us shatter the barriers.”

The voice was very weak. It was like it was speaking to my soul. It was different from a human voice, but I heard it speaking to me.

I quickly imagined myself casting Zweite Aura.

“That’s not it. That will not overcome this.”

“But . . . But I . . .”

“Relax. Think of the spells you know. Imagine yourself spinning the highest magic.”

What was she talking about? Before I could say anything, she continued.

“The shield you are currently using has magic assistance

properties. It is not so difficult, so please concentrate. I will help you."

Was she talking about the Whale Magic Core Shield?

Come to think of it, it did have a special effect called magic assistance, but I never knew what that was supposed to mean, so I'd ignored it. I had just thought that it made my healing and support magic more effective.

But Ost seemed to know exactly what it meant.

Which made me wonder, could she see all my stats and abilities?

"I, the Spirit Tortoise, command the heavens, command the earth, defy all reason, join, and spit up blood. Oh great strength . . ."

As Ost spoke, I thought I could feel the power in the room gathering around us. What was happening?

I knew that she was using that unique form of magic she had, but . . . something . . . something different was happening. I could feel something flowing into me.

"A while ago, I told you that I wanted to teach you this spell. I'm sure you'll be able to cast it on your own someday. Please, remember this feeling."

I nodded silently.

Ost was our last hope, and she was using me to carry out her plan.

I had to do all I could.

Something appeared in my mind, like a puzzle.

It was fuzzy and hard to make out, but it looked like a series of pieces that could fit together. My intuition told me that different magic spells would result from different arrangements of the pieces.

With what I currently knew, there weren't very many shapes I could hope to make from the pieces. But Ost was arranging them for

me, indicating the pieces and where they needed to go. Each time I placed a piece incorrectly, it faded away and disappeared. Luckily, they reappeared after a moment. In all likelihood, without Ost there to help me, the disappearing pieces would probably be lost for good. When the shape assembled the wrong way, Ost somehow reversed the process. To finish the puzzle, I just had to follow her lead.

Watching the pieces arrange themselves in my mind, I almost felt like laughing. The puzzle was so difficult that I didn't see how anyone could have possibly figured it out.

If I had to spend this long arranging pieces in my mind during battle, I'd be dead for sure, especially considering how much concentration it required.

As the pieces arranged themselves, I could feel them drawing SP and magic away from me. Ost must have been feeding the spell with her own energy, too. All the spells I'd known about so far just required the user to use a particular phrase or incantation with some of their magic power.

I thought back on the learning curve I'd gone through to learn magic, and I think it was actually harder to learn to read the magic book than it was to actually cast the spells. In some ways, magic was actually pretty easy to use.

But this spell was different. The spells we had already learned were simple enough. Learning them wasn't so different than learning spelling or vocabulary in school. But this spell felt more like . . . it felt more like math. The pieces were like different numbers, and arranging them in different ways would produce a different result—a different spell. Before I knew what was happening, I was speaking.

"I, the Shield Hero, borrow the strength of the Spirit Tortoise to command the heavens, command the earth, defy all reason, join, and spit up blood. Oh great strength of the dragons—join the power of the heroes with magic. The source of power that is the Shield Hero commands you. Read and comprehend all that is under the sun, and show your power to me! I command you—give them everything!"

"All Liberation Aura!"

The field of effect was . . . all of my allies?!

What was “liberation?” I thought the highest magic level was “drifa!”

The spell activated, and my magic power and SP quickly began to drain away. I felt faint for a second, but it was nothing like what was happening to Ost.

“Are you okay?!”

“Yes . . . I . . . I can stand.” She jumped to her feet. Something about it didn’t seem right. Sure, she was a familiar, and we were close to the heart so she could regenerate faster than normal. But how could she just jump to her feet after using so much of her energy?

The spell she used earlier was strange, too. She had said “Spirit Tortoise” instead of “Ost” when she cast it.

Could Ost really be . . . No—I had to focus on what was happening before my eyes.

“Ha!”

Glass was running around at three times the speed she had been, slicing at Kyo with her fans. L’Arc and Filo leapt to their feet as if nothing had happened. It was a strange sight to see.

“What is . . . ?!”

“What the hell?! You had a move like that up your sleeves? You liars!” Kyo screamed.

I couldn’t believe what was happening. I really want to snap at him. He was calling *us* liars? Ha!

“Everyone! Hurry and attack! You should be able to move freely within the gravity field now!” Ost shouted. Everyone nodded and took off running.

Rishia was still tottering on unstable legs. She was the last to start

moving. “This . . . This magic power . . . It’s . . . unbelievable!”

Therese shot ball after ball of flame at the endlessly replenishing stock of regenerating neo guardians, charring them on the spot. Raphtalia followed the spells with her sword, which slipped through them as if they were made of butter.

The neo guardians were falling like flies, and everyone was pressing towards an increasingly helpless Kyo.

“This is it!”

Glass led the charge, followed by L’Arc, Raphtalia, Filo, and the rest. They all had their weapons out and were moving in for the kill. Was I supposed to join them? It felt strange to sit back and watch.

“Hyaaaaa!”

I couldn’t tell who had shouted first, but someone moved in for the final attack.

Just then, Kyo smiled. In a flash, another barrier—like my Shooting Star Shield—appeared around him. How many tricks did he have up his sleeve?

“I didn’t want to do this until everything was over. But I will show you my true strength. You should be grateful.” He opened his hand, and energy began to swirl around the room and gather at his fingertips. The energy was coming from the Spirit Tortoise core!

“No thanks! Everyone! Charge him together!”

I didn’t want to stand back and watch him fill his hands with whatever that stuff was. At my call, everyone in the room attacked his force field.

But every time they broke it, it reappeared in a flash.

“Ugh.”

And every time it broke, Ost squealed in pain beside me. Everyone

noticed the pattern.

“Huh? Oh? You mean you don’t know? Well, now’s a good a time as any to show you!” Kyo shouted. Cords of light immediately appeared and bound Ost’s feet together. They pulled her up into the air and then inside of his barrier.

When she entered it, it grew even thicker!

Desperate to save her, everyone furiously attacked the barrier.

With each attack, Ost twitched and yelped in pain.

“Ost!”

“You idiots! You really don’t know who this is?”

“What are you talking about?” When I asked him, Kyo nodded to himself, pleased.

“Oh, Shield Hero. I know you’re stupid, but you must have some idea—right? Don’t you know who she is?”

I don’t think Ost knew who she actually was until we started getting closer to the heart. The only reason we’d made it as far as we did was because of her help. She was also the only reason we stood a chance in this fight.

“My . . . My real name, my real form . . . I am the Spirit Tortoise itself. I am its very soul, manifest in human form.”

“But then . . . But all this time we’ve spent together!” Raphtalia shouted, unable to hide her surprise.

“If the Spirit Tortoise dies, then so will I. That much hasn’t changed. So do not worry,” Ost said. Seeing the worry on everyone’s faces, she choked down her pain and smiled to tell them it would be alright. They all eased their attacks.

“Well, this is a good time to take the energy she’s absorbed this whole time.”

“U . . . Ugh . . .”

The cords of light around her arms and legs started to drain away Ost’s remaining energy. At the same time, a translucent blue ball appeared in his hand. It almost looked like it was filled with water.

I knew that color. It was the same color as the sand in the blue dragon hourglasses. It started to shine.

“Ain’t it pretty? It’s the energy that the Spirit Tortoise gathered. And now . . .”

The ball flashed and became transparent before melting into his hands.

The air in the chamber began to vibrate.

What was going on? I’d seen something like it in manga and video games. It was the kind of thing that normally happens at the end of a major battle, when the enemy’s power skyrockets.

Chapter Fifteen
The Spirit Tortoise's Soul

"This makes me *so* much stronger!" Kyo stepped out from behind his barrier and walked slowly toward us. The magic energy swirled in a vortex around him.

He seemed to vibrate for a second, and then he appeared directly in front of me. There was no time to think—I threw my shield up just in time to block a stream of pages from Kyo's book.

They slammed against the shield with so much force that I couldn't absorb all the energy. I dug my heels in, but the pages sent me flying backwards. Luckily, I managed to regain my balance before falling over.

"Whew! The most basic composition form is *that* powerful? Amazing!" Kyo laughed, pointing his book at everyone in the chamber. "Not bad. Alright! Now, I'll show you what I can really do!"

He flipped open the book and sent pages flying out in all directions. There were too many of them to dodge, and a lot of people were forced to parry them, getting knocked off balance in the process.

It wasn't over yet. The enemy had become so powerful that the support magic we'd been relying on until that point had been rendered useless.

"Yes! That's better. This is the way I like my battles! Let the enemy think they have a chance before *wham!* You crush them. What could be better? Ahahahaha!"

"Shield Hero!" Ost shouted. "That man is using the energy that the Spirit Tortoise collected. He's using the core to channel it into himself! Hurry! If we can destroy the core, then we may be able to weaken him."

That sounded like good idea to me.

“Now, now! Don’t you be naughty! I have some tricks left too, you know?” Kyo said, laughing. “Ahaha! Aren’t you forgetting about my precious hostages? Not that I need them—I’d still be able do whatever I wanted, even if I didn’t have them!” Kyo motioned to the three heroes behind him.

“Ugh.”

“You coward.”

Kyo turned back and frowned at Glass. “Not that you would care about my hostages.”

“. . .”

Glass didn’t move an inch. She glared at Kyo, anger burning in her eyes.

“Oh, please! You’re not so naïve, are you? Were you really not going to kill them, just because it isn’t a fair fight? Ahaha! Lucky me!”

He was so vulgar. I could hardly stand it.

He’d found Glass’s weakness and was mocking her—pointing his finger at her and giggling like a child. I wasn’t friends with any of the other heroes either, but I wouldn’t leave them to die.

“You coward!”

The shout rang out like a shot, echoing through the chamber.

“Huh?” Kyo mumbled, looking for the source.

“I cannot allow you to take these weakened heroes as your hostage! I will not allow it!”

It was . . . Rishia.

“Ahaha! If it isn’t the little girl who’s been standing uselessly on the sidelines! You’re going to tell me what to do now? Ha!”

“That’s right. I might not be the strongest person in the room, but I’m not going to stand by and let you get away with this!” Rishia shouted, flipping back the hood of her kigurumi to glare at Kyo.

Her eyes looked different. They weren’t pathetic or imploring. No—they were filled with passion and anger.

“This weak little girl doesn’t know her place, does she?”

“Have you even thought about how Ost must feel coming here? Don’t you realize that we’ve all come to fight for our futures? For our very lives? Master Itsuki taught me about justice, and . . . and . . . and I cannot allow you to get away with your scheming!”

“Justice? Ha! Give me a break! You’re so weak it’s pathetic—if evil exists, that’s it. You want justice? I am justice.”

The ground around Rishia seemed to squirm and crawl. Filo and the old lady had been gathering energy during Kyo’s speech, and now it was starting to overflow.

“You are getting on my last nerve. I’ll kill you first,” Kyo barked. He turned and sent a page flying at Rishia.

I returned to my senses and ran to protect her, but he was too fast. Damn it! He was going to kill her!

But she didn’t need me. She dodged the attack. She continued to glare at Kyo.

“What?”

“You . . . You cannot be proud of this power you’ve *stolen* from another! However powerful it may make your attacks, it’s not your power to begin with! You don’t know how to use it!” Rishia shouted, unsheathing her sword.

“Ah, now I’m being lectured by the baby in the room? Ahaha!” Kyo laughed and sent another stream of pages to kill her.

There were a lot more pages this time! There were so many of

them, and they were moving so fast, I wasn't sure if even I could block them—and they were heading straight for Rishia.

But she dodged them, without making any unnecessary moves, and kept walking toward the increasingly furious Kyo. Whenever she couldn't dodge a page, she skewered it on the point of her sword.

"Your attacks show no consideration. They aren't anything like Eclair's, or Raphtalia's, or Filo's. They are uninspired shows of force—nothing more."

"Shut up!" He shouted, suddenly offended. A vein stood out from his forehead, throbbing.

I couldn't believe it. I could hardly follow his attacks as it was, but Rishia read his every move.

Her stats were very low considering her level. Did that mean that this sudden display of skill was all thanks to the Hengen Muso training? The old lady had said that Rishia had innate potential. Had she finally realized it? It looked like she had gone through some kind of awakening.

"Let's see you dodge this! Composition of Flame!" Kyo used something resembling a skill, summoning a roaring flame shaped like a demon. The flame creature charged at Rishia.

"Die!"

Her sword flashed, cleaving the demon in two.

A split second later, swords of ice came flying from the back of the room to nail the demon's body to the floor.

"Wh . . . What!?"

"You might think you're smart, but you always attack the same way. Your eyes tell me exactly what you're going to do!"

"Are you making a fool of me? Take this!"

Kyo furiously used another skill. He was so upset that he wasn't thinking clearly. He could have used his hostages, but he was too focused on trying to kill Rishia, who knocked his skills away with the blade of her sword.

After Kyo powered up, none of us stood a chance against him. But now Rishia, of all people, was holding her own.

Kyo smiled. "You almost had me coming to get you. But I have my hostages over here, so you'd better just stay put. And after the power boost I just got, you're only delaying the inevitable. You can try to buy yourself time, but I'll only keep getting stronger."

"When you realize you can't win, you turn back to your hostages," Rishia said, her eyes cold.

She was like a different person. And yet I could tell that the passion she was displaying, this new persona, was who she really was.

"I . . . I don't have the strong will power that Naofumi does. And I don't have the excellent sense of purpose that Master Itsuki does. I'm not as kind as Motoyasu, and I'm not as cool-headed as Ren."

No . . . She was wrong about that.

She selflessly fought for others. After being saved herself, she knew what it meant to save another. In truth, she was more selfless and caring than any of the heroes. At the very least, she was more heroic than I was. And now she was holding her own in battle.

She had thrown herself into battle completely and was ready to sacrifice herself for the chance to defeat Kyo. She'd done it without hesitation, just like Ost.

Maybe she was a simple person, but she had all the passion to back up her decision. Her very soul was shouting its resolve. She was enraged at the evil she'd seen. I had never known there was a lion in her heart, slumbering this whole time. I never would have even suspected it.

Her stats were so low for her level that it had always seemed a little

unnatural. And the old lady had insisted on Rishia's innate talents. She must have been right. Everything unfolding before me at that moment proved it.

"I'm not as strong as Raphtalia, and I don't have Filo's pure heart. I'm not talented with a sword like Eclair, and I certainly don't have the experience of the master."

"Yeah, I get it already. I've heard enough of your whimpering, little girl. Why don't you just get out of here? If you don't, I'll kill your hero friend."

Rishia's hand filled with light, which shaped itself into a blade.

"But I . . . I . . . I can beat you. I can beat you!" She shouted. Her conviction rang out through the chamber. Then she turned, aimed, and threw the blade of light at the heroes imprisoned on the far wall.

The blade didn't hurt them but burst into a warm, enveloping light that settled on their crystal prisons.

The crystals cracked.

"You! Argh! You let them go?!"

"You're next! Hyaaa!" Rishia raised her sword and charged at Kyo.

Kyo raised his book and used it to block Rishia's sword. For a moment, their weapons were locked together, neither one overpowering the other. Sparks flew.

"Who the hell are you? Die already!" Kyo yelled, jumping back to get distance from Rishia. The crackling barrier reappeared around him. It must have disappeared while he attacked.

"You're the one that needs to give it up! You don't have any hostages left!" L'Arc shouted, standing before the collapsed heroes and brandishing his scythe.

Kyo smirked, ignoring him. "Don't you get it? This world is dying anyway. At least I'm putting its energy to use! You're fools for not

understanding that!"

"YOU'RE the fool! The vassal weapons decide what we can do and what we can't do!"

L'Arc screamed, his voice cracking with anger. I'd never heard him sound that way.

"Yeah, well I'm not a slave to the vassal weapons. What does an object have to teach me about anything?"

Damn. There wasn't much I could do to help.

While Liberation Aura was still in effect, I could use the Shield of Wrath to cast Blood Sacrifice and destroy the core, like Ost had suggested. If it didn't work, I'd be out of the battle for good. But with how things stood at the moment, I didn't see another way to win.

There was no way out. I was actually impressed that we'd made it as far as we had.

I moved silently, so that I wouldn't draw the attention of Kyo, who was still in a shouting match with L'Arc. Silently, I touched my shield and changed it into the Shield of Wrath.

But the shield wouldn't let me!

"No. That shield cannot break the core."

I heard a mysterious voice. I turned to its speaker and saw her there, struggling against the cords of light that bound her. Her face bore the same pleading expression she'd had when I first met her.

"So . . . It is finally time for my remaining strength to find shape in the holy shield."

The sound of rushing wind filled my ears, and the shield in my hands changed shape.

Spirit Tortoise Heart Shield conditions met

The information appeared in my field of vision. I quickly knew that it was by far the best shield I'd come across. I was shocked to see that it had already been powered up to a certain extent.



Spirit Tortoise Heart Shield (awakened) 80/80 AT

abilities unlocked: equip bonus: protection of the dragons special effect: gravity field, C soul recovery, C magic snatch, C gravity shot life-force up: magic defense (large), lightning resistance, SP drain nullification, magic assistance, spell support exclusive special effect energy blast 100%

mastery level: 100

The physical shield looked a lot like the Whale Magic Core Shield. But the specifications were incomparable. When I used the new shield, it changed the efficacy of protective magic, and the shield's stats rose to be more than twice the previous shield.

"Please . . . You must defeat me . . ."

The shield's "energy blast" option was blinking. I felt like she was telling me to use it.

But . . . If I did . . .

All the day's events came flooding back into my mind, and I realized with a shock that I'd only been fighting with Ost for a single day. I felt as though we'd spent so much more time together than that, which spoke to the depth of the difficulties we'd faced together.

"Do not hesitate . . . You must . . ."

"But If I . . ."

"If everything had gone according to plan, we would not have met. The heroes would never learn what the Spirit Tortoise really was, only of its role, and for that, they would slaughter me without ever knowing my true form. I would have fulfilled my purpose, only to

disappear. That was our fate."

I knew that. My head told me that it was true. But my hands were shaking.

Of all those I'd faced that could talk back to me, I'd only had to kill a few. Actually no, I'd only killed the high priest. But we had never had a real conversation, much less understood one other. He had simply tried to kill me.

When I fought him and killed him, I told myself that it was in self-defense. That was how I'd gotten through the shock of taking a life. So even though I knew what I'd done, I had never had cause to regret it.

But if I used the energy blast here, the Spirit Tortoise—Ost—would die.

And she'd do it for the world. She'd die for us.

We'd fought together. She was my friend. And when I thought of killing her, my emotions didn't want to accept it.

"Your hesitation is touching. Possessor of the holy shield . . . Shield Hero, please . . . Help me to fulfill my mission."

"Aren't you upset by your fate?"

People hated her. They wished for her death. She was destined to be killed by heroes, the embodiment of "justice." It was too sad—too sad to bear.

"Upset? No, of course not. I can nourish all the life in the world, helping it to thrive. I am not sad."

Even I felt like I could understand the draw of sacrifice. But why? Could I really die for the sake of others—without hesitation? I'd been framed for a crime, thrown out into the streets penniless and alone. I'd hated the world with all my heart. And now Ost's sacrificial, selfless love was threatening to undo all of that pain.

"I know . . . I know that you understand. If you did not, you would

not have fought so long, so hard, to stop me."

I remembered how I felt when Raphtalia and Filo believed in me, and I knew she was right. I wanted to protect my friends. I wanted to protect the people that believed in me. I understood what Ost meant. She was saying that that feeling extended to everyone in the world.

"Now . . . I know it is much to ask of you . . . but it is all that remains."

"What the hell are you doing?!" Kyo suddenly noticed me and sent a stream of pages flying straight at me.

I blocked them with my shield. I didn't flinch. His attacks no longer bothered me.

"What? How did you block that?! Whatever—you won't stop this one!"

"No!" Rishia shouted. "I will! The justice of which Master Itsuki speaks compels me to stop you!"

She took aim and threw her sword straight at Kyo.

"Ha! Good luck! This barrier is stronger than it's ever been—you'll never get through it! It's more flexible than the last one! You don't stand a chance!" Kyo shouted condescendingly. He deployed a few pages to block the flying sword.

But the sword pierced straight through them, hit the barrier, and kept on going.

"Damn! It's so . . . fast!"

The sword broke through the barrier and sailed through the air. Then it landed, with a dull thud, in Kyo's chest.

"Ugh . . . You!"

It was time! I turned to look at Ost. She nodded.

It felt like time slowed down. It felt like only Ost and I could feel the seconds pass.

I held up the shield and imagined the energy beam firing.

The shield sprouted four legs to support its weight, and crosshairs appeared in the air before me. Then it summoned an enormous amount of energy from around me and formed a ball of crackling energy—the same energy the Spirit Tortoise had shot at us outside.

The shield grew into a shape like the barrel of a gun, and a wing-like pedestal appeared behind me. The crosshairs came into focus, and I set them on my target.

It was time. Time to grant Ost's final wish.

I nodded, and the beam fired.

Everything went white. I couldn't see anything but the crackling energy.

"Damn! I don't think . . . !"

Kyo ran to block the beam from hitting the core, but there was too much energy for him to stop it, and it blew him out of the way.

"Aghhhhh!" He climbed to his feet and ran to attack me directly. But before he could, the barrier that he had been using appeared and . . . protected me instead!

"What? Not at a time like this! Nooooo!"

The shield was filled with the power of the Spirit Tortoise. The Spirit Tortoise's heart—Ost—protected me.

As long as we were inside the Spirit Tortoise and I had that shield equipped, I couldn't be hurt.

I had to use its energy to break the Spirit Tortoise's core—that's what Ost wanted.

Then I . . . I had to help her!”

“Ugh.”

The beam grew stronger and wider. The barrier protecting the core cracked.

The crack widened, and the beam burst through the opening, slamming against the next barrier. Then it broke through that barrier and went on to the next.

Again and again, the beam shattered the barriers in its way. Then, finally, it hit the core itself.

There was a loud piercing, shriek-like sound, and the core shattered into thousands of pieces.

The chamber was bathed in blinding light, and I couldn’t see anything for a while.

Cough . . . Cough . . .

The blast was very powerful. I blinked to get my bearings. The chamber filled with light, but it wasn’t the blinding light of the energy beam. No—it was light from outside.

The chamber was silent. The projection on the wall that Kyo had used to monitor what was happening outside had vanished.

A column of smoke rose from my shield. The gun barrel shape that had appeared when I fired the energy beam turned into glowing light before vanishing.

Finally, I saw my friends lying on the ground, where they had ducked under the beam.

“Mr. Naofumi.”

“Kiddo.”

I smiled and waved to them. “Alright, back on your feet. We still

have work to do."

The enemy wasn't gone yet. It wasn't over.

"You!"

That's right. The enemy was still standing.

"You ruined my plans! Ruined by the stupid Shield Hero!"

"Stupid? Coming from you?"

"Yeah!" Rishia shouted, running over to support me. A sphere of magic hovered over her outstretched hand. She had defended herself against Kyo's powered-up attacks and had scored impressive critical hits against him, too. What had caused her awakening? Her emotions? Her Hengen Muso training? She moved so quickly, so fluidly.

"Come on everyone! Let's get rid of him once and for all!" Rishia shouted.

Raphtalia, Filo, Eclair, the old lady, and then L'Arc, Glass, and Therese all readied their weapons for a final face-off.

And then Ost appeared behind me, wrapped in light.

"Ha! None of you stand a chance against me, so you all have to team up. Is that it? What a laugh! Oh well, I guess it's time!" Kyo barked, a pained expression crossing his face. He looked like he'd swallowed a bug.

"You're not getting out of this one. You'll pay for your crimes with your life!"

"Will I? I've already accomplished what I set out to do. A genius knows when it's time to step away."

Soft light spiraled into Kyo's hands.

It looked like the Spirit Tortoise's energy!

I looked back at Ost to find her trying to stretch out her arms, but she couldn't move fast enough.

Glass and Eclair leapt at Kyo, but he was just a little too fast for them.

"Aha! You didn't think all the energy would disappear when you destroyed the core, did you? Too bad! I developed this thing myself, so don't expect that energy to return to the earth! Ahaha!"

The energy formed a ball in his hand, then floated into the air above him. It glowed with a faint light before quickly condensing to form a ball of gravity so powerful that it warped space and tore a hole in the air.

"Thanks for the fun! Later!" Kyo shouted. He jumped into the hole and vanished.

But before he vanished completely, he pointed Rishia and I and shouted, "I'll kill you for what you've done here. Prepare for your execution!"

He was really pissing me off!

"Wait!" I ran after him, but he vanished into the hole before I could catch up. I couldn't let him get away! If he escaped now, he'd only show up again later, even stronger. I couldn't let that happen!

When I reached for the hole to chase after him, it sparked and repelled me.

Action not permitted.

Holy heroes are not allowed to invade another world.

Invade? Another world?

Did that mean that the hole led to yet another world?

“Mr. Naofumi!”

“Naofumi!”

Raphtalia and Rishia called after me

I turned to face them, only to see Ost lying there, half transparent. She looked like she might disappear at any moment. But she didn’t seem to be in any pain.

“Hey . . .” I tried to protest, but there was no point. I’d destroyed the core, so it was only a matter of time before Ost disappeared. We’d talked about it before I fired the beam. There was no time to wallow in regret.

I had a responsibility to her. I had to make sure I listened to her final words. I had to make sure she left us without leaving anything unsaid.

On my way back to Ost’s side, I passed L’Arc, Glass, and Therese. They were walking towards the hole in the air, their weapons and arms outstretched.

“We will find out where he has run to. Please wait for our return.”

“Alright . . .”

They would carry on the investigation where I wasn’t able to follow. Glass had appeared through the rifts that came with the waves, and so had L’Arc. They knew where they were going.

Epilogue
Ost Horai

I turned back to Ost.

She wavered, like a fragile mirage, but she looked satisfied.

“Thank you. Shield Hero, you finally defeated me.”

“Don’t thank me. I didn’t want to do this.”

I wasn’t happy at all. I felt awful. I kept thinking of ways I could have changed things. My mind flooded with “what ifs.”

“Ah . . . heh . . . I thought you might say that. We didn’t have a lot of time together, but I feel like I know you.”

“Shut up.”

“Mr. Naofumi, you don’t need to speak that way . . .”

“You’re right. We haven’t spent very much time together, but in that short time, I realized you were a friend that I could trust.”

“A . . . friend? I am destined to be destroyed by the heroes, but I became your friend instead?”

“That’s right. My friend. Even if you are a crazy monster.”

She’d put herself at risk to protect me in all the battles we’d faced together. I wasn’t sad to lose her because of her skills. I was sad to lose her as a friend. That’s how much I had come to trust her.

Damn it! Why was it that every time I started to trust someone, they turned out to be my enemy?

“How’s the turtle lady?”

“Filo . . . calm down. Ost is finally free from her mission. We have

to see her off—you see?" Raphtalia said, patting Filo's head. Filo was just starting to realize how sad everyone looked.

Filo had been pretty upset when our journey with Melty ended. I didn't want to think about how she would react to the death of a friend.

"Do we have to?"

"Yes."

"Where are you going?"

"Nowhere . . . I am . . . part of the world."

"Really?"

Ost smiled as she cushioned the blow with kind lies.

Maybe they weren't lies.

She was the Spirit Tortoise, a benevolent beast that absorbed sacrificed lives to protect the very world itself. Maybe she really was part of the world. Maybe the world needed her sacrifice to go on surviving.

"Please express my gratitude to the queen of the filolials. It was because of her that we were successful today."

"Okay!"

Ost turned to Rishia next.

"Thank you very much. We were only able to destroy my core because you distracted the enemy. Our success is due to your efforts, and the efforts of the queen of Melromarc."

She was right about that. It was Rishia and the queen that first realized the Spirit Tortoise was the cause of the calamities. They were the ones that read through those thick, ancient reports. We never would have made it this far without their research.

And of course, Rishia's actions during the final battle were decisive.

"Feh . . ."

"Don't look so sad. The Shield Hero is alive because of you. The power of your will, and your passion, paved the way for our victory."

"But I . . . I was never able to help the way I wanted. I wish I were stronger. If I was the . . ."

Rishia looked even sadder, more despairing, like she had after Itsuki expelled her from his party. She thought that if only she'd been stronger, we'd have secured a better future for ourselves. If only . . .

And so she faced her regrets. Was there no other way forward? Did we have to overcome our regrets to make progress? It sounds like a joke, but I was starting to realize that it was true. There was nothing left to do now. There was nothing that could change the harsh truth of what was happening.

People say that you have to keep moving forward. But I was never going to forget what had happened that day, and I felt like doubts and regrets would always plague me. It felt like a curse, something I would always have to deal with. Ost—I mean, Spirit Tortoise! Damn you!

I tried to hate her, thinking it would alleviate my guilt. But it didn't work. I had to accept it.

"It is okay. I'm happy. Besides, I was destined to stand against the heroes to guard the earth. I'm supposed to be an enemy. Do not let my death sadden you."

She was asking for the impossible. How could she even ask that of us? Who could watch a friend die without feeling sad?

"And if you have the time to spend worrying about me, please, spend it on the heroes that were held captive."

"Oh! You're right! Master Itsuki!"

“I’ll accompany you.”

“Me too!”

Eclair and the old lady accompanied Rishia to go check on the other three heroes.

Ost had managed to change the subject. I glared at her, and she smiled back at me.

Damn her! She had such evil-looking eyes, but she was so selfless and pure. Why couldn’t she just present herself honestly?

“Good, they’re still breathing.”

“That doesn’t mean they’re out of the woods yet. We better hurry! It could be a matter of life and death.”

“I will try to supply them with energy to help heal!”

Rishia and the others looked after the three heroes.

They’d taken a real beating, so I couldn’t say for sure, but still, those three seemed to survive everything they went through. They would probably be fine.

“Ost, if you don’t want people to be sad when you die, then you should treat them worse. Why can’t you just pretend to be a jerk? Have you thought about how we are supposed to move on after you’re gone?”

“I’m sorry. But if I had done that, Shield Hero—no, Naofumi—could I have earned your trust?”

She hit me where it hurt.

She was right, too. With those eyes, if she had been nasty or cold, if she’d run around barking orders at me, I never would have teamed up with her.

“I guess you’re right.”

“Mr. Naofumi. Please, think about the words you use,” Raphtalia said, chastising me. I guess she was right—I shouldn’t criticize the personality of a dying woman.

“He got away.”

“Yes. That is my one regret,” Ost said, nodding.

“I tried to follow him through the portal, but it wouldn’t let me through. Do you know why?”

“The holy heroes must protect this world. They are not allowed to invade other worlds. That is the role of the vassal weapons.”

Were the vassal weapons for invading? That didn’t sound like anything I’d heard before. Weren’t the vassal weapons supposed to lend power to the holy weapons?

“Ost, it doesn’t look like we have much time.”

“That’s correct. We are almost out of time. I know it is impossible, but can I ask you to take care of the enemy?”

“If I can find him, then yes. If it’s within my power, I won’t let anyone that abused you walk free.”

“That’s just like you, Naofumi. You’re a kind person.”

“Yes, he is,” Raphtalia agreed.

Ost continued. “If you can find a way to reclaim the energy that man stole from us, then you may be able to produce a barrier to buy yourself time in the next wave.”

“Is that really possible?”

“Yes, it was originally energy that I created. You will be able to absorb it with your holy shield.”

The Spirit Tortoise Heart Shield responded while she spoke.

If we could get the energy back, we could create the barrier that the Spirit Tortoise was originally trying to make.

"The hourglass wasn't full, so I do not know how much time it will buy you, but it should extend the time until the wave comes."

"That's not a bad idea."

"And when I die, the seal on the next benevolent creature—the Phoenix—will break."

"Really?"

"Yes. The Phoenix is an even more powerful guardian than I was. If the heroes are worn down, I do not know if they will be able to survive the encounter."

That didn't sound good.

How were we supposed to fight a monster like that? The Spirit Tortoise Heart Shield gave me access to the energy beam attack, which was certainly powerful. But I didn't know if it was possible to shoot more than one beam in a row.

"Therefore, I will try to keep word of my death from reaching the Phoenix. That may buy you additional time."

"Thank you."

"Do not thank me. All of this is my fault. I never should have allowed myself to be taken over by that man."

"First things first. We'll try to get back the stolen energy—that will buy us some time, right?"

Ost nodded and reached out to touch my shield.

"The Spirit Tortoise requests special approval. Allow the Shield Hero to pass through the portal to another world."

My shield reacted, and a flashing icon appeared in my field of

vision.

Special request approved.

The holy heroes may now conditionally invade other worlds.

“Now you should be able to chase after him.”

“Thanks. I’ll see to it that your wish is fulfilled. That guy won’t know what hit him!”

“Kiddo! That gate is connected to our world now!”

“Oh yeah?”

“We’re going after that guy. And when we find him, we’ll take back the energy he stole from this world’s guardian beast.”

“This is all we can do to demonstrate our sincerity. Please, wait for our return.”

L’Arc and Glass were speaking to me from the entrance to the portal.

But I couldn’t leave it like that. “Wait. We’re coming too. It’s not that I don’t trust you. It’s that I want to do it myself.”

I knew that L’Arc and Glass were powerful enough to follow through.

They were my enemies, but I’d had enough experiences with them to know that they were trustworthy.

I knew they were powerful, but I didn’t know if they were powerful enough to take on that insane man and win. So there was only one thing left for me to do—I had to go with them.

“I don’t like anything about that guy. I don’t like what he’s done, how he talks, how he thinks. I want to make him pay for what he’s done to this world. That’s not all though. I’m going to take back the energy he stole from you, and I’m going to use it to buy us more time, before the next wave comes.”

“Thank you. Really. Thank you.”

Ost was holding my hand, but suddenly, I wasn’t able to feel her. I looked down to find that her legs were already vanishing, dissolving into light.

We were out of time.

“Ms. Ost!” Raphtalia shouted.

Rishia heard Raphtalia’s shout and came running over.

“Ost! Feh . . . no!”

There was no time.

Ost smiled. She looked happy. “Perhaps it isn’t fair, but I’m a little . . . glad.”

“Glad that you’re leaving us?”

“No. I was fated to destroy life, to be hated and scorned. People were to cheer when I died, and yet here you are, sad to see me go. I cannot help but feel joyful.”

Her eyes brimmed with tears.

Mine did too. Maybe I was just tired.

Filo understood what was happening, too. She wiped at her eyes with balled fists.

“So please understand that this was all I could have hoped for. I was a scourge on the earth, but here you stand, crying for me. It’s . . . I . . .”

Ost—the Spirit Tortoise—dissolved into beads of light, leaving us with only her words: “If I had another chance at life, I . . . would spend it . . . with you.”

She vanished, leaving nothing behind.

And that was the end of the Spirit Tortoise. It was extinguished along with the tortoise’s own heart, with its soul.

“. . .”

There was nothing I could do. I just stood there, watching the light filter in from outside, through the hole I’d made using the energy blast.

The world asked for sacrifices from everyone. It was a terrible place.

It summoned heroes to save its people from the waves of destruction, and then it forced them to fight.

If it meant saving itself from the waves, the world would sacrifice all its life to the Spirit Tortoise. And so to protect the lives of the people, we had to take the life of the tortoise.

The tortoise even begged us to kill it. The world begged the heroes to save it from the waves. The world would sacrifice anything to save itself. It would sacrifice its life to the tortoise or its heroes to the waves. Wasn’t there any other way to save it?

I wanted to turn on it, to scream at it, to yell that it wasn’t fair. But I knew it wouldn’t help. I knew that I had to face the reality of what we’d done.

I didn’t want to sacrifice myself for anything. I didn’t want to ask anyone else to sacrifice themselves either.

That’s what heroes were for—fighting. What did I know about people like Trash, who sat back in safety while other people fought on

their behalf?



The Spirit Tortoise fought for the world. So did everyone who fought against the tortoise. Everyone was fighting for what they believed in.

And I wasn't going to forget it.

"Kiddo!"

"We will soon close the portal to our world. You must hurry!"

Glass and L'Arc yelled.

Eclair shouted back, "If we don't get the heroes to a hospital soon, I cannot guarantee they will survive!"

What should we do?

"We're going after him! Eclair, old lady—you two take the heroes to the closest hospital!"

"Understood! I will tell the queen what has happened here!"

"Do so! Also, tell her I'm sorry to leave her with all the clean-up."

"Understood, Mr. Iwatani. I expect to see you again, safe and sound."

"You will. Oh, and make sure you look after Keel too, okay?"

"Yes. He'll be a decent warrior by the time you return."

I turned to Raphtalia and Filo. They would have to serve as my attack squad.

"Mr. Naofumi, we're going, aren't we?"

"Yeah. You're coming, right?"

"Of course! I'll always follow you!"

“I’m coming toooooo! Imma kick that guy good—for the turtle lady!”

I liked Filo’s enthusiasm.

“Alright! Let’s get going!”

“Just a minute!” shouted Rishia. “Please, take me with you.”

“I thought you would want to watch over Itsuki’s recovery.”

“As you say, there is a part of me that wants to remain and watch over Master Itsuki’s recovery. But the sense of justice he instilled in me will not allow me to let that man go! I must see to his punishment!”

Her emotions were probably overpowering her judgment, and I wasn’t sure if she was strong enough to make it back alive. But I wasn’t going to tell her she couldn’t come.

“I have to leave Master Itsuki to bring justice to that man. I have to!”

Rishia had a power that still slept within her, and she’d used it to get us out of a pinch in the last battle. She might prove useful again. And besides, I’d promised her that I’d help her get stronger. I couldn’t turn my back on her now.

“I get it. Rishia—you come too.”

“Alright!”

“How long are you going to keep us waiting? Hurry up!”

“We’re coming! Everyone, goodbye!”

And so we joined forces with L’Arc and the others to chase after Kyo, in hopes that we might recover the energy he stole from our world.

We were about to enter the portal connected to the world that

Glass was from.

What would be waiting for us on the other side?

What were the waves?

What was this other world?

I didn't know the answers, but I knew the name of my enemy.

I knew his face. I knew his voice. I knew what he'd done.

I knew what to do.

There was only one thing to do—I had to kill him.

I was the Shield Hero, so I couldn't do it on my own. But I wasn't alone.

If I couldn't swing my fist, one of my friends would step in on my behalf—and I would be there to protect them.

In the end, we were coming back with everything he stole from the Spirit Tortoise—with everything he stole from my friend Ost!

We slipped through the portal to take back what was ours and entered a new world.

"Naofumi Iwatani, the possessor of the holy shield . . . and of a kind heart . . ."

A spirit floated in the air above where the Spirit Tortoise's body lay.

"Please save the lives of this world, just as you saved mine."

The queen of the filolials stood back to watch it.

A small rift to another world opened, became a pillar of light, and flew away.

Fitoria, the queen of the filolials, clasped her hands in prayer and watched it sail away. The soul of the Spirit Tortoise watched with her.

“I hope the Shield Hero’s destination is a fortunate one.”

“Thank you, Naofumi, the Shield Hero. Had I the opportunity, I’d protect you with this world. For what it’s worth . . . someday . . . together.”



Extra Chapter
Searching for Soul-Healing Water

“You call this soul-healing water?”

“That’s right.”

I was asking L’Arc about the mysteriously effective liquid he had sprinkled on me.

“Glass?”

“I’ll say this: I was irritated when you said you wanted to learn more about the world of our enemies. But finding something like this almost makes it worth it.

Soul-healing water. The mystery liquid dramatically increased all of my abilities. But even with my abilities improved, I hadn’t been able to defeat Naofumi, that holy hero of the enemy world.

What would have happened if I’d been forced to fight them without L’Arc’s help?

There’s a significant chance I might have lost.

L’Arc tells me that Naofumi focuses on defense, because he is the Shield Hero. If that were the case, then I wouldn’t expect him to be a very capable attacker. It makes me wonder—if I had to face any of the other holy heroes in battle, would I survive the encounter?

I looked at my fans. They existed to protect the world, and they were special. We called them vassal weapons. They could gain new abilities by absorbing materials and parts of defeated monsters.

They also had the ability to take monster parts and transform them into various useful materials and items. A hero that had been summoned to my world long ago named it “the drop function.”

At the moment, we were back at our base of operations, in the middle of a meeting. We were trying to get to the bottom of what had gone wrong.

The first problem was Naofumi himself. He had grown so powerful in such a short time that it was hard to believe.

The waves were a battle between worlds and when I met Naofumi, he said that only two weeks had passed in their world since the appearance of the previous wave. It had only been two weeks, but he had grown dramatically.

The last time I'd seen the heroes, he was the only one of the four that was strong enough to deserve the title. He was powerful back then, but he wasn't so powerful that I couldn't overcome him. He held a cursed, ominous shield in his hands, which told me he was strong enough to maintain control.

He was strong. It's true. I knew that I would defeat him the next time we met. That is truly what I thought. I thought I knew exactly how strong he was. Realizing I couldn't win at the time, I decided to run, knowing that I would have to put an end to him the next time I saw him.

But two weeks passed—or should I say, I *gave* him those two weeks—and when we met again, I realized I'd underestimated him. That holy hero from another world, Naofumi, had grown unbelievably powerful. I realized we were in trouble when we met in battle.

I had another move up my sleeve, but L'Arc stopped me from using it. Once again, the battle ended without a decisive victory.

"Right? We don't have anything like it in our world, so I was pretty thrilled to find it," L'Arc clipped, clearly pleased with himself. He spun the bottle in his hands.

"But how did you know? How did you know it would affect me like that?"

"Didn't I already tell you about that, Glass-chan? The only way to restore soul power is by waiting for it to naturally replenish itself, by

draining it from an enemy, or by receiving a portion of it from an ally."

"That's true, but . . ."

"And so, when I saw them use a draining attack on you, and your energy started to vanish, I realized it was because soul-people's energy must actually be soul power."

L'Arc, because he had teamed up with me, knew about what energy really was.

Soul power. Only those who held a vassal weapon could discern it. But I was a soul-person, so I was able to use my vassal weapon through other means.

When a human used a vassal weapon, they became aware of this soul power, but because I was a soul-person, that very same power was just normal energy for me.

"I understand, in theory. But do you see the problem with this?"

"Hm? Oh, you mean how it started to leak out after hitting an upper limit?"

"Yes."

It was true that the liquid had greatly enhanced my abilities.

For us soul-people—they call us spirits—our strength is tied to our energy.

For humans and other creatures like them, their strength is most directly related to something called their "level."

Energy is much like stamina for us, and when we use up our energy we grow weaker. In a short battle that can be decided quickly, we are unparalleled in a fight.

And while humans gain levels as they defeat monsters, spirits like me only regain a small portion of their energy. If we are forced to

battle powerful monsters for a long time, we can use up all of our energy. However, our energy levels also restore themselves naturally over time—a small amount each second. If nothing interferes, our energy levels will rise to a certain level on their own.

We grow stronger over time by using our energy to acquire various abilities, and . . . well, perhaps I will save the specifics for another time.

L'Arc and his friends must have known all of these things, too. Among them all, the overall energy capacity we command is most directly linked with our strength. This "capacity" refers to the amount of energy we are capable of collecting at one time. The capacity cannot be enlarged by any simple everyday exercises.

My vassal weapon helped me to enlarge my capacity beyond that of the average spirit, but to gain more power than I already had, it would require a great deal of additional time.

"The amount of energy I received from the soul-healing water greatly exceeded my capacity to store it. So I was only able to use that energy for a short time."

If only there were some way that I could extend that time limit, I might have a chance to defeat Naofumi.

I'll be honest. With how strong he has become, I won't be able to defeat him. If nothing changes, then I will be forced to use my final option the next time I see him. I'll have to trade my life for victory.

"So we could beat him if you had more capacity?"

"In theory, yes."

L'Arc was an easy-going accomplice of mine. He also held a vassal weapon.

I do not deny that he fights sincerely for the good of the world, but sometimes I feel that he lacks drive. I often found myself lecturing him.

He was an idealist, through and through.

There was so little time left until the next wave that any attempts we made to “level,” as the humans say, would be mostly meaningless.

I could easily accept monster parts and materials from my friends, and it would increase my strength slightly. But if I’ve already reached the limit of my capacity, what else could I do?

“Let’s use the next wave to move over to the other world.”

“What are you saying?”

“Glass, I swear. You have to learn to loosen up a bit. You’re too stuck in your ways.”

What?!

“Who is stuck in their ways?!”

“What would Kizuna-chan say if she saw you like this? You have to relax. Relax!”

“How cowardly of you! Don’t use Kizuna’s name like that!”

Kizuna was one of my closest friends. She was the one who wanted to protect the world. It was her commitment that inspired me to love the world, too. But Kizuna was not the sort of person we could send to battle in the waves.

Even worse, she had gone missing.

“Glass-chan, you make the funniest face whenever I bring up Kizuna’s name.”

“Don’t you mock me!”

“Oh stop that. You’re both just little girls to me.”

“Blasphemy! Don’t say another word!” I snapped, opening my fans and pointing them at L’Arc.

“Calm down.”

“Listen to me. We are very busy preparing for the wave battles. We don’t have time to spend exploring other worlds.”

“That’s easy to say, but have you noticed? That world is . . .”

L’Arc shared some important information with us. It was about the potential of the vassal weapons.

We gained new abilities by absorbing monsters and materials into our weapons, but there was a limit to how many things we had access to—a limit there was no way to get around.

We lived in a finite world. It might seem like there are infinite types of monsters and materials, but that isn’t the case.

But a new world offered new possibilities. It was filled with untapped resources. Furthermore, and this was perhaps the most surprising, the levels gained in that world were combined with the levels gained in our own.

That meant that the levels gained in each world could be added together.

“You see what I’m getting at, right? If we want to survive the next encounter with Naofumi, we should spend some time leveling up in their world.”

“But . . .” I began to protest, but I had to admit he had a point.

We had met Naofumi before, but we still hadn’t encountered any of the other holy heroes. What would happen if we won? Would the additional strength we’d accrued stay with us?

Would we need a temporary power boost?

Or since we didn’t have a lot of time, wouldn’t it be better to find a way to brush up our skills in our own world?

I had so many doubts.

“And . . . Didn’t you notice? They aren’t stupid. They aren’t going to put the holy heroes on the front lines so easily. If we get over there *before* the waves come . . . You see what I mean? We have the vassal weapons so we can kill them.”

That was a good point. It was going to be very difficult to kill the holy heroes if we only had the duration of the waves to do it.

It might make sense to cross over to the other world and then kill the last possessor of the holy weapon before the wave came.

“In Naofumi’s world, I couldn’t even find out where the other heroes were.”

“That’s true. Perhaps we should not worry too much over our methods. This is no time to worry about justice.”

I wonder how Kizuna would react if she were here to hear me say that.

L’Arc looked very happy, even though it had only been two days since our battle with Naofumi.

“So you know what I’m saying. If the next wave connects to Naofumi’s place, we should cross over to that world.”

“I suppose you’re right,” I sighed.

“Hey, where’s Therese?”

“She’s probably back at the room, no?”

“She’s still relaxing? We better get moving if we want to survive the next wave,” L’Arc said. I nodded, and we left to go meet with Therese.

Therese was back in the room, playing with a bangle.

“Hey, Therese! How are things?!”

She sighed and held the bangle up to the light. She almost seemed not to have heard him.

“Hey!”

“This is amazing. It’s so beautiful,” she muttered, running her finger over the gemstone set in it.

I wondered if Therese’s people could see something that I couldn’t in such objects.

On our way back, Therese had been very excited to show me the bangles from the other world. She said they were amazing.

Therese used a unique type of magic that drew on the power of gemstones. She said that she knew a lot about gemstones because of that, and that the bangles were fitted with the best of the best.

I couldn’t help but wonder why, if the stones were as good as she said, she didn’t use them during the battle with Naofumi.

“They’re beautiful.”

“Therese!”

“Yikes! L’Arc?! When did you get here?”

“When? Haven’t you heard me talking to you this whole time?”

She snapped to attention and hurried to hide the bangle from his sight. She looked like a young man desperate to hide his dirty magazines.

As I wasn’t one of Therese’s people, I couldn’t understand her fascination with the object. But why was she so nervous about being seen with it?

“Oh, um, right. Of course I heard you. What can I do for you?”

“Were you really listening? And do you really like kiddo’s bangles that much?”

“Of course I do, L’Arc! Don’t you see it? Can’t you feel how happy these stones are?”

“All I know is that those things are powerful.”

“You’re such a brute!”

“Ugh!”

Therese looked disappointed. Then she punched L’Arc in the stomach.

It was a solid punch. I’d have to remember that.

“If those bangles are so impressive, why didn’t you use them during our battle with Naofumi?” I asked.

Therese’s magic used the power of gemstones, and she was bragging about how great those stones were. So why didn’t she use them?

“Because the stones . . . The little stones wouldn’t lend me their power to use against him.”

“What?”

“Therese, you psycho! You could have held back a little,” L’Arc whined, clutching his stomach.

They were close friends, but they got into scuffles from time to time. I guess that showed how close they were, but I didn’t really understand it.

“And? Why wouldn’t the stones lend you their power to fight him?”

Therese looked very sad when she heard my question.

What was the matter? Had I said something rude?

“Glass, don’t you understand? Think about it from their perspective. A god-like creator picks you up and polishes you until

you are perfect. And then someone asks you to help them kill that very person."

"I think I see what you are trying to say."

Naofumi had made the bangles, so they wouldn't help us defeat him.

"But if we asked for their power to save Naofumi, I think these stones would sacrifice themselves to ensure his safety," Therese explained. She smiled and rubbed the stones against her cheek.

"Ugh, Therese. Stop that."

"If you want me to stop it, you should make me an even better bangle!"

"Damn you, kiddo! You had to raise the hurdle on me, didn't you"

"So? What did you want from me?"

"Yes, well . . ." I explained our plan to cross over to the other world during the next wave.

"Understood. Shall we get going?"

Luckily, Therese was optimistic about the plan and eager to cooperate.

"So with any luck, we will just slip through to the other side."

We all agreed on the plan and met the next wave head on.

Luckily, it was connected to Naofumi's world.

"Glass-chan. I'm sure you already know this, but if we see anyone fighting when we get there, ignore them and let's move on."

"Understood."

We stepped through the rift and inspected our new surroundings.

Off in the distance, I saw a bird-like monster locked in battle with one of the wave monsters. It looked a lot like the type of bird monster that had been in league with Naofumi. It finished off its enemy and turned, running straight in our direction.

“Let’s go!”

“Yup! Therese, help us out!”

“Okay.”

Thanks to Therese’s help, we were able to make a comparatively safe crossing to the other world.

I turned to look back in the direction we’d come from and saw the rifts in the sky closing. Then I noticed a problem.

“What? Our equip effects don’t seem to . . .”

My stats had fallen dramatically. It must have been what L’Arc was talking about—a side effect of moving to another world.

“Yeah, looks like it. It’s probably not your style, but you should wear some armor while we’re here,” L’Arc said, producing a set of armor from his scythe.

It was the western-styled leather armor that Kizuna had talked about.

There was no getting around it. It was better than wearing clothes with no effect at all. I removed my kimono and changed into the armor.

“Wow! Glass?”

“That does NOT look good on you!”

L’Arc’s comment annoyed me, so I kicked him in the shin.

“Ouch! What the hell?”

“You’re the one that gave me the armor.”

“How is that my fault? It’s the only set we have.”

“If you change your hairstyle a little, I think it will look better,” Therese said. She quickly tied my hair into two pigtails.

“Hm . . . You really do have a very young face, so something about this hair and this armor makes you look, um . . . immature?”

I kicked L’Arc’s shin again.

“Ouch! Why do you have to be so violent?”

“Just be grateful I didn’t hit you with my fans.”

“You’ll get used to the armor, and then it won’t bother you so much. Come on. Let’s get going.”

“Alright. L’Arc? Will you lead the way?”

“Sure thing. But first things first. Let’s eat!”

And so we began our adventure in the new world.

A few days passed.

“You know what? I like the food over here.”

“Yes, I agree. The Napolata is quite famous. That dish with the red noodles—I like it.”

“Erm . . . I’m starting to feel like we spend too much time wandering around eating all the regional specialties!”

Therese was holding a skewer of thick anko-like stuff she’d bought from a stall, and a chunk of it fell into the mud.

“Hey, you’re right!”

“Yeah, but we’ve also gotten a lot of drop items, and we’ve collected a lot of money, too.”

Our goals were to raise our levels and abilities and to procure more soul-healing water. If we could find a recipe for soul-healing water, and find the materials necessary to make it, then it would definitely help us in our next fight.

“Don’t worry so much. All of this is part of the path to making you as powerful as you can be.”

“Really?” I asked. I found it hard to believe. It was true that we had discovered many monsters and objects that I’d never seen in our world, but . . .

“Glass-chan, you worry too much. It’s going to be okay.”

“That doesn’t set my mind at ease.”

“So what? Oh, hey! It’s probably about time we found you some better equipment, don’t you think?” L’Arc said. He smiled and swung open the door to a weapon shop.

My vassal weapons were fans, but this world didn’t appear to sell fans in their weapon shops. It was a rare weapon, even in my world. I decided not to overthink it.

“What is it? Did they have a kimono?”

They actually did have one, but its effects and abilities were very low.

The shopkeeper said that he could have one custom made for me, but that it would take some time. L’Arc had other ideas in mind. He suggested another set of armor for me.

It was even uglier than my current armor, but it was made of better materials, and it had better equip effects.

“Think of all the battles we’re going to go through. I think you will need this.”

“Very well.”

I didn’t have any better options, so I paid for the armor with silver.

I suddenly noticed that Therese had disappeared. I looked around to see where she’d gone, only to find her standing before an accessory shop.

“Welcome! What can I get for you today?”

“Oh, it’s just . . . um . . . that.”

“Ah yes, a necklace made from Miraka ore. They say it raises the amount of experience its wearer receives from battle. It’s become quite a fad over in the Cal Mira islands.”

“Has it? I was just there, and I didn’t hear anything about it.”

“Ah yes, well they say the Shield Hero himself noticed its potential. It has become quite popular since.”

Just hearing the words “Shield Hero” cause my hand to curl into a fist. The more time we spent wandering around in public, the greater chance we had of bumping into Naofumi.

We had to be careful. We weren’t on our home turf, and we weren’t very strong yet.

“Therese!” L’Arc shouted. “You find more stones over there?”

Therese sadly shook her head. “Nothing on the level of the bangles.”

I could hardly believe how obsessed she was with the bangles that Naofumi made.

“L’Arc, you should probably start working on your crafting skills while you have the chance.”

“Ugh, no thanks. I hate doing that sort of detailed work. I’ll buy you something someday. How about that?”

“If you don’t try harder, Naofumi is going to steal her from you.”

“Ha! I doubt that. What are you talking about, Glass? Haha!”

I sighed. I felt tired.

“Oh hey, Glass-chan, I think pretty soon we’ll be coming into the territory we were in last time. We might run into Naofumi and his friends there, so stay on your toes.”

“Understood.”

“Just to make sure, I will use magic to hide our true identities,” Therese said, rubbing a gemstone and muttering a spell.

The spell would make us look different to others.

L’Arc went to a nearby tavern to gather information on the area.

“I was thinking about going to Cal Mira to level up, but the activation event is almost over.”

“Too bad. We’ll have to find another way.”

“Right. Let’s head to a place where the monsters drop items we can use to make soul-healing water.”

We kept the mood light and moved over the country, fighting monsters as we came across them. We even found some of the monsters that were referenced in the soul-healing water recipe. I began to feel hesitantly optimistic. Maybe things were looking up.

The next problem was figuring out what sort of weapons the four holy heroes would be carrying. I already knew about the Shield Hero, Naofumi Iwatani.

We began to hear stories about the other heroes, too.

Sword, Spear, Bow . . . As expected, they carried different weapons than the heroes from our world—but they were all very simple.

The adventurers I'd met before the battle with Naofumi, the ones who had called themselves heroes, had carried those very weapons.

They had been so weak that I was sure they were lying about being heroes. So where had the real heroes gone?

Then when I found L'Arc fighting Naofumi on the islands, those same three adventurers were there. Could it be that the other three heroes were so weak we didn't need to worry about them? No—that would be far too optimistic.

Even if they really had been the remaining heroes, it might have been a ploy to hide their true power until the last moment.

"So this place is called Melromarc?"

On the road there, we came across a lot of monsters that looked like bats with tortoise shells on their backs. They must have only existed in this new world. I'd never seen anything quite like them before.

"That's right. We aren't going to the islands anymore, but there should be plenty of monsters in this area that will drop the stuff we need to make soul-healing water. Let's go."

We entered Naofumi's country.

I didn't recognize the writing system, the culture, or the way that people thought.

Even the drinks seemed unfamiliar.

I didn't even recognize the fish jumping in a nearby river. Kizuna would have been thrilled to find a new fishing spot. I couldn't wait to tell her all about it.

"Naofumi and the other holy heroes spend their time in this country. What better place to find out more about them?"

"Yes. Let us see what we can find about Naofumi and about the others."

A few days passed since we entered Melromarc.

We were walking through a think jungle, and heavy red fruit hung from branches all around us.

“The monsters around here are supposed to drop great materials.”

Since we came to the new world, we’d spent days hunting around for soul-healing water materials. I was starting to doubt that L’Arc knew what he was talking about.

Not to mention those strange shelled bats were appearing more and more frequently with each passing day. None of them dropped anything useful.

“Are you sure?”

“You need to be more trusting! We should head somewhere with stronger monsters.”

I was a spirit, so I wasn’t going to benefit from fighting stronger monsters. I could just get materials from L’Arc and Therese, so there was no reason for me to go with them.

“It would take too much time to power up that way. We don’t have the time to waste.”

“It’s fine! We are here to help you! Let’s just keep doing all we can until the next wave.”

“Right,” I muttered. Was I the only one losing confidence in the mission?

L’Arc didn’t seem to know what he was doing to get us through all of this. He didn’t have the backbone.

“Glass-chan. You waste energy being so tense all the time.”

“You’re the one who’s making me tense!”

“Ah, you’re becoming more like Naofumi every day!”

What was that supposed to mean? I remembered the way Naofumi had looked in battle—so angry, so tense. L’Arc was right—I didn’t want to be like that.

Another few days went by. We hunted monsters and leveled up our weapons while we collected materials. Then our vassal weapons started to vibrate.

A warning appeared in my field of view, saying that a guardian beast had reawakened.

“It looks like one of this world’s guardian beasts has started to move.”

“Yeah. But what to do about it is up to the people here. They can either kill it or let it construct its world-saving barrier.”

“But it doesn’t mean there is still isn’t a way for us to return home.”

Yes, the waves in this world would stop for a time, but the waves would continue back in our world. The timer in my field of view was still ticking, counting down to the arrival of the next wave. So it didn’t matter what choice the people of this world made. It didn’t even matter if we ran out of time. Anyway, that’s what I told myself as I killed one of those strange monsters, a Spirit Tortoise familiar.

“Either way, our chances of getting in another fight with Naofumi are lower now, right? Isn’t that a good thing?

If the Spirit Tortoise created a barrier to protect the world, then we wouldn’t have to fight anymore. And if they killed the Spirit Tortoise, then we could at least have a long period of peace. Either way was good for us, because we needed more time to grow stronger before we were forced to face Naofumi in battle again.

If we could find a way to make something like soul-healing water

back in our own world, then we would stand a better chance next time. The armies fighting for and against the Spirit Tortoise were of little concern to me.

It didn't take very long for word of the Shield Hero's victory over the Spirit Tortoise to reach us.

"That kid. He can really pull off some impressive stuff—when he puts his mind to it, that is."

"Indeed. Some of his actions leave a bad taste in my mouth, but there is no doubt that he is a true hero."

We found ourselves preparing to leave this new world, as it would only be a matter of time before the Spirit Tortoise resolved our problems for us.

But then . . .

Our vassal weapons began to scream.

"What is that?" L'Arc shouted, tightening his grip on his scythe.

I spoke to my weapon.

I could see it. Someone I knew was walking through the town, just like any old day—like nothing special was happening.

I pointed at him.

Then, as if he finally understood what was happening, L'Arc nodded and readied his weapon.

The person we were following finally noticed that he was being followed, and he turned to face us in the middle of the street.

"Well, well, what are you three doing in a place like this?"

"How about you answer first?"

I knew him. He ignored the mission his vassal weapon had

entrusted to him and tried to use it to rule the world. He was our enemy. He was unforgivable.

It was Kyo Ethnina, the hero of the book of the vassal weapons.

My vassal weapon was still screeching and sounding an alarm.

Then Kyo's book sent out a light to surround us.

Suddenly, my field of vision was full of information. It said things I couldn't believe.

Kyo had developed technology and used it to take control of the world's guardian beast.

"You!"

"Heh. Those vassal weapons of yours won't shut up, will they? What's the big deal—you were going to destroy this world anyway? At least let me use it first!"

"What are you after?!"

"Why should I tell you idiots?"

The book in his hand started to shine.

"Oh? I guess it's time then. I was hoping I could laugh at you fools for a little longer, but I guess we are out of time," Kyo said. Then he vanished.

He must have used a teleportation skill of some kind. He did it nearly instantaneously, without broadcasting his intentions.

"Glass-chan. This is not good. That guy had taken control of this world's Spirit Tortoise."

"Yes. There have to be rules in battle. Fighting does not rid the world of good or evil. And his action has definitely broken the rules."

If he thought he could use any of the energy that he took from the

Spirit Tortoise, he was mistaken.

The vassal weapon in my hand warned me of the risks.

If one used another world's guardian beast to extend the life of their own world, it would only end in destruction. If you steal another's leg to replace a leg you've lost, it won't work, and you will die.

We had to stop him. I didn't know how to do it, but we had to stop him.

"L'Arc, Therese. Let's go."

"Yup!"

"Yes!"

We had a small stockpile of soul-healing water, so we'd be able to fight a little.

If we had to give our lives to stop Kyo's treachery, we would. That was our job as possessors of the vassal weapons, even if we were from another world.

We found the road that would take us to the rampaging Spirit Tortoise and set off to do our duty.

Glass and her friends prepared for the waves.

They must defeat Kyo, but what is waiting for them when they find him?

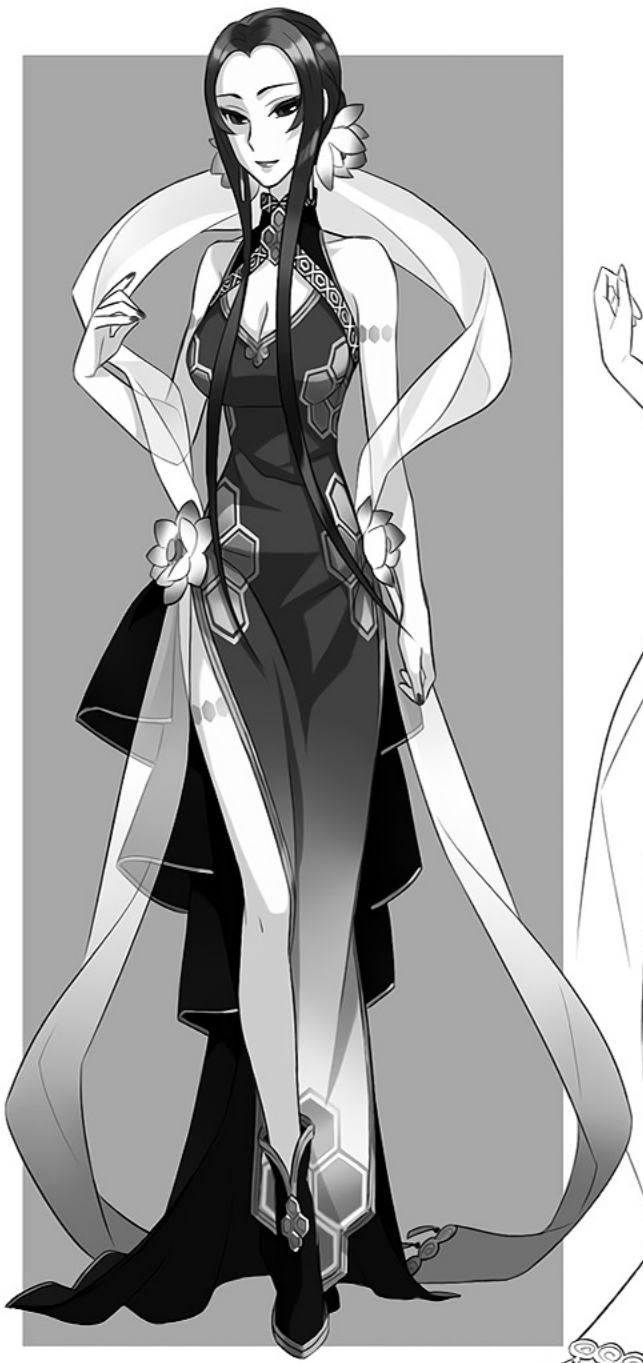
Their story joins with the Shield Hero's.

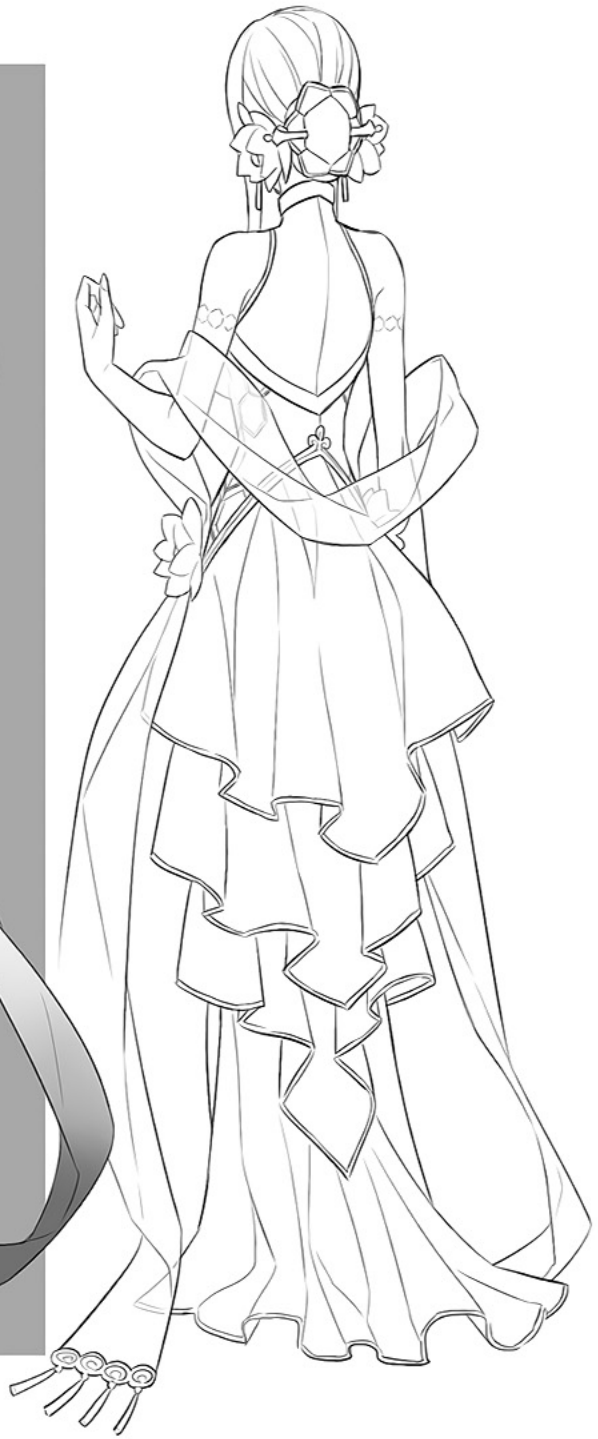
These are the stories of two worlds that should never have met.

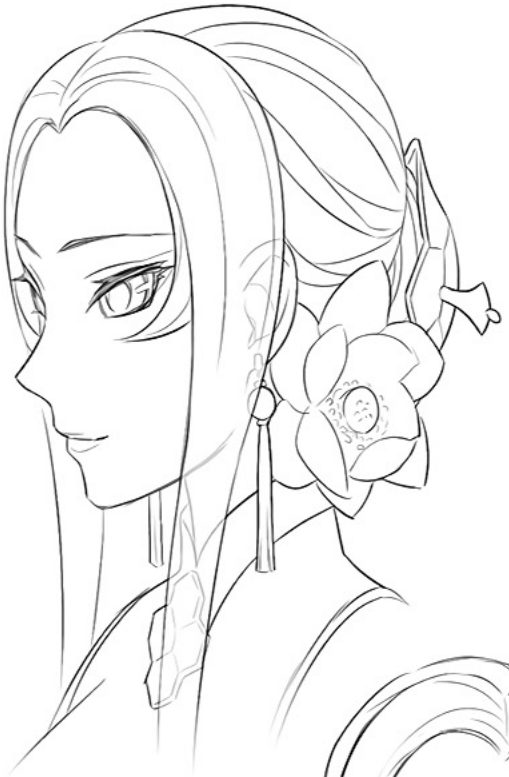
The border between the worlds will begin to warp. What will the new reality mean for Glass?

The hopes of another world—one that stands against destruction—are not sufficient to stop the coming of the great waves.

The waves that will drown all that is, leaving only desolation behind.









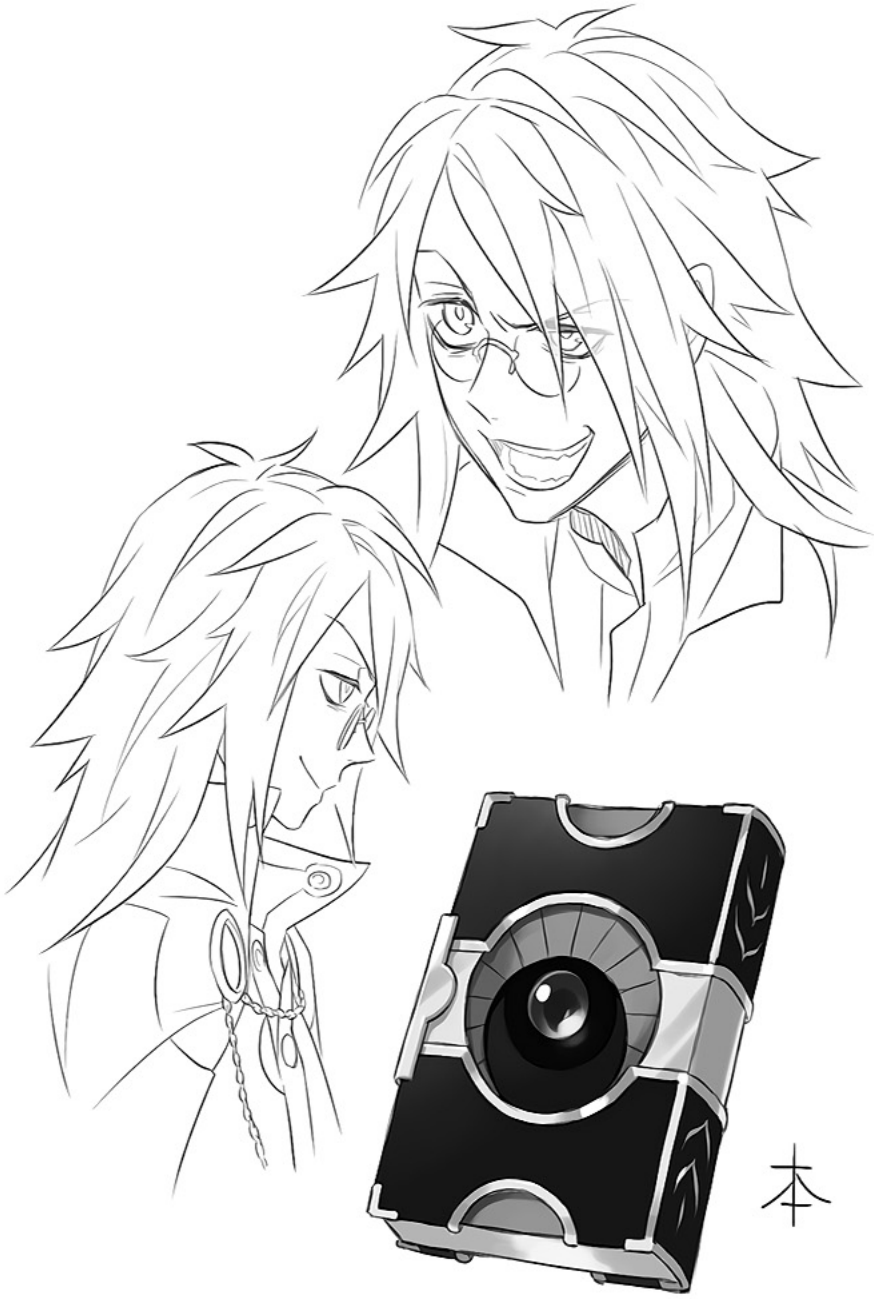
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