
THE RISING OF 13 THE SHIELD HERO
Aneko Yusagi
ONE PEACE BOOKS

The Rising of the Shield Hero 13



Aneko Yusagi


Jaralis
Raphtalia
Naofumi Iwatani
Fohl
Werner
Weapon Shop Guy
Sadeena
Atla
THE RISING OF THE 13 SHIELD HERO


“There were outfits prepared for us, so we should change.”

Prologue: Team Assignments “You ready?”

“Yes.”

“Sheesh. Could you have come from a more inconvenient place?” I grumbled.

Due to a particular string of events, I was currently in the process of getting ready to depart for a certain country. It had all started when . . . When had it started again? I wanted to say it was when I had Raphtalia change into a miko outfit in this world, but I had a feeling it actually went back a lot further than that. Either way, I was going to avoid taking any responsibility and say it wasn’t my fault.

I guess I should start with a little bit of background. My name is Naofumi Iwatani. I was originally a university student living in Japan, but for various reasons I ended up getting summoned to another world to serve as the Shield Hero. That new world functioned a lot like a game. People had levels and could gain experience to level up by defeating monsters. The system made it easy to see the results of one’s hard work.

The reason the people of this world summoned me here was because they wanted me to fight against what they called “waves,” a phenomenon that was threatening to destroy their world. Getting summoned to a parallel universe felt like a dream come true in the beginning. But the country I’d been summoned to was simply rotten and I got caught up in the middle of several big conspiracies. I hate to admit it, but I ended up with a completely warped personality as a result. Just thinking about that stuff made me depressed.

“Can you blame us for coming here? The Seaetto territory here in Melromarc actually welcomed vagrant demi-humans, after all,” Sadeena replied.

“My birth is the real problem here, isn’t it?” Raphtalia said quietly with a hint of regret in her voice.

Raphtalia was the girl who’d become my first companion after I was summoned to this world. In the beginning, I bought her as a slave to make her fight for me, since I had no way of attacking on my own. But we’d been through a lot together since then, and now she was my trusty sidekick. She was also kind of like a daughter to me.

Thinking back, we sure had come a long way. I would have never been able to imagine a future like this back in the beginning, when I was first summoned here. To summarize what had happened without going into too much detail, it all started with a string of conspiracies in Melromarc, which was the country that summoned me. After finally overcoming all of that, we had to deal with enemies who showed up from a different world on the other side of the waves.

The waves that we heroes had been summoned to fight were actually a phenomenon that stemmed from the imminent fusion of different worlds. If two worlds failed to defeat the waves caused by their collision, the worlds would fuse together. As a result, the maximum capacity that a single world could contain would be surpassed. Ultimately, the worlds would be torn apart and destroyed. That was pretty much the extent of our current understanding.

Anyway, we eventually made peace with the enemies that initially crossed over during the waves — Glass, L'Arc, and Therese . Later on, another enemy hijacked the Spirit Tortoise, which was one of the four benevolent animals meant to protect this world. But we defeated him and brought him to justice. For the time being, the Spirit Tortoise's power had temporarily put a stop to the waves in this world.

For Raphtalia's sake, I decided to use that time to rebuild the village where she had been born and raised, since it had been destroyed by one of the waves. As part of that, I'd also gone around buying up the villagers who'd been forced into slavery after leaving the village and then brought them back to the village. I did this so that I could train them to fight for me against the waves, of course. I needed more offensive capabilities, and slaves and monsters raised by a hero would be more powerful than usual.

After that, I went about rounding up the other three holy heroes, one by one. I took them into protective custody so that we might actually have a chance against the waves. After being summoned to this world, they ran around fighting like it was all just a game. But they finally came to terms with reality and turned over a new leaf. That was what happened in a nutshell, anyway.

"What do you want us to do? We should go with you, right?" asked Ren.

"Hold on just a sec," I replied.

That was the Sword Hero that just spoke to me. His name was Ren Amaki. In the beginning, he had been all about maintaining his “cool” persona. But he got a bit wonky after experiencing a big failure. He decided to put his faith in Witch, the bitch who had deceived me and framed me for rape. She betrayed him, and he fell into despair once again. After that, a bunch of stuff happened, and now he was staying in my village under my protection.

After Ren’s reform, among us four holy heroes, his personality actually ended up fitting the hero image the most. He was 16 years old. Honestly, I’d become so warped now that Ren’s innocence could be quite a shock at times. He wasn’t weak, by any means. But he’d been consumed by multiple curses in battle before coming to the village, so he was currently in a weakened state. For now, he was just training and waiting for the effects of the curses to wear off.

That said, I’d relied on the cursed power of the Shield of Wrath to make it out of my own tight spot, so I was in a weakened state too. Apart from my defense, most of my stats were currently just a bit higher than those of the average adventurer. But Ren had implemented the weapon power-up methods I told him about, so he was definitely far stronger than he had been before coming to the village.

I mentioned this earlier too, but Ren had been deceived by Witch. Just like I had. Having a shared enemy had given birth to a growing sense of camaraderie between the two of us. After all he’d been through, Ren had become a serious, level-headed guy. But Witch was one person he could never forgive.

“Where’s Itsuki?” I asked.

“Right here,” said Itsuki.

I looked around and saw him standing with Rishia and raising his hand. Itsuki was the Bow Hero. His full name was Itsuki Kawasumi. He’d come to the village fairly recently.

Just like Ren, Itsuki had been summoned from a different version of Japan than me. He’d originally had a really strong sense of justice. But like Ren, he’d been consumed by a cursed weapon and his personality ended up being corrupted as a result. He had lost practically all sense of identity, not to mention his sense of justice.

We'd found him fighting in the coliseums of Zeltoble — the country of merchants and mercenaries —under the absolutely cringeworthy alias Perfect Hidden Justice. While there, Witch deceived him, stole all of his money, and left him with a massive pile of debt. I'd agreed to shoulder his debts for the time being, but I certainly had no plan of just writing them off.

Itsuki's sense of justice had once saved Rishia and she subsequently joined his party because of it. But Itsuki eventually tossed her aside in his selfishness. After that, she trained under my guidance for a while before facing Itsuki in battle. By that time, she'd grown enough that she was able to defeat him and show him the meaning of true justice.

Rishia had come from a ruined noble family, apparently. But she was in charge of guiding Itsuki along the path of reform now. She carried a mysterious, semitransparent weapon, and she had become remarkably powerful.

"Oh, I didn't realize you were here. So yeah, there are several issues at hand here," I said.

"What do you mean, Naofumi? Sadeena tried to explain earlier, but it'd be nice if you could put it into terms we could understand," Ren replied.

It all started when L'Arc dressed Raphtalia in a miko outfit. L'Arc was a vassal weapon holder, which was his world's equivalent of this world's seven star hero. Anyway, the miko outfit looked so good on Raphtalia that I began plotting ways to have her continue wearing one even after we returned to this world. So I had a miko outfit made for her here. But when I had her try it on, it triggered a whole mess of problems.

Raphtalia had apparently been born into the royal bloodline of a demi-human country named Q'ten Lo, and the official dress reserved for the country's empress closely resembled the miko outfit. Raphtalia's parents had no interest in inheriting the throne, so they left the country. But the country's spies had been keeping tabs on Raphtalia all along.

I didn't know about any of that when I had her try on the miko outfit. But in their eyes, Raphtalia was wearing the royal garb and associating with the Shield Hero, who was basically the god of the demi-humans. In other words, they took it as a claim to the country's throne and decided to eliminate her as a result.

On top of that, the spies who were keeping tabs on Raphtalia caused a huge disturbance in my territory. And now assassins were going to just keep coming after her, it seemed. That wasn't the kind of thing I needed to deal with.

The fact that they had been observing Raphtalia the whole time meant they'd been watching when the village was attacked by the monsters from the wave, when Raphtalia was captured by slave hunters, when she was tortured as a slave, and when she was going through all of the hardships she'd suffered after becoming my slave. And I was certain they were powerful enough to have saved her from pretty much anything. But ultimately, they went so far as to try and kill her when they didn't like the way things were going.

I didn't care what I had to do—I was going to make them pay! That pretty much summed up my thoughts on the issue, so I decided to invade the country known as Q'ten Lo. I'd asked Sadeena where the country was, but she still hadn't answered me.

"Sadeena, you still haven't given me any more than a general overview, either. We have to stop by Siltvelt, right? Can you explain?" I asked.

"Alright, boys and girls. I'll tell you everything you need to know," she replied.

Sadeena was kind of like a big sister to all of the village slaves, including Raphtalia. She was a demi-human, but she also had a killer whale therianthrope form that she could use. She was oddly powerful for not being a hero.

Looks-wise, she was pretty much on par with Raphtalia. She also made no attempt to hide her unwelcome sexual advances on me. She'd apparently publicly declared that she would marry the man who could outdrink her, and since I couldn't get drunk, she was always hitting on me. She was a real pain in my ass. I'd heard she was born in the same country as Raphtalia's parents and accompanied them here as something like a bodyguard.

"I want to be sure I have this right. We can't get to Q'ten Lo without going through Siltvelt, right?" I asked.

The country we were headed to — Q'ten Lo — was even further to the east than Siltvelt. One had to cross the sea to get there, and the country had sealed itself off from the rest of the world too.

“Yes, it’s even further east than Siltvelt. It’s also extremely hard to get into,” Sadeena replied.

“Hard in what way?” I asked.

Sadeena looked like she was reminiscing about the past.

“Well, to start, it’s in the middle of the ocean, so you have to travel by boat. There are several small countries along the way that we can ignore. Q’ten Lo lies beyond all of those. The ocean currents are really chaotic, which makes it practically impossible to get there in the first place,” she explained.

“Oh yeah?”

“And there’s an even bigger problem. There’s a water dragon in the ocean who keeps a protective barrier in place around the country and guards it carefully. Not even I can break through that barrier,” she continued.

“Can’t we just defeat the dragon?” I asked.

If it was being guarded by a monster, then surely we could just defeat the monster.

“The water dragon remains hidden somewhere in the depths of the ocean below Q’ten Lo. If there’s a way to defeat him, I’d like to know too,” she said.

Hmm . . . I guess it was like asking how to attack me directly when I had Shooting Star Shield activated. Protection was my specialty, so I could understand just how difficult that would be. It would be easy if we could break through using brute force, but it didn’t sound like that was likely.

“I guess that means he’s maintaining the country’s barrier from the inside, and while hiding at the bottom of the ocean on top of that,” I said.

Sadeena nodded. That reminded me. The attackers had called her the water dragon’s former miko priestess or something like that. I wondered if that was why she knew so much.

“Thanks to that barrier, invading from the air is impossible too. As far as I know, the only way into the country is on a trading ship from Siltvelt. I found that out while still living there,” she added.

Strange. Q’ten Lo was starting to remind me of Japan from a long time ago. It

had isolated itself with extremely limited access to the outside world. I guess that made Siltvelt the equivalent of Portugal or maybe the Netherlands.

“Then what about using the port to smuggle ourselves in?” I asked.

“They’ll be on high alert after what happened with little Raphtalia. Getting in without some serious support from Siltvelt is probably going to be difficult,” Sadeena replied.

I let out a deep sigh. I guess this was going to be a tough one. Under the circumstances, getting into the country secretly would be pretty much impossible. So basically, Sadeena was saying we would have to pry the borders open by force. She did say I should be prepared to crush a country for Raphtalia’s sake, after all. I guess there was no other option. We’d just have to go to Siltvelt and request their help.

“Got it. We’ll go to Siltvelt and have them prepare a boat for us, then,” I said.

I had no idea how much time we would lose going to Siltvelt, but we had no choice. Ren and Itsuki didn’t seem to understand the full scope of what going there meant, but I could see a lightbulb turn on in Rishia’s head.

“So that’s settled. Ren and Itsuki, taking you two to Siltvelt would most likely just complicate matters. In fact, it would probably be downright dangerous,” I said.

Things were complicated between Siltvelt and Melromarc, which is where we were currently based. The two countries had been on bad terms for ages now. That had a lot to do with me getting framed and put through all kinds of hell here.

The four holy heroes were four people with holy weapons who were summoned to this world as its saviors. Because of that, the people of the world worshipped the heroes. But the official religion of Melromarc had originally been the Church of the Three Heroes, which worshipped all of the holy heroes except for the Shield Hero. According to the Church of Three Heroes, the Shield Hero was a demon. But it had been a rotten religion, and when the members showed their true colors and started running rampant, we ultimately ousted them.

It was the opposite in Siltvelt. The official religion there worshipped the Shield Hero. It wouldn't be unheard of to have related issues arise there. Operating within Melromarc had been easy for the other three heroes, so it was highly likely that the reverse would be true in Siltvelt. Of course, I wanted to think they'd be fine if they were with me. But under the current circumstances, even I was bound to get wrapped up in a mess or two while there. Ren and Itsuki coming would probably just needlessly complicate matters.

"Then what should we do?" Ren asked.

"They don't worship any heroes in Q'ten Lo, do they?" I asked Sadeena.

"I want to say no. My work limited my exposure to things like that, so I can't say for certain," she replied.

She sure was useless. I guess it wasn't her fault, though.

"Anyway, we'll use my portal to return to the village at regular intervals, so you guys just be ready to join the fight at any time. If you have any spare time, head to the Cal Mira islands and focus on getting rid of those curses," I said.

"Got it. If you have any trouble, just call for us any time," Ren replied.

"Understood," said Itsuki.

"Fehhh . . . We sure got wrapped up in a big mess," Rishia muttered.

Yeah, she was right about that.

"Alright, so that means we need to depart for Siltvelt. I wonder where Filo is," I said.

Filo had been the second companion to join me after I was summoned to this world. She was a young girl that was actually a kind of monster called a filolial. Filolials were bird-type monsters that loved pulling carriages more than anything else. When raised by a hero, they could gain a filolial queen form that allowed them to transform into a human.

In her filolial form, Filo was a white bird with pink highlights on her feathers. When she turned into a human, she was a young girl with blonde hair and blue eyes. She had a childlike innocence. She was kind of like a celebrity in the eyes of the villagers. There was an incident not long ago that resulted in her level

dropping drastically, so she had gone out to level up with her close friend Melty —princess of Melromarc—and my precious familiar, Raph-chan.

I wondered if she would come back if I used the monster seal to order her to do so.

“Who knows where they are now,” Raphtalia replied.

“The monster seal does tell me her general direction. She’d probably come back if I gave her the order.”

It would probably take a while for her to get back, even if I did give the order, though. I was in a bad mood at the moment. Rather than dealing with that headache, I had a feeling it’d be better to just come up with another plan. I gave up on summoning Filo back. She’d finally gotten the chance to go level up, so interfering with that would’ve made me feel bad too.

And then a little red dragon raised his hand.

“Kwa!”

The dragon’s name was Gaelion, and he was the culprit responsible for the recent incident I just mentioned.

Not too long ago, I’d been gifted a bunch of supplies as a show of support — most likely from Siltvelt — and there’d been a dragon egg mixed in among them. I wanted to experiment with the dragon at the village, so I decided to raise it with the help of Rat, an alchemist who had come from this world’s largest country, Faubrey.

Well, I guess it was the villagers that had done the actual raising. There was a girl named Wyndia who I’d tried to nickname “valley girl,” but she’d rejected the idea. She was the one who had taken responsibility for raising the dragon.

Anyway, Gaelion quickly grew to be a good-sized dragon, but then the problems started. He wanted me to play with him, so he started knocking on my door and running off. After scolding him for his mischief, I started making an effort to spend more time playing with him.

But while we were spending time together, the little rascal got the bright idea of eating the dragon core I’d previously used in my armor. The core had been

made by combining the dragon zombie core—which we got after fighting the corpse of a dragon Ren had slain—with a demon dragon core from the other world we went to. Gaelion began acting violently as soon as he swallowed the core, ultimately losing control and running away. He fled to the mountain where the dragon zombie had lived before being slain. So we headed that way to try to save our Gaelion.

That was all well and good, but then it turned out that the demon dragon core we'd gotten in the other world had seized control of Gaelion. The Demon Dragon that Kizuna — one of the four holy heroes from that other world — defeated had re-manifested itself using Gaelion's body. Filo had eaten part of the dragon zombie core too, and that allowed the dragon to steal her experience points. Even worse, she ended up being trapped in the dragon's body.

Gaelion managed to regain control while we were fighting the Demon Dragon. He escaped from the dragon's restraints along with Filo, which weakened the Demon Dragon and allowed us to defeat it. Now the original Gaelion — the dragon who raised Wyndia as his own child and who Ren once defeated — coexists with our baby Gaelion inside of his body. Both of their minds reside in the single body now, in other words.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Umm, Gaelion says he'll let you ride him," Wyndia replied.

She interpreted for Gaelion, who she was now raising. Wyndia was a demi-human girl with dog-like ears. She had been raised by a dragon and was fond of monsters, so she helped look after the monsters in the village.

"Are you going with them, Wyndia?!" Ren asked.

He ran over to Wyndia with a worried look on his face.

"If Gaelion is going, then of course I am," she replied.

"If . . . if you go . . ." he stammered.

Wyndia gave Ren a swift kick to the shin. Of course, with Ren's stat boosts it didn't seem to have much of an effect.

“Stop trying to act like my guardian!” she shouted.

Ultimately, Ren had killed Wyndia’s father. He was trying to own up to that fact, but it just ended up annoying Wyndia. Regardless, he hadn’t given up and was still searching for a way to make amends.

“Gyao! Gyao!”

Gaelion didn’t like Ren, most likely because of the adult Gaelion inside of him. There was no way he would let Ren ride him. In other words, Gaelion wasn’t going to let Ren come even if he wanted to.

“So? What are you going to do, Shield Hero?” Wyndia asked.

I thought for a moment.

“I guess it’s our only choice without Filo around, although I’m pretty sure we do have another filolial,” I said.

I looked over toward the barn —or monster stable I should have said, I guess. I could see a light-purple filolial looking over at us with a dejected look on its face. That was Filo Underling #1. Generally speaking, filolials couldn’t fly. From a transportation standpoint, that put Gaelion on top at the moment. Actually, competing with Gaelion, who could fly, might have been the whole reason Filo had gone out to level.

“I ———”

Another hand went up. This time it was a certain stuffed doll.

“My master has something to say,” the doll said.

“What is it?” I asked.

I looked over at S’yne, who was the stuffed familiar’s master.

S’yne wasn’t from this world or even Kizuna’s world. She was a vassal weapon holder from another world that had apparently been destroyed by the waves. Our first encounter had been as opponents in a fight in Zeltoble’s underground coliseum tournament. She was going by the ring name Murder Pierrot at the time. A lot happened after that, and now she was living here in my territory.

I wasn’t really sure what her true objective was, but her own enemies had

invaded this world and were trying to kill the four holy heroes here. She seemed to want to defeat those enemies and protect the holy heroes.

Since the world she'd originally lived in had been destroyed, the translation function of her vassal weapon was damaged. Her speech was always cutting out, so I could never understand what she was saying. By using a stuffed doll as a familiar and having the doll interpret for her, she'd finally found a way to communicate her thoughts to us.

Back when we were trying to take Ren into protective custody, some new enemies showed up. They had a ridiculous ability that allowed them to resurrect even if we somehow managed to kill them. S'yne helped us finally defeat those enemies once and for all. It turned out she'd been searching for a way to do that for a long time.

"My master says that she might be able to transport you to a point along the way. She would like to see a map."

"Umm, sure."

I showed S'yne my world map.

"Let's see. She says she placed a teleportation marking pin on some cargo on a Zeltoble trading ship, so she should be able to transport you part of the way."

"Oh yeah? That would help."

S'yne had a skill that allowed her to teleport to the location of anything she attached one of her marking pins to. She could also keep tabs on the pin's immediate surroundings. She'd rushed to my aid before when I was in trouble, thanks to a pin she'd stuck on my armor.

All things considered, even with Filo's speed, getting to Siltvelt would take time. The teleportation skills that Ren, Itsuki, and I could use required us to go to a place and save the location before we could teleport back there. Raphtalia had the katana vassal weapon from that other world, but it only had a portal skill that teleported to dragon hourglasses. Those were facilities that notified the people of coming waves. The hourglasses were also used to perform class-up ceremonies, which allowed people and monsters to surpass the initial level cap. On top of that, Raphtalia couldn't use her teleport unless she'd already

been to a dragon hourglass.

But all S'yne had to do was stick one of her marking pins on something and she would be able to teleport to that thing's location, even if the thing moved. It sure was a convenient skill.

"Alright, so we'll have S'yne teleport us. In that case, Raphtalia, Sadeena, Gaelion, and Wyndia should do fine," I said.

"Ahem!"

Oh, dammit. Now *she* was raising her hand. What a headache. Thoroughly annoyed, I turned my gaze to the girl with her hand held high in the air — Atla.

"Yes, Atla?"

She was a hakuko, which was a race of demi-humans considered to be one of the most powerful among them. Their level caps were higher too. She was a slave that had initially been part of a package deal when I purchased her older brother, Fohl, in Zeltoble. Lately I was starting to think she might actually be stronger than her brother.

I mean, when I first saw her she was a sickly little girl that looked like she might die at any moment. She had an incurable disease that had weakened her and rendered her unable to even walk. But when I gave her some medicine, she began to recover rapidly. And now she'd turned into a slave who was too energetic for her own good.

"I would like to accompany you," she said.

"What are you thinking, Atla?!" Fohl shouted.

That was the big brother whose reputation was on the decline. Fohl had been leveling up recently, and that had been accompanied by a growth spurt. He was getting rather tall.

"Brother, as Mr. Naofumi's retainers, we must be prepared to serve by his side at all times. That should go without saying," she replied.

"But!"

"Brother, are you not aware of our performance, or lack thereof, recently?"

“Ugh . . .”

Actually, it was undeniable that Atla was a prodigy. Ren, Itsuki, and I were all eagerly trying to learn a martial art called the Hengen Muso style, but Atla understood its very essence without even studying. It was thanks to her that we were able to defeat the Demon Dragon recently. Hidden inside of that little body was the potential to rival even an awakened Rishia.

In fact, Atla’s growth had probably been the most remarkable of all the village slaves. Sadeena had just been crazy strong from the start. But Atla just had to watch Rishia fight —well, actually Atla couldn’t see. But just by sensing Rishia’s movements, she was able to reproduce them. Her level still wasn’t very reassuring, but I had no complaints about her ability to fight.

On the contrary, it felt like Fohl was the one who hadn’t really done anything of note.

“I could take you two with us, but you’re hakuko, right?” I said.

The hakuko race of demi-humans was basically royalty in Siltvelt. Long, long ago, Siltvelt had been ruled by a hakuko, but that hakuko started a war, which Siltvelt lost. The hakuko were blamed for that defeat and the race fell into disrepute.

“Brother, we should have some influence in Siltvelt, right? This is our chance to be useful as retainers. That’s our duty. Come, Brother, it’s time to make good use of your connections.”

Atla latched on to Fohl’s arm and entreated him in a manner that almost looked as if she were trying to seduce him. To put it bluntly, Atla was always prepared to do whatever it took to win. When her brother started protesting, she had no qualms about shutting him up with an unexpected sharp jab. She’d been born into a noble warrior family, supposedly, but I would have thought it was a clan of barbarians.

“Ugh . . . It’s not that I don’t have connections, but that was all a long time ago. I don’t know if they’ll be of any help,” he replied.

“Hmm . . .”

So even if their family had fallen into ruin, he might still have some

connections we could use.

“S’yne, how far can you take us?” I asked.

“The marking pin that she attached to the cargo seems to be near this port here,” the stuffed doll familiar replied, pointing at the map.

The familiar had been modeled after Keel’s therianthrope form. Keel was a slave at the village who could use a therianthrope form that resembled a Siberian husky. I’d skip the details for now.

The familiar had pointed at a port town near Shieldfreeden. I guess we’d ride Gaelion from there. Or was there a reason to stop by Shieldfreeden too? That would probably just cause even more trouble.

“Sadeena,” I said.

“Yes?”

“What about Shieldfreeden?”

“Shieldfreeden has a relatively short history. They don’t trade with Q’ten Lo. There’s no reason for us to go there. Well, they do have boats that go to Siltvelt, but that’s all I can think of.”

A carriage or boat that went directly to Siltvelt from the port town would make things easier.

“Alright, you two can come. But I’ll be bringing you back to the village at night with my portal,” I told Atla.

“Of course,” she replied.

“Alright, then let’s head out. You’re up, S’yne.”

S’yne nodded. She invited us all to a party and then gripped her weapon and began whispering something. And then *whish!* We were teleported away pretty much like when I used my portal.

Chapter One: Advance Payment

“This is . . .”

I looked at our surroundings. We seemed to be in a port storehouse. There was a large wooden crate nearby. The marking pin must have been attached to the crate.

“Yeah, that’s definitely a convenient skill. If we had to, we could just attach a pin to Gaelion and send him ahead. That might even be more — ”

I paused mid-sentence when I noticed S’yne peering at her weapon strangely.

“That ——— pretty ——— ”

“She says that was pretty dangerous,” the Keel-like stuffed doll replied.

“What was?” I asked.

“My master says that using her weapon in its weakened state to transport multiple people at once is dangerous. If something went wrong and the teleport failed, it’s hard to say what would happen.”

S’yne was using a vassal weapon that belonged to a world that had been destroyed. Its translation functionality was already failing. The weapon’s other powers were also slowly dwindling away, bit by bit.

“So we just barely made it and another attempt would be dangerous, in other words,” I said.

“Correct. Your idea could work, but it would be a gamble. Would you still like to try?” the doll asked.

“And I’m guessing it would still be dangerous even with less people,” I replied.

S’yne nodded.

“So much for that. Us heroes will be on portal duty for the rest of the trip then,” I said.

Some kind of teleport mishap was not something I could risk at the moment. I’d just be happy with the fact that we’d managed to take this much of a

shortcut.

S’yne bowed her head apologetically. I ruffled her hair a bit as a sign that she shouldn’t worry about it. She jerked her head back up quickly and seemed to be blushing slightly.

“Did that bother you?” I asked her.

She shook her head and then smiled really big. I guess that meant she didn’t mind me ruffling her hair, but why was she smiling? I thought she was supposed to be the cool, unaffected type. That smile was out of character. Or was this one of those things where the girl falls in love with the hero when he rubs her on the head? Surely not.

“My master says that she will come running should anything happen, regardless.”

“Thanks. But last time she was asleep and didn’t even notice. Let’s try to avoid that.”

“She says it won’t happen again.”

Just as I finished settling things with S’yne, Atla’s ears began twitching and her tail flicked back and forth a couple times.

“Hm? I sense the arrival of a new enemy,” she said.

“Huh? Where?” I asked.

We were in a port storehouse, after all. It was possible a security guard had mistaken us for thieves or something. I wondered if we should try running. I had a feeling that would be difficult with our numbers.

“Nowhere. It’s just a hunch,” she replied.

“Don’t say misleading things like that!” I snapped.

“You’re being overly cautious, Atla,” said Raphtalia.

“Whatever. Let’s go,” I said.

We all climbed on Gaelion’s back and thus began our journey.

Judging by our progress, riding Gaelion was quicker than traveling by boat or carriage. I guess that was only natural, considering we were flying.

“Kwa . . .”

“Gaelion says we’re heavy. He says we’ll need to travel with less people if we want him to fly for extended periods of time,” said Wyndia.

She was complaining on Gaelion’s behalf. I turned around and counted how many people were riding him. There was me, Raphtalia, Sadeena, Wyndia, S’yne, Atla, and Fohl. Yeah, that did seem like too many people to be riding him, to be honest. Gaelion could transform into a rather large dragon, so we’d all climbed on like it was only natural. But I could definitely see how seven people might be a bit heavy, especially if we wanted to prioritize traveling fast.

“Kwaaaaa . . .”

It was clearly no small effort for Gaelion to continue flying. I could sense him concentrating his magic power into his wings as he flapped them. That reminded me. Rat mentioned that it was difficult for dragons to sustain flight over long periods of time. I looked back at the others again.

“Maybe it should just be me and Wyndia while traveling. I’m already going to be bringing the others to us using my portal, after all,” I said.

“That might be a good idea. All of this swaying is starting to make me sick,” Raphtalia replied.

She didn’t look so good. Now that I thought about it, even riding in Filo’s carriage had made her sick in the beginning. Maybe motion sickness was a weakness of hers.

Then Fohl made a retching sound. Him too? I’d never experienced motion sickness myself, so I couldn’t really claim to understand. It sure didn’t seem fun, though.

“Brother, you and Raphtalia lack discipline,” said Atla.

She seemed completely unfazed. If anyone, it should have been her that got sick easily. Her recovery really had been a little bit *too* successful.

“Wha ——— ?”

S’yne didn’t seem to be particularly bothered.

“Oh my!” Sadeena squealed playfully.

“Sadeena, you better not go transforming into your therianthrope form here,” I said.

If she changed into her big, fat killer whale therianthrope form while we were flying, Gaelion was likely to run out of strength and fall out of the sky.

“Kw-kwa . . .”

“He says he needs to rest,” said Wyndia.

“I guess we’ll just have to take a break,” I replied.

I wasn’t too excited about taking a break since we were in a hurry, but I could understand. We touched down in a meadow to let Gaelion rest.

“It’s not often that you get to experience traveling by flight. This is fun,” Sadeena said.

“It’s going to take more than fun to solve our problems,” I retorted.

After a few moments, a faint rumbling sound came from Gaelion’s direction.

“Kwaaaa . . .”

“Gaelion says he’s hungry.”

“He just ate!” I shouted.

I’d fed him plenty just before we left. What did she mean he was hungry already?!

“I’m sure he used up a lot of magic power flying with seven people on his back. It only makes sense that he would be exhausted and get hungry, don’t you think?” Sadeena suggested.

“I guess that does make sense,” I said.

So by flying, we could ignore troublesome terrain, but fuel efficiency would drop. Yeah, it would probably be best to have Raphtalia and a few of the others stay back at home while we were on the move, although it’s not like there weren’t monsters up in the sky. In fact, Sadeena had already dropped several of them out of the air with her lightning magic.

“Should we return to the village and feed him? Or should we just go kill some random monsters and feed him here?” I asked.

Gaelion was a dragon, right? If I didn't need to cook the food, then it would probably be quickest to just kill some monsters in the area and he could eat those. If I got lucky, I might even end up getting some new shield materials.

"You want to hunt?" asked Raphtalia.

"Sure, why not?" I replied.

"Then hunting time it is!" Atla shouted. "Do your best, Brother! Let's give Mr. Naofumi a reason to praise us!"

"A-Atla! Wait! Ugh!" Fohl moaned.

Atla just up and ran off all of a sudden, and Fohl went chasing after her.

"I guess we might as well look for monsters while we're waiting on Gaelion's magic power to regenerate," said Raphtalia.

"Sounds like a plan. Should I go look too?" Sadeena asked.

"I guess it's settled then, although we could use magic water to forcefully regenerate it," I said.

I had been making life force water for our training. It restored magic power too, but we needed a lot of it for our training, so I was always worried about my stock. It required more materials to make than one might imagine, and it sold for a pretty good price too. Since I'd taken on Itsuki's debts, I wanted to avoid being wasteful. It had only been several hours since starting our journey, after all. It probably wouldn't be good to push too hard right from the start.

"Alright, Gaelion and Wyndia, you two rest and save up energy for the remainder of our flight," I said.

"Wh ——— "

"You're coming too, S'yne. Other than that, we need to think about the weight. From an offensive perspective, I'd like to take Sadeena, but . . ." I trailed off.

"Oh? But?" Sadeena asked.

Hypothetically speaking, if Sadeena lost it and attacked me, I wasn't sure if I'd be able to restrain her with just Gaelion and Wyndia. Wait, why was I worrying

about Sadeena anyway?

“Sadeena, surely you wouldn’t attack Mr. Naofumi at a time like this, right?” asked Raphtalia.

“Of course not!” Sadeena replied playfully while shaking her head.

Yeah, I couldn’t believe a word she said. But messing around could’ve gotten us killed, so I’d like to think even Sadeena wouldn’t do anything like that. To be honest, this flying around thing was more troublesome than I’d expected. We had to deal with people getting sick. Also, flying for long stretches was a problem too.

Hmm . . . Maybe it would be better to bring Filo or her underling and travel by carriage, after all. That’s how we’d gotten around in Zeltoble. I guess getting around was still a headache even with a portal skill. I mulled over our options as we headed out to hunt monsters.

“Hmm . . . The monsters around here are different than the ones in Melromarc,” I commented.

“Yeah, they are,” Raphtalia replied.

We’d just killed a monster that resembled a hedgehog. It had a ridiculously long name: zenith blue needle rat. We’d also seen some indigo lizards and a bunch of other monsters that I’d never seen in Melromarc.

Of course, I’d implemented numerous power-up methods, so none of the monsters we ran into presented much of a challenge. Our current party was kind of like an all-star lineup of my best fighters. It would have been worrisome if we had been struggling. And we were still in the fields, so it wasn’t like this was an area where powerful monsters would show up.

Regardless, even weak monsters could unlock new shields with stat boosts. It would be foolish to ignore that. All of the tiny +1 bonuses added up over time. I had a feeling the time was coming when I would need to just travel around the world gathering new monster materials to raise my stats. But for now, I needed to gather materials whenever I had the chance. I absorbed the monster parts into my shield.

“I should have Ren and Itsuki travel around the world, defeating monsters and

gathering materials like this too," I said.

Heroes couldn't share experience points, but materials were another story. That was another way we could cooperate to help each other.

"Don't you think we should probably get this Q'ten Lo business taken care of first?" Sadeena asked.

"I th ——— "

S'yne said something and nodded.

"I guess so. But we need to make sure to do little stuff like that too, or who knows when we'll end up regretting it. Time is limited, so we can't afford to waste what little we have," I said.

S'yne was clapping now. Whose side was she on anyway?

"Being a hero sure is tough," Sadeena said.

"Yes, those have been my thoughts exactly, ever since I started to use the katana vassal weapon. Just like Glass said, 'With great power comes great responsibility,'" Raphtalia replied.

That did sound like something Glass would say. I hated to break it to her, but great power was for making sure you got your way. But if I said something like that, it'd just make Raphtalia angry, so I kept my mouth shut.

"In any case, should we go ahead and take what we've gathered back to Gaelion and then some of us can head back home?" she asked.

"I guess so. And then I think I'll have him take us a bit further today. It's not like he can't fight while in the air. I'll just take Wyndia and continue on with the three of us," I said.

"Understood . . ." Raphtalia replied with a hint of regret in her voice.

"I'd like to stick around and make sure you're safe since the enemy is after you, but . . ." I added.

"You leave little Raphtalia to me, little Naofumi," said Sadeena.

She tapped her hand against her chest in a show of confidence. I probably could trust her to keep Raphtalia safe too. Plus, Ren and Itsuki were still back at

the village. Raphtalia would probably be a lot safer there than alone with me.

With that in mind, we took the monsters back and fed Gaelion before continuing on with fewer people to make flying easier on him.

It had been around two days since resuming our journey, and there hadn't been any attacks on the village so far. We'd made it about two-thirds of the way to Siltvelt. At our current pace, we'd probably end up in Siltvelt by tomorrow. We'd basically managed to squeeze a two-week trip into four days. That was fantastic. Gaelion's flight speed and our portal skills made for a pretty great combination. Of course, Siltvelt wasn't our final destination, so it wasn't like our journey had come to an end.

"Kwa! Kwaaa!"

Gaelion had been in a really good mood lately. According to Wyndia, it was because I was giving him more attention.

"Alright, I guess that's far enough for today. Let's go ahead and head back to the vil — "

Just then, I noticed something stirring up a cloud of dust as it barreled toward us from the rear. What now?

"Kwaaaaa!"

Gaelion got into a defensive stance. I shifted my gaze toward the source of the cloud of dust. I was considering using my portal to flee, depending on how things turned out, but . . .

"Aha! I knew that was you, Masteeerrr! Heeeyyy!"

Filo waved to me as she came running up in her filolial queen form.

"Rafuuu!"

Raph-chan was still riding around on Filo's head, like usual. Seeing her made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. That's what I was thinking when all of a sudden —

"*As the source of your power, I command you! Let the way of the universe be revealed once more! Wash away the abomination that stands before me!*"

“Drifa Aqua Blast!”

A magical attack came flying toward me from just behind Filo. Almost completely by instinct, I threw my shield up and batted the attack right back at the caster.

“Whoa!”

The person who had cast the spell dodged their own spell by a hair’s breadth. I’d figured out who the caster was the moment I heard her voice.

“What are you thinking?!” she screamed.

“That’s my line, Melty,” I replied.

“Do you really think that spell was cast for no reason?!” Melty continued.

“Pretty much. Especially with you being the caster,” I said.

“What does that mean?!” she shouted.

Melty glared at me and went on making an annoying fuss. She was the second princess of Melromarc, and she had gone out to level up with Filo. Anyway, my reaction had been spur-of-the-moment, but I’d actually managed to deflect back a magical attack with my shield. Only being able to block got depressing, so maybe that was something I should practice until I could use it at will.



“What are you three doing here?” I asked.

“Hm?” Filo responded, not quite seeming to understand the question.

Had they gone out leveling and ended up running all this way? They sure had come a long way.

“Umm, aaaactually, we were out leveling somewhere else. Buuut then Fitoria showed up! And then a bunch of stuff happened, and she asked us to go find yoooou,” Filo explained.

“What is ‘a bunch of stuff’?” I asked.

I had a feeling I was about to get tangled up in something really bothersome. I guess I’d hear her out and just refuse depending on what it was.

“Rafu!”

“And theeenn, Raph-chan said we would find you if we came this waaay,” Filo continued.

“Ah, I see. I guess Raph-chan can tell what I’m up to even from far away,” I said.

“Rafuuu!” Raph-chan squeaked and nodded.

So she had guided them to me, it seemed.

“Maaaster, Fitoria said she has a favor to ask of yooou,” Filo went on.

“That can wait. Right now, I have some really annoying business that I have to take care of before anything else,” I replied.

“B-but, Naofumi, Fitoria already did a bunch of stuff as advance payment for your help,” Melty said.

“Well, I’m busy right now so it can wait. And anyway, who the hell pays in advance without asking?! I never accepted any advance payment. Whatever it is, you take care of it, Melty,” I said.

Melty looked really fed up now.

“So what is it? I guess I can at least hear the request out,” I continued.

“I don’t know why you always have to act like you’re so superior, Naofumi, but whatever. It all started shortly after Filo, Raph-chan, and I headed out to level up,” Melty began.

She continued on, explaining everything that had happened up until they had found us.

Soon after Melty and Filo had left to go leveling — around the time of the attack on the village — Melty hit the level 40 cap, so they decided to head back. That night, Fitoria asked Filo to meet up. It had been a while since Melty had seen Fitoria too, so she was really excited.

“Long time no see,” said Fitoria.

“Yes, indeed! Thank you for all of your help stopping the Spirit Tortoise in Melromarc,” Melty replied.

“Don’t mention it. Taking care of that was partially my responsibility from the get-go.”

Melty was overjoyed by Fitoria’s kind attitude and the presence of all the surrounding filolials.

“. . .”

“Rafu!”

Raph-chan was still sitting on Filo’s head. For some reason, Fitoria glared at her for several moments.

“Hmph . . .”

“Rafu, rafu!”

Raph-chan was squeaking as if she were lecturing Fitoria and it left an impression on Melty. So she asked Filo what Raph-chan was saying later, and apparently it was something like:

“*It’s only proper to make your request directly instead of trying to get what you want through manipulation that causes others trouble. I’ll make good use of the power you were using to try to manipulate the heroes, so don’t expect me to return it.*”

Huh? Did that mean Fitoria had been using Filo to try to manipulate me?

Who knows whether it was actually because Raph-chan had lectured her or not, but Fitoria let out a deep sigh and began talking.

“Fine. The fact that my methods didn’t seem reasonable is a failure on my part, anyway. In that case, allow me to be more direct this time: I’ve come to request your help,” Fitoria stated.

“Umm, what can we do for you?” Melty asked.

Filo responded with a quizzical “hm?” and Fitoria went on to explain the details of her request to Filo, Melty, and Raph-chan.

“And then you came to find me?” I asked.

“Yeah. Fitoria wants you to help,” Melty replied.

“I see. Thanks for the details. But that will have to wait,” I said.

“Even after hearing the explanation, that’s all you have to say?” Melty asked.

“What else would I say? Things need to be handled in order of priority. Tell Fitoria not to come to me with annoying problems that she can’t solve on her own,” I replied.

I was guessing Fitoria had only come to me because she couldn’t solve the problem on her own, and I didn’t feel like obliging a demand like that. Not to mention, Fitoria was ridiculously strong. I couldn’t imagine myself being able to handle a problem that was too much for her.

“And besides, I’m right in the middle of working on improving relations between the four holy heroes, just like Fitoria asked me to do,” I continued.

Ren and Itsuki still had problems, but we’d resolved our differences. And as for Motoyasu, all said and done, I figured he’d be fine left alone. In fact, I preferred not having him around to deal with.

“I’ll take care of it for her once I’m done dealing with my own annoying problem. Until then, she’ll just have to wait,” I said.

“Hm? Okay. She wants to know how long that will take,” said Filo.

She must have received a communication from Fitoria.

“Who knows? I hope to get it over with as quickly as possible, but I have no idea,” I told her.

“She says that’s not helpful,” Filo replied.

“Hell if I care. Tell her to help herself, then,” I said.

“Umm, Naofumi, at least let us finish explaining first,” said Melty.

“I have no desire to hear what the actual request is. I’m sure finding out would just get me tangled up in a bunch of trouble,” I replied.

Melty let out a deep sigh.

“So what’s this advance payment you mentioned? Money?” I asked.

“All you think about is profit, Naofumi. No, it’s not money. Fitoria bestowed several helpful blessings on me and Filo,” Melty replied.

“Blessings?” I asked with a confused look on my face.

Filo and Melty both nodded.

“You can see Filo’s stats, right? Why don’t you take a look?” Melty said.

Just like she suggested, I checked Filo’s stats. I was at a loss for words. They had all more than doubled. Her stats were now just slightly below what they’d been when we faced the Spirit Tortoise.

“I’m not really sure, but she did something that raised our overall attributes in exchange for lowering our levels. She also took care of my class-up,” Melty explained.

“What do you think, Masteeerrr? There’s no way I’ll let Gaelion get the best of me nooow!” Filo exclaimed.

“Gyao, gyao, gyao!”

Gaelion started growling at Filo threateningly. I sighed. But Filo sure had come back a lot stronger, even though her progress had really just been thanks to the advance payment from Fitoria. I had a feeling it still wouldn’t be nearly enough to offset the hassle of whatever it was she wanted me to do.

“I’m sorry, but if she thinks I’m going to quietly give in because of a huge advance payment like this, she’s a fool. I refuse! I refuse her advance payment!” I shouted.

“I find it hard to understand why you’re giving Fitoria a hard time,” Melty replied.

“Buuuut . . .” Filo moaned.

“Gyao, gyao, gyao!”

Gaelion was laughing at Filo in a ridiculing manner. With an advance payment this big, there was no doubt that the request was going to be a massive headache.

“Either way, it will have to wait! Filo, you understand that certain things take priority, right?” I asked.

“Yeah. Master decides what order things need to be done in,” Filo replied.

“Exactly. I knew you would understand. Good girl,” I said.

“Eh, heh, heh . . . I understand!”

“Seriously? You know what will happen if we refuse, right?” Melty asked Filo.

Melty was starting to panic, but that wasn’t my problem.

“I’ll accept the request, but it will have to wait. We have our own situation to deal with too. Fitoria will have to wait in line,” I said.

It only made sense to prioritize Raphtalia’s problem at the moment.

“If she absolutely can’t wait, then I can send Ren and Itsuki from the village to take care of it. Would that work?” I asked.

“Huh? Umm, she says it has to be you and me,” Filo replied.

I knew it. If she wasn’t willing to ask Ren and Itsuki, that probably meant there was some kind of personal circumstances involved. It might have been something that would benefit from a strong defense, but I was sure Ren and Itsuki would be able to handle pretty much anything with their attack power. Or it could have been something that didn’t require fighting skill at all.

“Then that settles it. I’ll take care of it later, so she’ll just have to wait until then. End of discussion!” I snapped.

I wasn’t going to let myself be taken advantage of by giving in to that selfish bird queen’s strong-arm tactics. I’d keep her waiting a while to make her pay for even trying such a thing.

“Or what? Are you going to say you’ll kill the four holy heroes over something

like this too, Fitoria?" I asked.

I almost felt like I could hear her stamping her foot on the ground bitterly somewhere far, far away. Deep down, she might not have been all that different from Filo, after all.

"It seems like she gave in," Filo said.

"That's good to hear," I replied.

"She saaaid, 'Don't come complaining to me when you end up regretting this later.'"

Regretting what? I wasn't going to fall for her lame attempt to provoke me. Besides, if I was going to regret something, I'd much rather regret it *after* I had finished cleaning up the mess with Raphtalia.

"Rafuuu!"

"You're such a good girl. Yes you are!" I told Raph-chan.

It had been a while since I'd seen her. I spent a few moments petting her and enjoying the texture of her fur.

"So what are you doing in a place like this, other than putting off helping Fitoria?" Melty asked.

She was watching me pet Raph-chan.

"Oh yeah, that. It turns out we have to go to a little country called Q'ten Lo," I replied.

I told Melty and Filo about the issues surrounding Raphtalia's birth. If I didn't address the problem, the development of the village would most likely suffer.

"We have no choice but to go, and we're right in the middle of our journey there now," I explained.

"Soooo in other words, it's all because Master made big sis wear that miko —"

"Filo, if you say one more word, I'm going to pet Gaelion," I threatened, cutting Filo off.

"Kwa!"

“Noooo!”

When that successfully managed to shut Filo up, Melty smacked her palm against her forehead in disbelief.

“Don’t use Gaelion to harass others!” Wyndia snapped.

She sure was annoying.

“Have you told Mother about this?” Melty asked.

“Umm, no,” I replied.

I’d completely forgotten about going to tell the queen. There were diplomatic aspects to the issue as well, so I guess I probably should have.

“Alright, I’ll send you back to the village, so you go tell the queen for me, Melty. This is a good stopping point for today, anyway. Let’s all go back together,” I said.

“Wait a minute! Don’t push your problems off on me!” Melty shouted.

She looked angry, but I just ignored her and teleported everyone back to the village.

Chapter Two: Sending Word of Our Visit

“We’re baaaack!”

“Hey, it’s Filo!”

The slaves all came to welcome Filo back when we arrived at the village.

“Huh? You came back with Bubba Shield?” one of the slaves asked.

“Yuuup, we ran into Master while we were out!” Filo replied.

“I see,” the slave replied.

“Welcome back, Mr. Naofumi. I see Filo is with you for some reason,” Raphtalia said.

“Yeah, she showed up right as we were about to head back, so I brought her with us,” I replied.

“I see . . .” she muttered dubiously.

“She came back a lot stronger than when she left too,” I said.

I told Raphtalia about everything that had just happened a few moments earlier.

“Now then, we should be arriving at Siltvelt sometime tomorrow. Somebody, fetch Sadeena for me. We need to think about what kind of problems we might end up facing there. Also, if we have Filo pull a carriage, we should all be able to enter the country together,” I continued.

“Kwa, kwa, kwa!”

Gaelion starting moaning. I’m sure he was complaining about the fact that I was going to take Filo.

“Gaelion, it’s great that you can fly a small group of people around. But when it comes to large groups of people, Filo has the advantage since she can pull a carriage. You’ll just have to accept that,” I told him.

“Kwa! Kwa!”

“Umm, he says he can pull a carriage too,” Wyndia said.

“Noooo! Pulling carriages is myyyy job!” Filo shouted.

“I’ve been riding on your back for the past two days, so don’t complain about sitting this one out,” I told Gaelion.

“Kwaaa . . .”

His puppy eyes weren’t going to change my mind. Learning self-restraint was important too. And besides, it wasn’t like I’d completely forgiven him for all of the trouble he’d caused recently, although I had to give him credit for doing his best to make up for it.

“Like it or not, it’s Filo’s turn now. I can’t take a carriage using my portal, so we’ll have to get a cheap one there. Is that okay with you, Filo?” I asked.

“Yup!”

“Once we get closer to Siltvelt, we’re likely to receive just the kind of welcome I’d prefer to avoid. If that happens, the more of us there are, the better,” I continued.

Riding Gaelion wasn’t a bad way of getting around, but I’d rather have more people with me if I was going to have to deal with a whole nation. I had to be careful with Siltvelt too. The country worshipped the Shield Hero. But I couldn’t be sure there wouldn’t be extremist elements not all that different from Melromarc. I couldn’t let my guard down.

“Oooh, ooooh, Maaasteeerrrr, can Mel-chan come toooo?” Filo begged.

“It’s probably best if Melty doesn’t come. You’d never guess she was a princess based on how obstinate she is, but she’s still royalty,” I replied.

“What did you say?!” Melty yelped.

“Do you want to go, then?” I asked her.

“. . .”

We were talking about a country that might even be dangerous for the queen to visit on diplomatic business. Anyway, we needed to check with the queen first. It’s not like we actually had business with the country itself.

“Okay, I really don’t want to, but I’ll go speak with Mother. Let’s go, Filo,” Melty said.

“Okay!” Filo replied.

Melty climbed on Filo’s back after she changed into her filolial form and then Filo sprinted off into the distance. There was no time to rest for those two. They sure did get along well, though.

“Mr. Naofumi!” Atla called out.

She came strolling up with Fohl in tow.

“Welcome back,” she said.

“Thanks. We’ll be arriving at Siltvelt around tomorrow or the day after. We’re all going together once Filo gets back,” I told her.

I looked over at Fohl.

“So Fohl, you said you know some people in Siltvelt, right?” I asked him.

“One of the people who used to look after us returned to Siltvelt. That’s all I know. We’ll have to find him,” he said.

“Can we trust this person?” I asked.

Fohl crossed his arms and stood there thinking for a moment.

“I don’t know, honestly. I was just a child at the time, and our parents never told even us about our grandparents in the first place,” he said.

“I see.”

The hakuko were a hot-blooded race that had gone to war with Trash. From what I’d heard, Trash had driven them into a corner and ultimately caused their fall from power. Realistically speaking, taking the siblings might have been dangerous. Even so . . .

“At the very least, I’d like to show Atla the house we grew up in,” Fohl said quietly.

“Is that in Siltvelt?” I asked.

“No.”

Fohl asked me to show him a map and then started to look for the location. He pointed to a spot near the area we had stopped at earlier that evening, just

outside of Siltvelt. Making a stop there wouldn't be out of the question.

"By the way, I've been wondering about something, Fohl," I said.

"What?" he asked.

"Can you speak the language of Siltvelt?"

Raphtalia, Ren, Itsuki, and I all had weapons that would translate for us. But the others wouldn't be able to communicate if they didn't know the language. Rishia was smart enough to learn a foreign language in a matter of days, but not everyone was as talented as her.

"Well, yeah . . . I learned to speak several languages during the time we were floating around, before we ended up in Zeltoble," he said.

"I did too. After all, conversation was about the only thing I could look forward to back when I was sick. I had Brother teach me several languages during that time," Atla added.

"Oh?"

That was a skill I didn't expect them to have. In other words, they could speak not only the language of Siltvelt, but other languages from the surrounding areas as well. That could come in handy when I decided to expand our trade routes.

"Little Fohl still makes a fair number of mistakes when speaking the official language of Melromarc," Sadeena said.

"Yeah," Fohl replied, nodding.

He glanced over at me with a curious look on his face.

"How's that work? I wonder what language . . . you hear . . . when I speak," he said.

He paused randomly several times as he spoke. He was probably switching languages each time.

"Brother, stop trying to make a fool of Mr. Naofumi by speaking in multiple languages," Atla snapped.

She gave him a quick jab in the back and he groaned in pain. She was as quick

as always.

“Ugh . . . I was just testing him, is all, Atla! I want to see what he heard — especially that last part,” Fohl said.

Apparently, “I wonder what language” had been the Siltvelt language, “you hear” had been the Melromarc language, and “when I speak” had been some different language with a really heavy accent. Atla said even she couldn’t understand the last part.

“It was ‘when I speak.’ Isn’t that right, Mr. Naofumi?” Raphtalia asked.

I nodded.

“Conversations get translated by heroes’ weapons. I’m guessing that goes for even the most minor languages too,” I said.

I guess the fact that the weapons couldn’t translate monster speech could’ve been considered a shortcoming. Or was it more of a saving grace? I couldn’t even imagine what a headache it would’ve been if I could communicate with normal monsters. I was much happier leaving that kind of thing to Filo, Rat, and Wyndia.

“That sure is a convenient ability,” Fohl said.

“What was the last language anyway?” I asked.

“It’s a small dialect used on the outskirts of Siltvelt. One of our servants taught it to me a long time ago,” he replied.

So the weapons even translated dialects flawlessly. Amazing. If being a hero wasn’t a job itself, maybe I could have made a living as an interpreter.

“Even the Seaetto territory has its own dialect, you know,” said Sadeena.

“Still, Fohl and Atla being multilingual is an advantage,” I replied.

Keel and the other slaves from Lurolona could generally only speak the official language of Melromarc. I wondered how many languages Raphtalia’s parents knew.

“Hey, Sadeena. What language do they speak in Q’ten Lo?” I asked.

“There are some slight differences, but it’s basically the same as the language

spoken in Siltvelt. The same goes for Shieldfreeden, even though they speak it with a really thick accent there," she explained.

This language they spoke was basically the official language of the demi-humans.

"You probably didn't notice when you were there, but you can get by with pretty much any major language in Zeltoble. That's one of the things that makes the country so convenient," she continued.

"I'm sure different shops cater to different languages," I said.

Zeltoble had been a real melting pot of different nationalities and races. There was such a mixture that there was no point even trying to discriminate.

"Faubrey has its own official language, by the way. Of the two, that one would be considered the major language," Sadeena added.

"I see."

Faubrey was the country of the heroes, so nobility and anyone of high birth would probably want to speak the country's language. I'd heard that in the United Kingdom it was once possible to discern someone's social class by the language they spoke. Perhaps the cultural landscape in Faubrey was similar. But none of that really mattered. We'd probably end up going there eventually, but it was Siltvelt that we would be visiting in the next day or two.

"So are we going to make a special stop for Fohl and Atla then, Mr. Naofumi?" Raphtalia asked.

"I wouldn't mind as long as it's a quick stop," I said.

In fact, I was all for it if it would help motivate them. I wanted to go back to my own world, but that was impossible. I could definitely understand the desire to return to one's home.

"I would like to, if at all possible. I want to show Atla the house," Fohl replied.

"I'm not interested. Not to mention I'm blind," Atla said.

The way she walked around so freely sure made it seem like she could see. According to her, it was because she could sense life force.

“. . .”

These siblings were on completely different wavelengths. I was starting to feel sorry for Fohl.

“How about we stop by on the way back, if we have time?” I suggested.

Fohl looked disappointed. I felt really bad for him, so I’d stop by later just for him.

“Awww,” Sadeena swooned.

“You have a really sympathetic look on your face, Mr. Naofumi,” Raphtalia said.

“Brother! Stop trying to make Mr. Naofumi pity you, you coward!” Atla shouted.

Now Atla was scolding him. That just made me feel even sorrier for him.

“Shut up! All of you! Don’t look at me like that!” Fohl shouted.

Hopefully he would get something valuable out of going. But was Atla really that uninterested in the past?

“We can ransack the place if no one is living there,” I suggested.

“What the hell do you want from our house?!” Fohl shouted.

“There might be some good stuff in there, right?” I replied.

Hakuko royalty had lived there. Or maybe it had been a vacation home or something. But there could have been family treasures still hidden somewhere in there.

“More than likely there’s someone else living there now,” I added.

I had to admit I was interested in finding out what kind of place it was too. But we’d just have to wait and see what happened.

“I guess you’re right. There might have been something in there that could help the heroes,” Fohl said after nodding.

The next day arrived. Before heading out, I dropped by the mansion in the neighboring town where Melty and Eclair were staying. Eclair was in the

courtyard. It was still morning and she already looked exhausted. Maybe it was just my imagination. She and Ren had just started practicing swinging their swords when Eclair let out a sigh of relief.

“Nothing makes me feel more at peace than practicing swings,” she said.

“This makes you feel at peace? Is that some kind of chivalry thing?” Ren asked.

Eclair always looked the most alive when she was training swordsmanship with Ren. But even he looked confused now. The whole thing was pretty surreal.

“Alright, you wait here for the others to arrive, Raphtalia. You’re in charge while I’m gone,” I said.

“Okay, understood. In that case, I guess I’ll practice swings with Eclair and Ren while I wait for you to get back,” she replied.

“I understand the desire to practice, but I think you should be doing some more advanced training. I suggest we engage in a mock battle,” Atla said.

“It’s still morning. I just want to work up a light sweat. I wouldn’t last until evening if we started going all out this early in the day,” Raphtalia replied.

“That’s your problem, Raphtalia. It’s no wonder you still can’t understand the essence of the style that these people are working so hard to grasp,” Atla said.

“Atla, you really are something,” Raphtalia replied.

The two started arguing, but I just pretended not to notice. I headed into the mansion to look for Melty. It was still early morning, but I found her in a room where she was sorting through a huge pile of paperwork.

“Oh, it’s you, Naofumi,” she said.

“I heard you and Filo were here. I came to get Filo,” I replied.

“Oh, so that’s why you’re here.”

I don’t know if it was because she was worn out, but she plopped down and slouched in her chair. On the contrary, Filo was looking around like she was full of energy.

“So? Did you talk to the queen, Melty?” I asked.

“Yes, I spoke with Mother,” she replied.

After they discussed it, the queen had decided that Melty should stay behind to avoid potentially stirring up even more trouble. Melty said she planned on assisting — oh, sorry, “supervising”—Eclair in her role as the acting governor. That’s why she was only sorting the paperwork and not filling it out.

“Well, that’s probably for the best,” I said.

“Yeah. If I went it would make things a lot more complicated, I’m sure. There’s something else too. You were planning on getting a carriage after teleporting there, right?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Mother said that she notified Siltvelt of your visit and asked for a messenger to be sent to your initial location with a carriage for you to use.”

“Oh, that’ll be a big help,” I said.

Whether we bought a carriage or just rented one when we got there, I was expecting to have to spend some money. I sure didn’t want to build one, so that worked out perfectly.

“The only thing is . . . Going to Siltvelt will likely cause quite a few problems, diplomatically speaking. You need to be careful,” Melty continued.

“I know that. But do you really think we could convince them to help us if we sent any of the other heroes?” I asked.

“Probably not. In fact, it’s doubtful whether they would even consider listening to anyone other than you,” she replied.

She was probably right. To be honest, even though Siltvelt was kind of like the Shield Hero’s home field, going would mean having to deal with some really annoying political issues.

I’d been using the rebuilding of Raphtalia’s village as an excuse to avoid going, but that wouldn’t work anymore. If possible, I’d wait until the world had been saved before going there, but I had no choice but to give up on that now.

Running away wasn't going to accomplish anything. I'd just have to smash through this annoying obstacle for Raphtalia's sake.

"Of course, Mother and I have already coordinated with the more powerful nobles to address any issues here in Melromarc. All of the major issues have been resolved, officially speaking," Melty added.

"You mean other than your big sister and the Church of the Three Heroes members, right?" I said.

Melty nodded.

"The extent of my sister's foolishness amazes me. To think she would cause so much trouble . . ." she said.

"You're telling me," I grumbled.

She was still missing, along with Itsuki's other companions. Not to mention, I'd heard that the one who was always wearing the gaudy armor was actually Melromarc nobility. Who knew what kind of shady business they might have secretly been up to. But they hadn't caused any new problems yet. I hoped not, anyway. It wouldn't have surprised me one bit if they tried to pull something off while I was gone.

"You plan on coming back regularly, right?" Melty asked.

"That's the plan. You should keep an eye out and be prepared to protect yourself from attackers too," I said.

There was no guarantee that attacks would be limited to the village. Melty and I might have argued a lot, but I was rather fond of her. She was reasonable, unlike her sister, and she had a strong sense of duty. She had a bit of a temper when interacting with me, but that was only natural considering her age. In fact, it would've been hard for me to come up with something I really disliked about her. So I certainly didn't want to see her getting hurt as a result of one of my problems.

"I know that," she replied.

"I'm counting on you to take care of scheduling while I'm gone too. We need to have Ren and Itsuki go to the Cal Mira islands soon so that they can work on

getting their curses healed.”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, I was thinking. Why don’t we demote Eclair and make you the governor of this town instead?” I suggested.

“You can’t be serious.”

“Really. Eclair might be useful in battle, but she’s still stuck in the mindset of being a knight. I don’t have time to wait for her to grow up. I’d feel a lot better having someone in charge that I can already trust to manage the place. You, in other words.”

“Y-you really think that?”

Melty blushed. I’d only stated the facts. I guess she might not have been used to being complimented. Her mom was the queen, after all. She’d probably received a really strict upbringing too, since her sister had turned out so rotten.

Now that I thought about it, Melty was still just a child, even though I treated her like I would a close friend around my own age. Praising her a little bit every now and then might have been good for her motivation.

“I do. I figure you could even succeed the queen and manage to make things work somehow,” I told her.

“Well, then. I had no idea you thought of me that way, Naofumi,” she replied.

Melty seemed to be in a better mood now. I guess she was the type that benefitted from a little praise after all. Then again, Melty would probably do just fine being scolded too, but that was just because she was the kind of person who never gave up. It would probably be best to just give her plenty of compliments to keep her motivation high. She wasn’t the type to let it go to her head, after all.

“That settles it then. You’re in charge while I’m gone,” I said.

“Understood!” Melty replied.

She was full of enthusiasm all of a sudden. It was hard to believe she was the same person who had fired off that magical attack at me just yesterday.

In any case, the territory would probably be fine while I was gone now. At the very least, it would be a lot better off than if I'd left it in the hands of Eclair, who had yet to achieve anything at all as governor. There's probably no need to mention that Eclair gave me a really nasty look when I saw her afterward.

"Alright, we should probably head out soon. I can expect a carriage to be waiting for us there, right?" I asked.

"That's what we discussed, but that was only yesterday. Whether it's actually there or not, you'll have to see for yourself once you get there," Melty replied.

"Alright. Filo, let's head out."

"Okaaay!"

Filo nodded cheerfully. She was going to be pulling the carriage in her top condition. Raphtalia had gotten used to it, but I was worried about the others.

"Alright, Filo, they have a carriage ready for us where we're going. I'm going to take everyone and then you'll transport us, just like I mentioned before," I said.

"Okay! A carriaaaage!" she exclaimed.

Yeah, I'd made her a promise. Thankfully we'd decided it could be a cheap carriage.

Filo looked up at me abruptly.

"Is that supposed to be the carriage you promised?" she asked.

I had a feeling she was going to start whining if I nodded, but whatever.

"That's right. It's a cheap one, but just deal with it," I said.

"Nooo! I want a better carriaaaage! I want a better one than befoooore! Get me a neeeew one!" she cried.

Filo hadn't had a carriage she really liked ever since Motoyasu stole her old one.

"Stop complaining. If you do a good job I'll get you a good one," I said.

"Ugh . . . I'll do my beeeessst!" she shouted.

Filo had had a string of misfortunes lately, so I'd been thinking about doing something nice for her anyway. I'd get her a better carriage after we took care of this mess.

That's what I was thinking as I walked back to where I'd left Raphtalia, but when I got there . . .

"Imitation Hengen Muso Secret Technique! First Form! Sun!" Atla shouted.

"Oh hey, Mr. Naofumi," Raphtalia said.

She called out to me despite being in the midst of a fierce battle with Atla. Rishia had shown up out of nowhere and was watching the two fight, along with Eclair, Ren, and Fohl. They all had looks of shock on their faces.

"Fehhh . . . Why are you able to do that, Atla?" Rishia asked.

"The old lady said she was a natural, right?" I replied.

"Ugh . . . The rest of us are putting everything we have into our training, yet all she has to do is be close and she can do it?" Fohl grumbled.

He shouldn't be so bitter! Hers was just an imitation of the real technique, so there was a good possibility that she hadn't learned it perfectly. Actually, Raphtalia was able to deal with the attacks successfully. But she had been sparring with Atla for quite some time now, so she'd probably improved quite a bit. I wanted to be able to see life force too. I was ready for enlightenment to hit me any time now.

"Oh?" said Sadeena.

I wondered when she had shown up.

"Something like this? That one's a bit complicated. I think I'd have to rely on magic to mimic that technique," she continued.

That reminded me. Sadeena could use magic to buff herself. Drifa Lightning Speed, was it? She could use Descent of the Thunder God too. If this were a manga, someone that used electricity like that could probably master the use of life force by thinking of it as electrical currents within the body or something. Sadeena could probably get the hang of it in no time.

"That's enough practice for now. Let's head out," I said.

“Understood! Make haste, Raphtalia! Just how long do you intend to continue practicing?” Atla said.

“You’re one to speak! You’re the one that turned our practice into an all-out battle!” Raphtalia snapped.

She sure had it tough. I really wished Fohl would keep Atla under control.

“Fohl, don’t just let your little sister run amok. That only makes things hard on Raphtalia,” I said.

“Ugh . . .” Fohl grumbled.

Groaning wasn’t going to help anything.

“If anything happens, you’re in charge of helping Raphtalia stop her. Surely the two of you together can restrain her,” I continued.

“I will overcome any obstacle that stands in my way!” Atla declared.

A commotion ensued when I told her to feel free to not overcome this obstacle.

“Anyway, it’s probably best if I take demi-humans with me since we’re going to Siltvelt. Raphtalia goes without saying. Then Sadeena . . . Filo is coming too, of course,” I said.

I thought about who else to take.

“I guess I’ll take Atla and Fohl too. But if it causes any kind of diplomatic issues, I want you to notify me of the situation immediately,” I continued.

I figured having them there could be useful.

“Of course we will! Right, Brother?” Atla said.

“Yeah. Putting one’s employer at a disadvantage after being paid is one thing a mercenary doesn’t do. Well, I guess it depends on the employer too, but I have no reason to feel differently as of now,” Fohl replied.

All said and done, Fohl seemed to actually understand how things were supposed to work. I guess it was just because of his sister that he was always on edge.

“I’m not sure taking a huge crowd would be a good idea, so that will probably

do,” I said.

“Rafu?”

“Of course I’m taking Raph-chan too,” I added.

I picked Raph-chan up and hugged her. She’d finally gotten down off of Filo’s head.

“Hmph!”

Atla glared at Raph-chan for some reason.

“Don’t tell me you’re even jealous of Raph-chan. I’m sorry, but that’s crossing the line,” I told her.

Acting out against Raph-chan was unforgivable. I could accept her fighting with Raphtalia, since they were sparring opponents, but this was different.

“The power emanating from her has grown denser. She’s stronger than before,” Atla said.

“Raaafuuu!”

“Oh really?” I asked.

Raph-chan did seem to be doing something while she was up there on top of Filo’s head. Maybe the effects of raising her mutability were starting to show. I checked her stats.

“Oh? She has a level icon now,” I said.

“Rafuuu!”

Apparently there had been some kind of mutation that caused the leveling system to apply to Raph-chan too. That was fantastic! Forget about Filo — I wanted to level Raph-chan up and make her really powerful!

“Mr. Naofumi?” Raphtalia muttered.

“Anyway, standing around here talking isn’t going to get anything accomplished. We’ll be arriving in Siltvelt within the day, so I want all of you to be on your guard,” I said.

“Understood!” Atla exclaimed.

Her energy sure was impressive.

Chapter Three: Arrival in Siltvelt

After I finally got everyone teleported using my portal skill, we made our way to a nearby village, where we found a couple of therianthropes dressed in what looked like holy garb. They were standing in front of a covered carriage and looking around nervously. Could they have been the messengers sent for us? They were quick!

“I-it’s been a while,” one of them stammered.

He bowed his head when he saw me, but I just stood there confused. “Been a while”? Since what? I stood there looking at him and trying to figure out who he was. He must have realized I didn’t recognize him, because he stepped back with an air of humility and let the other therianthrope speak.

“You probably don’t remember us, but we approached you and invited you to come to Siltvelt with us several days after you first arrived in this world, Shield Hero,” he said.

“Ohhh . . .”

That was a time when I still considered anyone that approached me to be an enemy and didn’t really pay much attention to them. I guess these guys had approached me back then. I seemed to remember badmouthing them and refusing their offer.

“We received word from Melromarc that you needed a carriage. We hastily prepared this one for you on behalf of Siltvelt, but I offer my sincere apologies if the information we received was mistaken,” he continued.

“There’s no mistake. I’m just surprised you were able to prepare one so quickly,” I replied.

That was crazy fast. We’d only informed the queen yesterday. I’d have to ask what kind of communication channels they used later.

“Shall we provide you with protection during your journey?” the therianthrope asked.

“We’ve already decided our route, but you’re welcome to tag along,” I said.

“Understood,” he replied.

There was something about his demeanor, kind of like he’d sworn an oath of absolute allegiance to me. It made me feel uneasy.

“Alright, Filo, you’re going to pull this carriage,” I said.

“Okaaay!”

Filo seemed to be in a pretty good mood. She came forward to pull the carriage.

“Everyone else hurry up and get in the carriage—once we’ve checked it for traps, that is,” I continued.

“Because you can never be too careful, right? Impressive, as always, Mr. Naofumi! You never forget to keep your guard up when dealing with others, no matter how friendly they may seem!” Atla exclaimed.

What was with her? I’d started getting the urge to do exactly the opposite of whatever I’d just said when she made comments like that lately. I couldn’t help but feel like there was actually something wrong with what I was doing for her to respond like that.

“Well, being vigilant is indeed important,” Raphtalia agreed.

Good. I guess I wasn’t mistaken, after all.

“I’ll help check too,” Sadeena said.

“I’ll see to the checking. I’d appreciate if you’d stay out of my way, Sadeena,” Atla snapped.

“Oh my,” Sadeena replied.

Those two could detect objects using life force or ultrasonic waves, so they were handy to have around, I guess. I let them go on arguing and went ahead and checked the carriage myself.

Yeah, there didn’t seem to be much of anything inside. They probably figured I might get upset if they put anything unnecessary in the carriage. There didn’t seem to be anything fishy about the cover, either. All that was left was to check for magical trickery and make sure there was nothing strange hidden between

the floorboards.

I was finishing up the check when Atla and Sadeena called out to me.

“I don’t sense anything particularly fishy,” Atla said.

“Neither do I,” added Sadeena.

“Got it. Alright, everyone in. Let’s get going and take care of our business in Siltvelt as quickly as possible,” I said.

Carriages sure were convenient for transporting large groups of people. Gaelion had insisted that he could pull a carriage, but I had to give Filo some love too — for a couple of days, at least.

Everyone started piling into the carriage. The Siltvelt emissaries raised an eyebrow when they saw Fohl and Atla, but I decided not to worry about it.

“Alright, let’s go!” I said.

“Oookaaay! Blast offff!” Filo shouted.

She gave a spirited nod and began pulling the carriage. She was moving pretty quickly.

“Ugh . . .”

Filo gripped the carriage shafts and groaned.

“What is it?” I asked.

I wondered if there was something odd that maybe only she could detect. We would need to be careful if it was a trap.

“Something is different about this woood,” she replied.

“It’s probably just a regional thing, don’t you think? I’m sure the carriage was made with trees from around here, after all,” I said.

“I think sooo,” she replied.

“Is Melromarc wood better or something?” I asked.

“Hm? They’re just different. It’s fine!”

“I see.”

And so our journey by carriage began. Everything was going fine for a while, but more and more people began gathering around the carriage as we got closer to Siltvelt. It started to look like a feudal lord's procession or something.

Were they supposed to be protecting us? Why did it only look like they were gathering around us to keep us from getting away? Regardless, it probably would have been easy enough to escape using my portal. And then even the Siltvelt army showed up. It was clear they were taking this quite seriously.

"Maaasteeerrr, it's getting hard to waaalk," Filo complained.

"I bet it is. Just how big of a parade do they plan on turning this into?" I grumbled.

"Hey, that says 'a very warm welcome,'" Fohl said.

He was reading a message written on a flag being carried by some townspeople walking along the road. Ugh . . . To be honest, a welcome of this magnitude just made me feel sick. I probably would have been delighted if I'd come here just after being summoned. But after having been put through the wringer here in this world, it just made my flesh crawl.

"Way to go, Siltvelt! I can tell this is a magnificent country by the way they worship you, Mr. Naofumi," said Atla.

"We seem to have another adherent right here in the carriage," I mumbled.

"A reception like this is only natural," she replied.

Fohl looked at Atla with a really dubious look on his face. I'm sure I had the same expression on my face. Had we come to a country full of mass-produced Atla clones?

"Do we really have to go through this place, Sadeena?" asked Raphtalia.

"Even I wasn't expecting this much. I guess you really are a hero after all, little Naofumi," Sadeena replied.

I was surprised too. I was finally seeing with my own eyes just how much influence the heroes had. All of a sudden, I recalled something the queen had told me.

"*First the princess and noble daughters would all demand audiences with you.*

The demi-human women would form a harem around you.”

With a welcome this enthusiastic, I had no doubt something like that might happen. Ugh, even the thought of it made me want to vomit.

Actually, I seemed to remember hearing something about a knight commander and several other adventurers—who’d picked fights with me—getting murdered even within Melromarc. And then, like a stud that had outlived its use . . .

“*Poor Mr. Iwatani, stricken so suddenly by such a grave illness . . .*”

I wanted to avoid that if at all possible. I should just let them know I had no plans of doing anything special in Siltvelt. I would just take care of my business and get out of there as soon as possible. Yeah, that’s what I would do.

“Let’s do our best to get out of this country as quickly as possible,” I said.

We’d just have to do what we could for now, and that included addressing their objectives too. Filo carried on pulling the carriage, and we arrived at the Siltvelt castle the following day.

At a glance, the castle had a Chinese feel to it, but with elements of Western-style stone architecture thrown in here and there. I wanted to say the contrast was almost excessive.

From an overall-size perspective, there wasn’t much difference between it and the Melromarc castle. But something about it . . . Maybe it was because of a difference in stature of the demi-humans and therianthropes, but the doors, bridges, and flags all seemed larger.

On top of that, it was covered in ivy and gave off an impression of wildness. There was a crude, slightly barbaric atmosphere to it. It was just like you’d expect from a castle that served as a stronghold for demi-humans and therianthropes in a fantasy novel or something.

Still in the carriage, I looked behind us. The Siltvelt castle town was organized similar to the Melromarc castle town, but the area outside of the walls looked like forest or jungle. The buildings themselves also seemed a bit sloppy, and there were areas of the ground that were a mixture of dirt and grass rather than being paved with stone.

I wondered if it had to do with the races living there. Maybe it was because I'd gotten used to seeing Melromarc, but something about it felt slightly uncivilized. The weapons for sale, selection of foods, and overall atmosphere of the shops seemed at least on par with Melromarc.

And then there was a large, outdoor stage facing the town square. Was that the church? There was a huge shield symbol on display there.

"We have arrived, Shield Hero!" exclaimed the emissary.

"Oh, umm, okay . . ." I replied.

"What should I do with the carriaaage?" Filo asked.

"Just leave it there and I'm sure someone will park it where it belongs," I said.

A therianthrope approached, clearly intent on taking over pulling the carriage for Filo. He was a burly therianthrope who looked kind of like a bull or maybe a minotaur. He definitely looked like he could pull a carriage.

"Okaaay!" Filo replied.

We got out of the carriage. I looked up at the Siltvelt castle and gulped. This was supposed to be the castle of a country that worshipped me, but for some reason it felt like a sinister castle full of demons and monsters. I'm sure I was just getting caught up in the moment. I couldn't let it get to me. That's right. I would just confidently strut in there like it was the Melromarc castle.

"Let's go," I said.

"U-understood," Raphtalia replied.

"I've only been inside the castle a couple times. I'm nervous," Fohl said.

"We must carry ourselves with pride, Brother! This country basically belongs to Mr. Naofumi, after all," Atla replied.

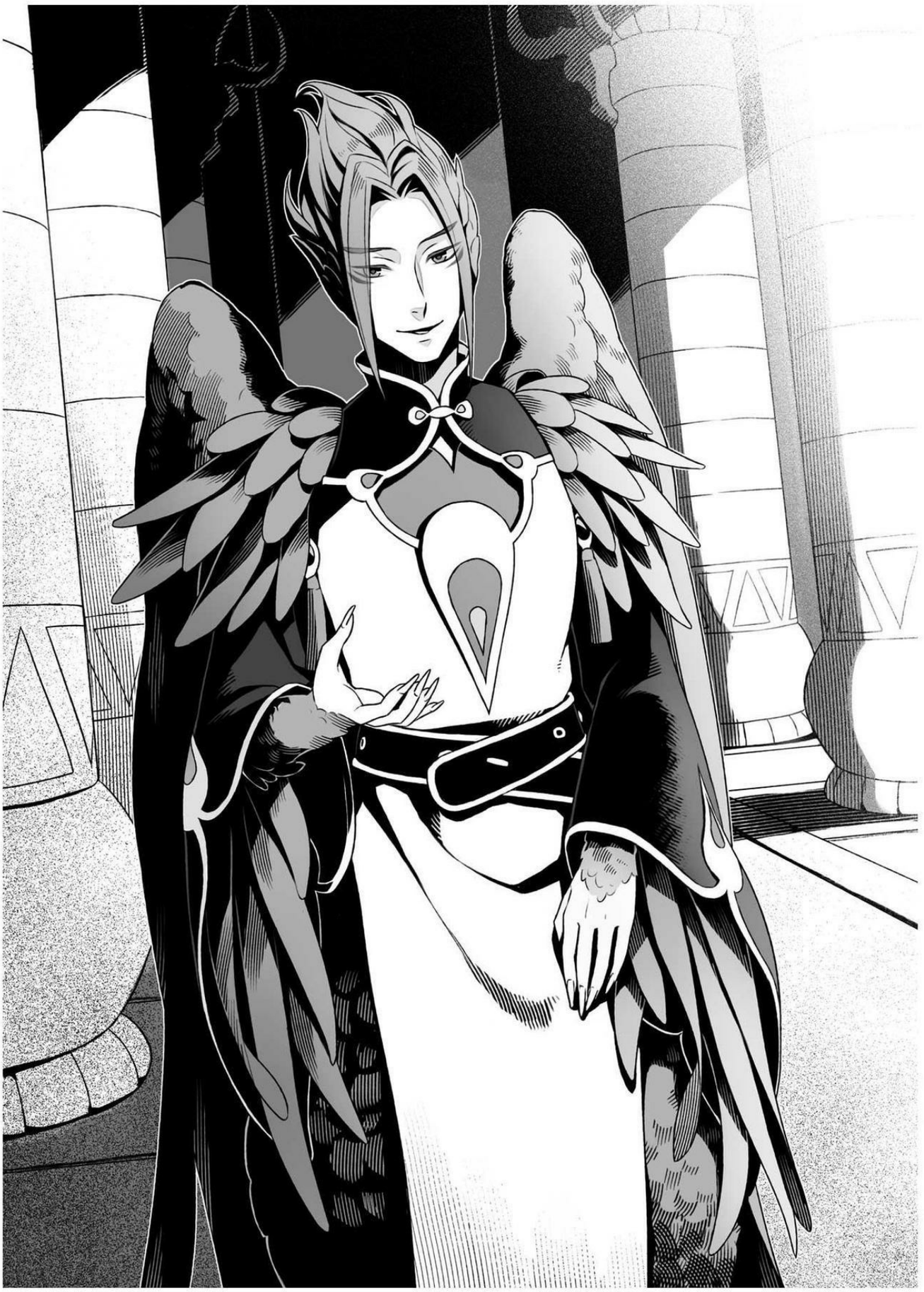
This country didn't belong to me! That's what I wanted to think, anyway. But what she said did make sense, considering they worshiped the Shield Hero. So I couldn't really argue with her either. Still, the country may have belonged to the Shield Hero, but it sure didn't belong to me. Anyway, maybe I would be able to relax if I just thought of the citizens like they were my villagers.

We went inside the castle. Someone who must have been the castle porter called out to us and then took us to the throne room surprisingly quickly.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the Shield Hero! You must be exhausted after such a long journey.”

Once we arrived at the throne room, we were welcomed by a man with flashy red feathers on his arms and shoulders. Unlike Filo’s angelic form, his hands and feet seemed somehow birdlike. He must have been a bird-type demi-human or therianthrope. I was guessing he was in his twenties. He might have just looked younger than he actually was, though.

“My name is Werner. I serve as representative of the shusaku race. I’m pleased to make your acquaintance,” the man said.



“Shusaku?” I asked.

Shusaku . . . Maybe that was supposed to be from “susaku,” which was the name of the Vermilion Bird in Japanese. Fohl and Atla were hakuko, so I guess it wasn’t all that strange. The Black Tortoise was “genbu” in Japanese, so maybe they called the race “kuromu” or something here. I wondered if they looked like they were chrome-plated. The name might have been different, but I probably wasn’t far off. The races basically looked like human-type forms of the four holy beasts, so it wasn’t hard to imagine.

“My name is Naofumi Iwatani. I’m the Shield Hero. These are my companions. This is Raphtalia. That’s my familiar, Raph-chan. Filo there is a filolial. And that’s Sadeena, Atla, and Fohl.”

Giving long introductions was a hassle, so I decided to just keep it short.

“Pleased to meet you,” said Werner.

He bowed and then shot a glance over at Atla and Fohl. I decided to be extra careful to avoid any kind of diplomatic issues.

“Those two are slaves that I bought in Zeltoble. I’ve been told they’re not pure hakuko. I’m sure they’re not interested in making any claims to authority. Is that going to be a problem?” I asked.

My comment must have been effective, because Werner quickly returned his gaze and bowed his head.

“Is that so? No problem at all!” he replied.

I wasn’t sure how much of an effect it’d actually had, though.

“Umm . . . Hey, Maaasteer, are you going to be talking here for looong?” Filo asked.

“Probably. I’m sure you’re bored, but just be patient,” I said.

“Okaaay.”

It looked like the conversation was going to move along smoothly thanks to Filo’s restlessness. She came in handy when I least expected it.

“Alright, I guess I’ll get straight to the point,” I said.

“As you wish!” Werner replied.

He stood up straight and looked at me without moving, like he was standing at attention. It wasn't quite the same as staring. His attitude made it seem like he was waiting to be given orders. Something about it bothered me.

"I'm not interested in ruling over Siltvelt or anything like that. Accomplishing an objective of mine required me to stop by. That's all. I promise not to do anything that would cause problems for those in charge of Siltvelt. I just want you to arrange a trading ship to Q'ten Lo for us. We plan to leave Siltvelt as soon as possible," I said.

The queen had mentioned that my coming to Siltvelt would cause problems for those in charge of the country, so I decided to squash any concern about that right from the start. But Werner seemed to be at a loss for words and just stood there looking befuddled for a moment.

"I see. There seems to have been a misunderstanding, Shield Hero," he finally replied.

"Huh?" I asked.

"Please take some time first to refresh yourselves after such a long journey. We would like you to join us for a party this evening, and then we can discuss business matters after that, if it pleases you," Werner continued.

"We're in a hurry . . ." I replied.

Frankly speaking, putting an end to the Q'ten Lo assassins was my top priority. I had absolutely zero intention of getting held up in Siltvelt.

"Besides, being here will only cause trouble for those in charge of Siltvelt, right?" I asked.

"I can't deny that your presence might be problematic for some. However, I also believe eliminating such corruption is necessary, should it exist," Werner replied.

He continued to voice his objection with polite assertiveness.

"But even more importantly, it is imperative that we demonstrate our devotion to the Shield Hero before anything else. Please think of it as a rite of passage," he added.

What a headache! The whole thing stunk of a sneaky attempt to lay claim to the Shield Hero as their own. I couldn't help but feel like agreeing would gradually lead me further and further into a trap. But I was also sure that they would probably refuse to cooperate if I rejected his offer.

I looked over at Sadeena, but she just shrugged, as if to say, "What can you do?"

"Magnificent! A demonstration of devotion to Mr. Naofumi!" Atla exclaimed.

I decided to ignore the single, completely clueless bonehead that had been impressed by Werner's proposal.

"Come, then! Please relax and make yourselves at home. Business discussions can wait until after you have rested," said Werner.

His attitude made it clear that he had no intention of compromising. I was pissed off already. This feeling of only pretending to have a conversation really got on my nerves. It reminded me of dealing with Motoyasu lately or Ren and Itsuki from before we'd taken them in.

"Fine. But you know what's going to happen if you try to ignore my request, right?" I said.

Siltvelt was supposed to be a country that worshipped the Shield Hero. So what would happen if I teleported out of the castle and started publicly badmouthing them? Because that's what I was going to do if they tried to mess with me. I made that clear with a threatening gaze.

"Of course!" Werner replied.

He gave an exaggerated bow.

"Now then, Shield Hero, allow me to show you and your companions to the guest rooms we have prepared for you. Please make yourselves at home there," he continued.

"Separate rooms are going to be a problem," I said.

I wanted to avoid getting split up and left by myself if at all possible. I mean, I wanted to think there was no one who could stop me from handling the situation, even if they did try something, but just in case . . .

“I’m afraid we cannot treat others as your equal. To do such a thing would be a desecration of our country’s religion,” Werner replied.

Hmm . . . I guess I could understand that. It would be like having to entertain a CEO and several low-ranking employees and being told to treat them all the same. I think that’s what he wanted to say. I could see how that might be difficult, but since it was the CEO making the request in our case, I also wanted to say they should be more flexible and oblige.

“Can you provide us a room next to the one Mr. Naofumi will be staying in?” Atla took a step forward and asked.

Werner glanced over at me and stood there thinking for a moment. I wasn’t going to compromise any further if he wasn’t even willing to do that. He must have realized that, because he nodded.

“Certainly. We shall prepare the room at once,” he said.

Hmph. That was a nice move on Atla’s part. I guess the save went to her this time. I’m sure by their reasoning I should’ve been given the presidential suite, while Raphtalia and the others belonged in standard rooms. Or even worse, maybe they would have tried to throw them out of the castle without me noticing. Then again, there was no way I could see that happening with the lineup I’d brought.

And so Werner took us to the castle guest rooms where we were supposed to relax, but . . .

Chapter Four: Shield of the Beast King “This seems more like one of the royal family’s bedrooms than a guest room,” I muttered.

Werner had brought us to a huge room prepared solely for me. I t was on the top floor of the castle and had a terrace with an amazing view.

I got the impression that the room that had been prepared for Raphtalia and the others was something like a waiting room intended for servants—allowing them to quickly come running when a member of the royal family called. There was nothing but a bed in the room, like it was just meant for naps or something. There were supposedly other rooms available, but they were all located further away.

“Yeah . . . It does seem that way,” Raphtalia replied in a whisper.

She was carefully checking the interior of the room.

“Surely this room can sleep several people,” I said.

“I’m afraid we cannot allow that. I hope your companions understand,” Werner replied.

He had adopted an attitude of humility that made it difficult for anyone to argue.

“We do understand, but . . .” Raphtalia mumbled.

“As long as we can stay in the adjacent room, it’s no problem at all!” Atla exclaimed.

“Atla!” I snapped.

“The bed looks so sooooft! Huh? I can’t lie on it?” Filo asked.

She’d tried to get on the bed, but some lady that looked like a maid had stopped her. The atmosphere in the room grew really tense. It seemed like Siltvelt was going to be a real headache, after all.

“Now then, allow me to take the rest of you to your room. Please follow me,” Werner said.

I tried to go with them but was stopped by one of the maids.

“Please stay here and rest, Shield Hero. You will have an audience with the

leadership shortly. After that we will have the evening party, followed by your bath, and then it will be bedtime," the maid said.

"Okay, and when do I get some discretionary time?" I asked.

"You are always free to act at your own discretion," the maid replied.

"In that case, the audience can wait. I need to talk with my companions," I said.

"I'm afraid that would be problematic. Your patience is appreciated," the maid replied.

What the hell was free about that?! I started to get upset and Raphtalia got a frantic look on her face.

"Please be patient, Mr. Naofumi. Getting angry right now will solve nothing," she said.

"No, if they've upset Mr. Naofumi, then we should punish them!" Atla shouted.

Her overly extreme response helped my anger subside a bit. What was with that little tyrant, anyway? I was fully aware that I acted like a dictator, but at least I wasn't a tyrant . . . yet.

I needed to calm down. It was true that compromising a bit now would be best if I wanted negotiations to go smoothly later.

"Fine. It's just for today, after all. But . . ." I said before turning to Raph-chan and beckoning her over.

"Rafu?"

Raph-chan came over to me and I picked her up in my arms.

"I demand that you allow Raph-chan to stay with me. She's my beloved pet," I announced.

"U-understood," the maid said.

The Siltvelt maids glanced at each other and seemed to think it would be okay if it was a pet. I reluctantly trudged over to the bed and waved goodbye to Raphtalia and the others.

“Raafuuu!”

“You know what to do if anything happens, Raph-chan,” Raphtalia said.

“Rafu! Rafu, rafu!”

Raph-chan stood up on her hind legs and slapped her hand against her chest, as if to say, “Leave it to me!” Aww, she was so cute. But just like Raph-chan was linked to me, she also had some kind of magical connection with Raphtalia that would allow her to send a distress signal. She could probably act as an alarm if anything happened.

“Okay then . . .” said Raphtalia.

“I’ll wait in the adjacent room,” Atla proclaimed.

“I understand how you feel, but they’re going to show us to the guest rooms first,” Raphtalia replied.

“Come on, Atla! Let’s go! Our kind don’t belong with this guy. He’s on a completely different level,” Fohl snorted.

“But, Mr. Naofumi!” Atla called out.

Fohl was clearly doing his best to be sarcastic. He grabbed Atla and dragged her away. That little bastard. I’d started to feel bad for Fohl, but that attitude was crossing a line.

“Alright, little Naofumi, I’ll drop in to say hi later, okay?” Sadeena said.

“Sure,” I replied.

I still felt a bit uneasy about it all, but I went ahead and saw Raphtalia and the others off.

“Rafuuu!”

I was standing on the terrace and enjoying watching Raph-chan explore the room. I looked out over the castle town below. The sun had begun its decline toward the horizon, but it wasn’t quite to the point of what I would’ve called setting yet.

I’d noticed on our way in that the Siltvelt townscape was a lot wilder than what I was used to seeing in Melromarc, but it was even more apparent when

looking at things from up above. There was a lot of variation in demi-human builds too. Some were huge, and others were tiny. It made for an interesting sight from afar. And with a mixture of demi-humans and therianthropes, there was tons of diversity among the residents. There were probably quite a few races in all.

That went for the buildings too. Some had really primitive designs, while others were more ordinary wooden buildings. There were elements of Chinese style too. Siltvelt was a real hodgepodge of peoples and cultures when compared to Melromarc.

“Rafu?”

“Hm? What is it, Raph-chan?” I asked.

Raph-chan had her eyes fixed on a shield that hung decoratively above the fireplace. I’d figured it was some kind of ceremonial prop. It had a really extravagant design, but it also looked a bit beat up in several spots. It was hard to describe. The covering had clearly been made using a number of different tanned hides.

I wondered if I should try using my weapon copy on it. I took it off the wall and held it in my hand.

Weapon copy system activated.

Shield of the Beast King conditions unlocked.

Shield of the Beast King 0/80 C

<abilities locked> equip bonus: therianthrope abilities up (large), demi-human abilities up (large), skill “Beast Transformation Assist” “Territorial Reform”

special equip effect: power of devotion Whoa! So it wasn’t just decoration! King of the beasts, huh? Did that mean the Shield Hero was the king of the beasts? Images of filolials, dragons, and Raph-chan appeared in the back of my mind. I wasn’t really sure how to feel about that.

“Rafu?”

I must have made a strange face, because Raph-chan looked up at me with an

expression of concern. I smiled to let her know there was nothing to worry about and then checked the shield description one more time.

“Beast Transformation Assist?”

I tried testing the skill, but it just gave me a message saying it couldn’t be used. Maybe certain conditions had to be met first or something. I had a good idea of what the “ability up” bonuses were. I tried checking the stats. That was strange. The values seemed unstable. They kept changing every time I looked at them. I couldn’t tell if they were high or low. What a strange shield.

Anyway, it seemed like a good idea to go ahead and unlock the abilities. This country worshipped the Shield Hero, so the weapon shop was probably full of shields I’d never seen too. There was a possibility I could increase my stats or pick up some new abilities, so I figured maybe I should drop in for a peek later.

“I wonder what ‘Territorial Reform’ is.”

I tried testing that one too, but a map just popped up on my screen and I had no idea what I was supposed to do. My territory in Melromarc seemed to be highlighted on the map, but it told me I was out of range when I tried to choose it. I guess I would try again later after I returned to the village.

“I wonder if I’m allowed to take a look around the castle.”

I knew I was a guest and was supposed to make myself at home, but maybe there were things they didn’t want anyone to see. There were places like that in the Melromarc castle, after all. Even I had enough sense to not go rummaging around in someone else’s castle.

But in RPGs, there was always stuff like treasure in castles, so I couldn’t help but wonder if I might find some here too. Even if I couldn’t keep the stuff, it’d be nice if I came across a shield. All I had to do was copy it and I might end up a bit stronger.

When I really thought about it, there might be other countries that would present Ren or Itsuki with similar opportunities. If we had some time to spare later, maybe I would have them go look for countries that worshipped only the sword or only the bow and have them sneak in. It wouldn’t be fair if I was the only one that got a chance like this.

“The Siltvelt leadership has gathered and is ready to receive you, Shield Hero,” a maid called out.

“Alright, I’m coming,” I replied.

I guess it was time for me to get to work.

“Rafu!”

I hugged Raph-chan in my arms and followed the maid down the hallway.

I was brought to what looked like a roundtable conference room. It was far bigger than any of the conference rooms I’d seen in Melromarc. That was the first thought that crossed my mind, but when I saw the members of the leadership, I understood why.

The demi-humans weren’t that bad. They were still big, but nothing crazy. Some of the therianthropes were just massive, though. When I really thought about it, I guess Sadeena was pretty big too when she was in her therianthrope form.

“The Shield Hero has arrived!”

Everyone stood up, and as soon as I entered the room they all bowed and began praying to me. Ugh . . . Talk about awkward.

“Rafu!”

I’d unconsciously tightened my hold on Raph-chan a bit too much.

“We are truly delighted that you have finally returned home to Siltvelt,” said one of the members who seemed to be the chairman for today.

“‘Returned home’? I don’t live here, you know,” I replied.

“Of course not. But the Shield Hero is Siltvelt’s hero. Even if you were summoned by another country, your time abroad is but a temporary expedition,” the chairman explained.

Ah, so basically, the Shield Hero belonged in Siltvelt to begin with. So in their eyes I had just been out visiting another country. I would’ve been lying if I said I wasn’t already fed up. It sure was nice being able to leave all the politics and annoying formalities like this to the queen and Melty back in Melromarc!

“Now then, let us begin with a round of self-introductions. Would that please the Shield Hero?” the chairman asked.

“Can we get on with the discussion if I say no?” I replied.

The chairman seemed to be at a loss for words.

“M-my sincere apologies! Please don’t be angry!” he pleaded.

Oh hell, was he really going to act like a single remark of mine was going to spell the end of his life? I let out a long, heavy sigh.

“I’m not angry. Just hurry up and continue,” I said.

“As you wish!” he shouted.

He bowed to me again. All of this was way too formal. I was getting fed up already. I wanted to hurry up and talk with Raphtalia and the others. Well, I wanted to escape from this place, anyway.

“Allow me . . .”

They began introducing themselves, one by one. I counted ten of them in all. I’d really expected there to be more of them. Maybe these were just the high-ranking representatives.

They were all demi-humans and therianthropes, so there was a lion and all kinds of other beasts. One of the therianthropes looked like a mammoth. The guy was absolutely massive, so it only made sense they’d need the room to be big too. Whenever I stared at any of them, they would get an embarrassed look on their faces and avert their eyes. I think they might have been misunderstanding.

“So what now? I mean, it’s nice to have an audience and all, but are we going to discuss something? I came to this country for a reason, so should I just go ahead and explain what that reason is?” I asked.

“No, we will discuss that at a later time. First, we would like to hear an account of your activities in Melromarc from your own mouth, Shield Hero,” the chairman replied.

Who cared about that? Hearsay was more than enough! Well, that was how I felt, but I guess hearing it directly from me might’ve had some kind of special

meaning for them. Something like that.

“After that, we would like to give you a demonstration of the strength of our soldiers and then better acquaint you with our country’s past, present, and future,” the chairman continued.

“Oh, come on! Waste someone else’s time with that stuff,” I said.

“But, Shield Hero, you must be prepared for the coming waves. It would be problematic if we did not familiarize you with such matters,” the chairman replied.

“Oh . . .”

Normally I would have been in charge of this whole region. Thanks to the queen pulling some strings, I’d gotten away with only having to deal with my little territory in Melromarc. And the waves had only stopped temporarily because of the Spirit Tortoise incident. But still, didn’t Siltvelt already have another hero? Didn’t they have their own seven star hero?

“By the way, where is the other hero that oversees this country?” I asked.

They all quickly looked away when I asked. Why would they look away? They knew I’d asked for the seven star heroes to come to Melromarc, right? Not to mention, I’d made the request by way of the queen and had her explicitly communicate the fact that there was a group of people out there who was trying to kill heroes.

“The thing is, the seven star hero that protects Siltvelt is quite devoted to his training. His appearances tend to be limited to times when his assistance is required,” the chairman replied.

“So what you mean is his whereabouts are unknown?” I asked.

“He usually comes when he is summoned. However, following the recent Spirit Tortoise incident, he departed on a journey to train and become stronger,” the chairman said.

If the heroes would just get together to share and implement all of the power-up methods, they would become a lot stronger almost instantly. What a headache. Then again, if any of the seven star heroes were good-for-nothings

like some of the heroes in Kizuna's world, telling them about the power-up methods would be suicide. I'd have to determine whether or not we could trust them first. We already had hero-killing assassins on our hands, after all.

"Whatever. I want you to search every nook and cranny. Find him and bring him back here. Even if we're only considering what lies ahead, his presence is needed," I said.

"As you wish!" the chairman replied.

Sheesh . . .

"I want him to come see me before the Phoenix shows up," I added.

I had a feeling there were a million other things that needed to be addressed, but I decided to go ahead and move on.

"You all know why I came to Siltvelt, right?" I asked.

"Umm . . ."

"We are currently in the process of verifying that information."

"Siltvelt shall spare no effort in celebrating the glorious return of the Shield Hero!"

They all responded at once with completely different answers. And what the hell was with that last one?! Was that guy listening to what I'd asked at all?

A loud clap thundered out. The therianthrope resembling a lion had clapped his hands to draw the attention of the others.

"Everyone! The Shield Hero's word is law! As citizens of Siltvelt, we must prioritize his wishes above all else, must we not?" the lion roared.

They all thundered out in agreement. Nice! This lion guy really seemed to understand how things should be.

"The Shield Hero wishes to leave our country at once and act on behalf of the world! This is a sign of his intention as a hero to make the world a better place! As such, it is Siltvelt's duty to eliminate war from this world, is it not?!" he continued.

"Umm, what is that supposed to mean?" I interjected.

He was completely twisting my words!

“Who said — ”

“To do that, we must expand our military operations! We shall acquire new strength with the assistance of the Shield Hero and form an army that is invincible! This is the task at hand, is it not?! Just like the residents of the Shield Hero’s territory have been doing!” the lion roared on, completely drowning out my attempt to object.

Everyone applauded in agreement.

“Hey! Stop ignoring me!” I shouted.

“Rafu?”

Raph-chan covered her ears in an attempt to drown out the cacophony of clapping and shouting.

“Shield Hero! We, the people of Siltvelt, look forward to having your blessing bestowed upon us!” the lion roared.

Was he telling me to make them my slaves? It was either that or he wanted me to form a party and use it to organize and lead an army.

“Now then, we must reconvene in a fresh meeting to refine the details of the Shield Hero’s plan. Come, we must move on to the next meeting quickly!” the lion continued.

“Huh? Who said —”

Before I could finish speaking, the lion asked an assistant to rush me out of the room. Shit! These bastards had zero intention of listening to anything I said! Dammit! There was no way I was leaving!

“Of course! We cannot expect the Shield Hero to leave! We should be the ones to move elsewhere to continue this discussion! We respectfully take our leave,” the lion said.

When they realized I wasn’t going to let them push me out, everyone stood up from the roundtable and began to leave the room. They almost looked like they were fleeing for their lives.

“Hey!” I shouted.

“We shall meet again soon!”

The door slammed shut, and it was just me and the maid who had brought me. Shit. I guess they were going to be surprisingly brazen about their attempts to control me. I wondered if I should just keep my mouth shut and flee the country. But if I did that, there was no way they would help us get to Q’ten Lo.

I’d expected there to be demi-humans or therianthropes that resembled the four holy beasts in a meeting of the top brass, but I hadn’t seen anyone like that. It was like they were all doing their best to make sure I didn’t get to say I just wanted to get my business taken care of and leave Siltvelt as soon as possible. So they started talking over me and then just ran off somewhere.

It didn’t get any more annoying than this. I wondered if I should just completely ignore all of this and force my demands on them. Then again, I’m sure they would choose to interpret the whole thing in a way that would only cause diplomatic issues for Melromarc. Fine. Then I’d just force my demands on them in a way that didn’t draw attention.

I was lost in thought when I realized that it was already getting dark outside. I remembered they had mentioned there would be a party that evening to celebrate my “return.” I wondered if I would be able to talk with Raphtalia and the others there.

“What are Raphtalia and the others up to, anyway?” I asked Raph-chan.

“Rafu?”

She began gesturing with her hands in an attempt to answer my question.

“Umm . . . Small room? Training? No? Discussion? Me? Book?” I guessed at the answer.

I couldn’t help but smile at the way Raph-chan was pointing at different things around the room and posing in certain ways.

“So if I put all that together, they’re in a room somewhere talking about episodes involving me. Is that about right?” I asked.

“Rafu!”

Raph-chan nodded excitedly. I got it. So they hadn't been brought to this area of the castle.

"Rafuuu!"

"Hm? Does that mean they finished talking?" I asked.

"Rafuu!"

After that, Raph-chan began pretending like she was eating a meal. Ah, that must have meant they had gone to the hall where the party was being held.

"Shield Hero, preparations for the evening's party have been completed. Your presence is requested," the maid said.

"Alright."

"Before you attend, we shall dress you in the appropriate attire. Please forgive our boldness."

Several maids suddenly surrounded me and began grasping at me in an attempt to change my clothes for me.

"I can change my clothes by myself! I'm a hero, not a noble! At least let me change my own clothes!" I shouted.

"A-as you wish! Please forgive us!"

I sighed.

"It's not like I'm mad at you or dislike you," I said.

Sheesh . . . It was just one headache after another here. I wondered if Motoyasu or the other heroes had experienced this kind of thing in Melromarc. Maybe I would ask Ren and Itsuki about it later. At the very least, the queen wasn't so uptight about that kind of stuff. Or rather, she treated me well while avoiding things that annoyed me.

Anyway, what was up with these clothes they'd prepared for me? Was this supposed to be a punk rock fashion choice or something? The shirt collar was lined with fur. I felt like a wannabe punk rock vocalist. Even worse, the headdress was made out of some carnivorous animal. Did I seriously have to wear this outfit?

“. . .”

They were probably going to gripe if I didn’t put it on. But there was just no way I could accept fashion sense like this.

“Rafu?”

“Alright, I’ll just use you in place of the headdress, Raph-chan,” I said.

“Rafu . . .”

The thought of being used as a fashion accessory seemed to embarrass Raph-chan, but I went ahead and put her on my head after I finished changing and then headed out of the room.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the Shield Hero has arrived!”

Trumpets erupted into fanfare, accompanied by an instrumental performance that sounded like the roar of a beast. I was taken to a stage at the front of the hall. It was ridiculous how many attendees had shown up! And since this was a country of demi-humans and therianthropes, they were all different sizes. There was a massive therianthrope way off in the distance, but I could still hear his shouting and applause clearly.

“Rafuuu!”

“Sorry, Raph-chan,” I apologized.

Raph-chan seemed a bit bothered by all of the loud noise.

“Let us offer a prayer to the Shield Hero,” said the emcee.

And then almost everyone in the hall put their hands together and began praying. Oh, come on! I mean, even back in Melromarc I’d been called the saint of the bird god, but no one had ever taken it this far!

“And that concludes our audience with the Shield Hero. Please, enjoy the food!” the emcee announced.

Umm, was it just me or had they not even tried to give me a chance to speak? Surely they had originally planned to have me say a word or two. I guess it would have been troublesome for them if I had started talking about wanting to go to Q’ten Lo at an event like this. But I wasn’t going to let them have their

way. I figured something like this might happen, so I already had a plan. I switched to my Voice Ganger Shield and spoke into the megaphone.

“Ahem! Test! Test! So yeah, apparently you don’t want me to speak, but after everything I had to overcome to succeed in Melromarc, do you really think stopping me is going to be that easy?”

Oh? I caught sight of Raphtalia and the others. Atla was clasping her hands together and had a smitten look on her face, but I decided to just ignore her.

“Let me start by saying that I understand what it is you’re trying to do. But right now I need to prioritize acting on behalf of the whole world. I want you to know it’s not because I haven’t considered the people of Siltvelt,” I continued.

After all, focusing solely on one’s own demands wouldn’t be a negotiation at all. Refusing to accept the other party’s demands to some extent wasn’t going to open any doors. I understood that fact.

“But I have no intention of telling anyone to go to war with Melromarc. Otherwise, why even talk about peace? Does the Seaetto territory and its friendly ties with the demi-humans mean nothing? I want you to think about that,” I said.

I could hear the faint sound of applause. I glanced over at Werner to warn him. But next time something like this happened, he was going to get a lot more than a warning.

“Now then, I don’t want to be a party pooper. How about I provide a bit of entertainment for all of you too? It is a party, after all!”

I beckoned to Filo. She pointed at herself quizzically and I nodded. *No, not you, Atla!* I motioned for Fohl and Raphtalia to restrain Atla. Filo skipped over to the stage cheerfully.

“Whaaat?” she asked.

“I want you to sing a song. Your job as a companion of the Shield Hero is to liven up this party,” I told her.

Filo was standing with me on the stage. She turned around to look at the audience and began trembling. That reaction . . . Had she still not gotten over

being put on display in Kizuna's world? She had no problem singing at the taverns, so why couldn't she do it here? Or was it because of Motoyasu?

"Don't worry, Motoyasu isn't going to show up. And if anything happens, I promise I'll protect you," I told her.

"Buuut you didn't protect me from the spear guuuuy," she complained.

"That's because you acted on your own that time," I replied.

I was ordering her to sing this time, so I'd take responsibility if something happened.

"Okaaay, then I'll do my beeessst," Filo said.

"Sing something that will get stuck in their heads," I said.

"Okaaay!"

Filo started to sing into the megaphone on my shield. Her singing was always a real crowd-pleaser, even at the taverns.

Would the people of Siltvelt be able to retain their ability to think rationally after hearing Filo's bewitching song? I'd have her sing something addictive and then crush their strong-arm tactics and force them to agree to have a trading ship sent to Q'ten Lo. Of course, there was always the possibility that the song could be *too* effective. If things went downhill, I'd give Raphtalia and the others a signal before barging into the crowd and taking advantage of the confusion to escape.

Filo was singing her heart out. When she really got into it, she always entered a kind of trance-like state. It was obvious that she was incredibly focused. Her voice rang out through the hall.

The people in the audience who had the best hearing began to stagger over and gather in front of the stage, mesmerized by the song. That meant things were going well, right? She must have been singing a brainwashing song. It probably applied some kind of seduction-type status effect or something. I could just imagine Motoyasu showing up out of nowhere. The thought of it scared me.

Filo finally finished singing her song. Several people in the audience started

clapping, and before long the roar of cheers filled the hall.

“And there you have it. A little something to liven this party up, courtesy of the Shield Hero. Now enjoy yourselves, unless you try anything sneaky. Then don’t expect to enjoy yourselves. Alright, later,” I said.

I told Filo to go back to the others. As she made her way back, the audience crowded around her. I could hear them all showering her in praise.

“Our sincere gratitude to the Shield Hero for his gracious words!” the emcee shouted.

“Rafuuu!”

Raph-chan squeaked, almost as if she were greeting the crowd. The Siltvelt leadership must have thought they would piss me off if they tried to get in the way, because they backed off. I got down off the stage and headed toward Raphtalia and the others. People crowded around, trying to get a better look at me, but they were held back by a rope that blocked them from actually getting in my way. Good, that was how it should’ve been.

I finally came to where Raphtalia and the others were standing.

“How’s it going? Have they caused you any trouble?” I asked.

“Nothing so far. But it’s scary not knowing what they may try next,” Raphtalia replied.

“Raph-chan told me they were asking about your adventures with me,” I said.

“Yes. They made me explain how we met and recount everything we’ve been through so far. They did pretty much the same thing with everyone else too,” she replied.

“I see.”

“Sadeena and Atla apparently made it sound like they had physical relations with you and ended up getting treated really suspiciously.”

What the hell were those two trying to do? Atla, especially — she still looked like a little girl, for goodness sake! Then again, there were people in this country who were convinced I had a thing for little girls, apparently.

“Do you think they’ll let us return to the village after this?” I asked.

“Do you want to go back?” Raphtalia replied.

Honestly, I wanted to leave immediately. How the hell was I supposed to relax in a situation like this?

“Well, all we’re going to do after this is sleep anyway. We need to ask them to arrange for the ship to Q’ten Lo tomorrow for sure, so I guess it doesn’t hurt to stay the night here. Just don’t let your guard down even for a second,” I said.

“Understood.”

Now then . . . I wondered what was next as I turned around and looked behind me. The Siltvelt leadership was watching me like I was a dangerous animal that required extreme caution. I could tell they were worried about me saying something that might cause them trouble. If that were the case, they should have just given in to my demands and sent me away already.

I was eating food off of the buffet while thinking about their stupidity. They had prepared a special meal just for me, but I just ignored that.

“So this is Siltvelt food, huh?” I muttered.

A lot of the flavors lacked refinement. You might even say there was something foul about the taste, but you could also argue that it was a chance to enjoy some unusual food.

“Hmm . . . I’d have to adjust the seasoning if I were going to serve this to the villagers. Coming up with a recipe shouldn’t be too difficult, though,” I said.

I analyzed each dish as I ate the food. I figured the villagers would make a fuss about wanting to try the food when I told them about it. It’d be best to go ahead and think about how to recreate it to some extent.

“You really think so? This is some really strange fare,” Raphtalia said.

There was something shaped like a little pouch that seemed like a fruit. I slit it open to analyze it. Maybe it was just me, but something about it seemed really raunchy.

“Making something that looks similar shouldn’t be too much of a problem. The ingredients themselves seem to be contributing to the flavoring a lot,

though," I replied.

There weren't many dishes that had really been given a distinct added flavor. But the natural flavors of the ingredients themselves, on the other hand, were pretty peculiar. I could make something similar but still different for the villagers.

"They have something that resembles ratatouille too," I said.

"What is that?" Raphtalia asked.

"It's a dish from back in my world. It's more of a country home cooking dish where I come from. But it's common in prisons and stuff, since it's cheap to make. The dish has some pretty tasteless nicknames like 'stinky slop,'" I explained.

I could imagine Keel looking disgusted right about now, if she'd been listening. She'd gotten really picky about smells ever since she started transforming into a dog. Honestly, someone who was used to Melromarc's food probably would think it stunk and might not be able to eat it.

"And that's something you eat?" Raphtalia asked.

"That it is. If you use quality ingredients, it can actually be pretty good. There's another similar dish known as caponata too."

"I noticed this a long time ago, but you sure seem to know a lot about cooking, Mr. Naofumi."

"You think so?"

"Remember that time when the village children made something and they were so proud of it? You took just one bite and then made several adjustments that really improved it."

"Oh yeah. And then the slave that had been in charge of cooking got all depressed."

I'd just made a couple of tiny adjustments that I figured would make the dish taste better. But doing so apparently hurt the pride of the slave who'd been in charge of cooking. Even I realized maybe I'd gone too far. I felt bad about it, so I hadn't meddled with the slaves' cooking since. They deserved to do things their

way, if they were going to do the cooking. But honestly, that kid glared at me like I'd killed her parents every time I cooked now.

"I should probably avoid doing any of the cooking, but they keep making requests. That kid who was handling the cooking that time will probably hate me until she dies," I said.

"Hate you?" Raphtalia asked.

"Well, yeah. Haven't you noticed she glares at me nonstop every time I'm cooking?"

"That's just her way of making sure she doesn't miss anything you're doing!"

"Ah, I see. So she just wants to see me make a mistake."

"That's not it. She's doing her best to learn from you so that she can improve."

"Then she doesn't hate me?"

"On the contrary, she has the utmost respect for you!"

Raphtalia seemed completely sure of herself. It did feel nice to hear that, but I couldn't really trust Raphtalia to be objective.

"Impressive as always, Mr. Naofumi! Why waste time capturing the hearts of the slaves when you can control them by capturing their stomachs instead?!" Atla exclaimed.

She sure knew how to make things sound bad. I'd heard people saying similar things in the village and the neighboring town. There seemed to be rumors that I made the slaves do whatever I wanted by feeding them food that was addictive.

"I know you like to cook too, Raphtalia. You should cook more often," I said.

"Umm, Mr. Naofumi . . . Would you really want to cook for someone who is a far better cook than yourself?" she replied.

Huh? Was that supposed to mean that she had reservations about me eating her cooking because I was a good cook?

"That's nothing you should worry about. Have I ever criticized someone else's

cooking like I was a food snob?” I asked.

“I guess you don’t really criticize others when it comes to food,” Raphtalia replied.

“I notice you made sure to specify food there . . .”

I suddenly recalled picking apart the way a crooked merchant was doing business on the Cal Mira islands once.

“Whatever. I’ll make sure to check out some of the dishes that Siltvelt is famous for later. Otherwise, I’ll never hear the end of it from Keel,” I said.

“Hm?” Filo muttered.

She started stuffing her face with food. It wasn’t going to last long now that she’d gotten going. The night wore on and the banquet ultimately ended without incident.

Chapter Five: Harem

I returned to my room after the evening party ended.

“Rafuu!”

Raph-chan looked out the window at the view and squeaked. I’d heard some demi-humans and therianthropes were nocturnal, and there was no sign of the lights dimming down below in the Siltvelt castle town. There were even some demi-humans that looked like bats flying around in the air.

“Shield Hero, it’s time for your bath. Please follow me,” said one of the maids.

“Oh yeah, they did say I would get to bathe after the party,” I said to myself.

“Rafu?”

Raph-chan had been made from a lock of Raphtalia’s hair, so that made her a female, right? Regardless, I didn’t like the idea of leaving her here in the room. I decided to take her with me. I picked Raph-chan up and followed the maid to the bathing area.

We walked down a hallway on the first floor of the castle that exited into the courtyard and then continued on to an area that looked like a shrine surrounded by trees. I could see steam rising, so that was probably the baths.

There were actually public bathing areas in Melromarc too. The people of this world seemed to take personal hygiene pretty seriously. But when I really thought about it, they summoned heroes from Japan on a regular basis. With the heroes telling them about their culture, it made sense that Japanese bathing habits might catch on. That was convenient for me.

I suddenly remembered all of those times rinsing myself off with cold water by the riverside after I’d been framed. I sure had come a long way when I thought about it.

As I reminisced, I took my armor and clothes off in what seemed to be the dressing area. The maid was staring at me, but I didn’t let it bother me. I’m sure that was just part of the job.

“Rafuu . . .”

Raph-chan seemed embarrassed. She put her hands over her eyes. She always had the cutest reactions.

“Alright. Let’s go, Raph-chan,” I said.

“Rafuuu!”

If I had the chance to bathe, I figured I might as well take my time and enjoy it. I walked toward the baths. The steam completely filled the air. I could make out the outlines of several figures when I looked over at the baths. I hesitated to say people, because the figures were so huge.

“We’re so glad you could make it, Shield Hero!”

Several girls who probably belonged to wealthy households stepped out of the bath and did their best to strike seductive poses.

“You let us take care of washing that body of yours, Shield Hero,” one of them said.

“Feel free to choose whoever you like best from among us . . . and we’ll be happy to accompany you back to your room,” said another one.

Umm, I was pretty sure I’d seen one or two of them at the slave market in Zeltoble.

“What do you think?” one of the girls asked.

Her breasts bounced as she sauntered over, and a chill ran down my spine. I’d been set up! They clearly planned on seducing me here and making me do something vulgar! Even if I was the Shield Hero, I was still a man. Somebody must have figured the sight of naked women would get me excited and came up with this plan.

The baths looked like a brothel. They were filled with everything from normal-looking women to massive therianthropes that were at least as big as Sadeena’s killer whale form. It was like I was supposed to be some kind of lecher who’d take any woman I could get my hands on. Or maybe they just prepared a wide variety of women and hoped that one of them would fit my preferences.

“Sorry, but I’m not interested,” I said.

I tried to leave the bathing area, but the women all got out of the water and surrounded me.

“Please don’t say that, Shield Hero!”

“Even if you think you won’t like it at first, you’ll be in ecstasy before you know it. You won’t be able to get enough!”

Blech! The chills . . . I felt sick. It made my flesh crawl. I mean, Sadeena had said things that made me want to throw up before, but this was on a whole different level. I’d settle for Sadeena a million times over before I touched one of these sluts. At least Sadeena gave me a choice. She always left me an escape route. Even if she did say things that made me sick, something about her attitude was comforting.

I never thought I would actually say something like that about Sadeena. I had no idea how absolutely repulsive it was when someone was actually serious about trying to seduce me. And not even really me, but the Shield Hero. I might even have to revise my opinion of Sadeena, even if only slightly. The same went for Atla.

“Please choose, Shield Hero! Which one of us do you most desire?”

“I want to give birth to your child, Shield Hero!” a small demi-human girl exclaimed.

She was practically an infant and she was saying things like that! It sent a shiver down my spine. It was like Melty trying to seduce me or something. I would’ve told her to try again in another ten years. I’m sure she would have yelled at me, though.

“Stop screwing around! Get out of here!” I shouted.

But the women didn’t leave. They inched closer to me, one step at a time.

“Come on, girls! Do your best to seduce the Shield Hero!” said one of the girls.

The women suddenly leapt at me and I calmly called out the name of a skill.

“Shooting Star Shield!”

The Shooting Star Shield barrier formed around me and repelled the women. The old weapon shop guy had saved my neck once again. Never before in my

life had I been so happy to have this skill.

“Ugh . . . Come on, Shield Hero! Let’s have some fun!” one of them called out.

“No thanks!” I shouted.

“Oh really? Come on, everyone! We must break this shell for the sake of our beloved Shield Hero!” she announced.

“Yeah!” they cried out in unison.

“How about no!” I shouted.

I figured I would just ignore them and barge through, pushing them out of the way, but reinforcements kept showing up until the bathing area was practically overflowing with women. Dammit! This was bad! My chances of escaping were diminishing with each second! Even worse, they all started hitting my barrier in an attempt to break it!

Talk about how *not* to set the mood! The women were all crowded around my defensive barrier and punching at it. This was some next-level scary shit. I had an accessory that added a counterattack effect to my Shooting Star Shield, but it only worked in Kizuna’s world. I hadn’t been able to find a usable substitute here in this world yet.

“Raaaawwwrrrrr!”

What the hell?! *Hey, elephant therianthrope! Stop trying to body slam me with your full weight, dammit!* Wait a minute! Was that thing planning on trying to sleep with me too?!

This barrier had even been able to withstand one of the Spirit Tortoise’s attacks, but the women continued to crowd around it, intent on destroying it.

“Mwahahaha! All we have to do is break this thing and the Shield Hero will be ours!” one of them shouted.

“Grrrr . . .”

Shit. The barrier didn’t show any signs of breaking, but the whole thing was still scary for a multitude of other reasons. I had to figure out a way to get out of there.

“Portal Shield!”

I couldn’t use my portal?! Had someone leaked info about how to interfere with our portal skills?! It didn’t matter! I needed to focus on shaking these women and getting out of here! I could probably use the barrier to repel them and force my way through. But could I really make it all the way to Raphtalia and the others with a never-ending stream of women on my tail?

“Rafuuu!”

Raph-chan jumped up on my head and started squeaking. She began to focus her attention as if she were reciting a magical incantation. I wondered if it would be possible to cast cooperative magic with Raph-chan. If things went well, I might just end up making it out of this mess after all.

I focused my attention on Raph-chan’s squeaks. I had no idea what kind of magic we could cast. But given the situation, anything would have been better than standing around doing nothing. Raph-chan and I wove our magic together as I continued walking.

Oh? Those familiar cooperative-magic puzzle pieces gradually began to fade into view. Way to go, Raph-chan! She’d come from a lock of Raphtalia’s hair, so her magic felt similar to Raphtalia’s. I was sure we’d be able to use the same cooperative magic that Raphtalia and I had cast before.

“*Power of two, lend your strength to confuse the enemy with an illusion! Re-spin the threads of fate, and turn our defeat into a victory!*”

“*Rafu, rafu, rafu . . .*”

I couldn’t help but smile when Raph-chan recited her incantation. I didn’t know if it was because Raph-chan was essentially a big bundle of magic power or not, but the flow of magic felt even stronger than when I’d cast the spell with Raphtalia.

“*Dragon Vein! Hear our petition and grant it! As the source of your power, we implore you! Let the true way be revealed once more! Show our enemies an illusion to confuse them!*”

“Emptiness is Form!”

“Rafuuuuu!”

Emptiness is Form?! I thought it was Form is Emptiness! I guess the meaning was essentially the same. We’d cast a spell that was almost the same, but different! Our magic shot out across the whole area, affecting all of the women there. They almost seemed to be tripping out as they stumbled away and then broke out into a riot in a different place than I was.

“No, wait! Shield Hero! Ohhh, you’re such a bad boy!” they yelled.

I had no idea what kind of hallucination they were seeing, but they started writhing around and falling over unconscious, one by one. Alright! This was our chance to escape!

“Rafu!”

Just then, Raphtalia and the others came running up. It was the worst timing possible.

“I got a distress signal from Raph-chan, but, umm . . .” Raphtalia’s voice trailed off.

“Oh my,” said Sadeena.

They were looking around and taking in the scene.

“They all look like they were having fuuun! Were you playing with them, Masteeerrr?” Filo asked.

“Ugh! They beat me to the finish line!” Atla lamented.

“I can’t believe you nailed so many girls in one go . . .” Fohl mumbled.

Did he seriously just say that?

“Like hell I did! Stop getting such ridiculous ideas! Raph-chan and I cast some cooperative magic and made them see a hallucination. Now is our chance to run! Let’s go!” I shouted.

“That will not be necessary!” Werner announced as he walked up.

“My deepest apologies, Shield Hero. Take these women away at once!” he shouted to his lackeys, who then began to drag the half-conscious women away.

Ugh . . . The place had started to reek. It was hard to describe, but if I had to say, it reeked of women. I wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible. I suddenly remembered the trauma I'd experienced when Witch deceived me.

"Shield Hero, please forgive us for this gross mishandling," Werner continued.

"This is beyond forgivable!" I shouted.

"This is a service that past Shield Heroes have enjoyed through the generations. We assumed you would be no different," he replied.

"So you finally show your true colors!" I shouted.

I motioned to Raphtalia and the others. Everyone drew their weapons and readied themselves to attack. But Werner stood there motionless with his hands clasped behind his back, as if to say that he had no intention of fighting.

"Well, well, well . . . I guess this means the Shield Hero is quite picky about his women," said a voice from the shadows.

And then the lion therianthrope from before came strolling over. Werner looked over at the lion and then furrowed his brow unhappily.

"Jaralis, choose your words more wisely," Werner said.

Upon being reprimanded, the lion that Werner had called Jaralis shrugged derisively and backed off. But he was still staring at Fohl and Atla with a look of contempt in his eyes. Fohl noticed him staring at them and seemed confused. I'd noticed people in Siltvelt looking enviously at the others just because they were under my command, so he could just deal with it for now. I wanted to get back to addressing what had just happened before changing the subject.

"Did you really think I'd let a bunch of women seduce me and then just have my way with them?!" I shouted.

Ever since being summoned to this world, even the thought of that kind of thing just made my stomach churn.

"I'm so very sorry," Werner said.

I was sure he felt absolutely zero remorse. In that case, I'd use this to make him agree to my demands. Yeah, I liked that idea.

“If you want me to overlook this, then arrange the boat for Q’ten Lo already!” I demanded.

“I-I’m afraid that will take more time. Please be patient with us,” Werner replied.

“Do you really need more time? There will be consequences if you lie to me!” I shouted.

“We do,” he said.

I continued grilling Werner for a while, but like a true politician, he skillfully avoided making any concrete statements and firmly stood his ground.

“Anyway, we’re going to use my teleportation skill to return to the village for now,” I said.

“W-wait! That would be a problem! Please give us some more time!” he replied.

“Why do you want me to stay in the castle so bad?” I asked.

“It would be bad for the country’s reputation if you were to leave without staying even one night,” he said.

Ah, now it made sense. The other countries had left Siltvelt in charge of hosting and managing the Shield Hero. If I left the country because they had pissed me off, Siltvelt would lose its national prestige.

“In such a case, it would be unclear whether we could comply with your request,” he continued.

I had a feeling what he was saying was reasonable, but it still seemed suspicious. What a pain.

“Then don’t let word get out! We’re just going to the village to sleep!” I said.

“Umm, Mr. Naofumi . . . Don’t you think we should give them one last chance? Otherwise we’re never going to reach an agreement, and that would be a problem for us as well,” Raphtalia said.

Werner must have realized I wouldn’t be able to argue with Raphtalia, because a look of relief spread across his face. Dammit! I glared at Sadeena.

“We can try to get to Q’ten Lo without Siltvelt’s assistance, but there’s no guarantee we’ll be able to make it,” she said.

Shit! What an annoying problem to have!

“Fine,” I said.

“Very well. I will call for a vote to comply with your request at an assembly in the near future. I shall do my best to ensure you receive our assistance, so please quell your anger,” Werner replied.

In the near future? At an assembly?

“Just what kind of cumbersome system does this country run on?!” I exclaimed.

“Siltvelt is supposedly similar to what the heroes refer to as a democracy. Representatives from the different races gather and vote on issues,” Sadeena explained.

A democracy?! They sure chose an annoying political system!

“In the past, the opinions of the hakuko and other elite races had a lot of political sway. But that changed after the loss of a war weakened their standing, I believe,” she continued.

That meant Trash was dragging me down even all the way out here in Siltvelt. Give me a break already! I was going to ask the queen to torture him when we got back to Melromarc.

“Utter foolishness! The ignorant masses can gather and discuss things all they want, but that will never amount to anything of value!” Atla muttered.

Hadn’t she been praising Siltvelt earlier? And what was with that comment, anyway? She sounded like some kind of oppressive dictator.

“Okay, fine. I’m going to let this one go. But I want you to make sure I get my assistance as soon as possible,” I said.

“Of course! As you wish, Shield Hero!” Werner replied.

He bowed and then left the bathing area. After that, we all returned to my room. Well, Raphtalia and the others had to wait on standby in the next room

over to comply with the Siltvelt rules. And so the night wore on.

I almost forgot to mention that Werner said they planned on having more women waiting for me in my room after I returned from my bath. I remembered seeing a parade of disappointed-looking women walking down the hallway when I was heading back to my room.

Chapter Six: Conspiracy

The next morning in Siltvelt . . . Actually, the Siltvelt castle town was apparently the castle town that never sleeps, so the streets were bustling all night long. It was pretty much the same in the morning. How did these people ever get any sleep? But then again, with such a diversity of demi-humans and therianthropes, I guess that couldn't be helped. It made Melromarc seem quiet in comparison, and that just felt strange.

I yawned.

"I wonder when breakfast is," I mumbled to myself.

I woke up early since I was used to getting up at the crack of dawn to take care of the monsters. I played with them a bit in the morning before preparing breakfast.

Other than Raphtalia and our group, there was no sign of anyone else in this section of the castle. Perhaps it was because they assumed I would still be in bed. I wouldn't have been surprised if leaving the room would set off an alarm or something. But I hadn't really gotten to talk with Raphtalia and the others much yesterday, so I decided to go meet up with them while I had the chance. I went to check the next room where they were staying.

I'd already had Sadeena and Atla check the rooms for any concealed shadow-type agents. There had been a few, but we chased them off. Even Raphtalia and Raph-chan could see through their concealment techniques by now too. After what had happened at the baths, we decided not to let anyone stick around, no matter who they were.

"Rafuuu!"

Raph-chan was constantly on the lookout, so I was sure there was no one like that around anymore. If they were, I'd smoke them out and use that as an excuse to really get mad this time. Maybe they knew that, because it was dead quiet. We ran the guards off last night too, so there really was no one left.

Alright! I quietly snuck out of my room and then walked over and opened the

door to the next room. When I did, I saw Fohl and Atla sitting there talking to a hakuko-looking fellow that I'd never seen before. It must have been Raphtalia and the others' turn to rest.

"Mr. Naofumi!" Atla exclaimed, as if she had been deeply moved. "Good morning! Today is a good day!"

"Oh yeah?" I replied.

I looked over at Fohl. He seemed a bit annoyed by Atla's attitude, but I guess he wasn't going to shower me with insults today.

"Who is that?" I asked.

"He's someone who used to work for my brother," Atla said.

"That's wrong, Atla. He worked for our parents," Fohl replied, correcting Atla.

Their parents' servant or whatever he was looked at me and got down on one knee.

"I can never thank you enough for so graciously taking Fohl and Atla in and even going so far as to nurse Atla back to health," he said.

"Umm, sure. Don't worry about it," I replied.

I think he was the first hakuko I'd seen here in Siltvelt.

"You truly are amazing, Shield Hero. To be able to witness such a miracle — I am simply in awe," he continued.

"That's enough of the formalities. And the gushy words of gratitude. Any more and I'll get mad," I said.

He looked up at me for a moment and then bowed deeply and stood up.

"So what were you three talking about?" I asked.

"Don't you remember what we discussed before coming here? You said you wanted to try asking for assistance if I knew of anyone," Fohl replied.

"Oh yeah. So this is that person?"

"Well, yeah."

This guy was supposed to assist us? I guess, with the way things were now, all

I could do was ask him what he'd be able to do for us.

"And what can you do for us? I'm not interested in trying to force you to help if there's nothing you can actually do," I said.

"There are several options we can discuss, but before that I wanted to tell you that the shusaku and his followers here in Siltvelt have no intention of letting you leave the country," he replied.

"I don't know how much of what you say I can trust, but judging from Werner's reaction yesterday, that wouldn't be a surprise," I said.

I'd gotten a glimpse of his true intentions via his attempt to keep me tied down here by throwing women at me.

"I'm not sure why he would want to keep someone as dangerous as me around, considering I could put his position at risk. He must be out of his mind," I continued.

"I suppose that depends on the hero," the man replied.

"What does?" I asked.

"Well, you know . . ."

I guess I could imagine something about getting me to marry someone.

"There are a number of possibilities, but I'm sure you can imagine what they might be," the man continued.

"Does he plan on giving us a boat to Q'ten Lo?" I asked.

"We haven't been able to verify those details yet," he replied.

I wondered if that meant I shouldn't expect much. I was starting to think this trip had been a waste of time.

"How disappointing," Atla said.

Wasn't that supposed to be my line?

"The hakuko are currently in the process of doing everything we can to see that your request is fulfilled, both for your sake and Fohl's as well," the man said.

“That said, any semblance of hakuko influence in Siltvelt is basically for show now, so don’t expect much,” Fohl emphasized.

I wasn’t a monster. I wouldn’t act without taking the other party’s position into consideration. But damn, I wanted to get out of this country and invade Q’ten Lo already! Since Siltvelt was a democracy, I wondered if that meant the hakuko were just busy trying to convince the other races to provide us assistance. I had no idea how many political factions there were.

“There is something else too, Fohl. There is a dubious character here in Siltvelt that you and the Shield Hero must be very careful of,” the man said.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Fohl asked.

“I guess it doesn’t hurt to listen, just for reference,” I said.

“Isn’t that a bit rude?” Fohl replied.

He looked at me with a disgusted look in his eyes and Atla gave him a sharp jab.

“Ugh . . .”

“It’s a therianthrope who was with Fohl’s grandfather at the time of his death. His name is Jaralis and — ”

We heard footsteps approaching. The hakuko interrupted the conversation, bowed, and left the room. Several moments later, a therianthrope that looked like a female lion showed up. She seemed to be looking for me.

“There you are, Shield Hero,” she said.

“It doesn’t matter where I am as long as I’m in the castle, right?” I replied.

“You never know where an assassin might be lurking. Please wait in your room until it is time.”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever,” I said.

Hmph. So there was some kind of conspiracy in Siltvelt and now I knew who to watch out for. Jaralis was that lion therianthrope, right? I didn’t know how far his involvement went or what the conspiracy was, but I needed to get them to agree to prepare a boat as soon as possible.

I didn't care about any Siltvelt conspiracies anyway. They could conspire all they wanted. I had no interest in that kind of thing—as long as it didn't cause me any trouble. I'm sure they felt the same way too. Because I had been somewhere far away, their worship of the Shield Hero over the generations and all of that was easy to take advantage of. Siltvelt hadn't tried to get involved with me before now. And that was my answer.

"Alright, Atla and Fohl. Tell Raphtalia and the others I said hey," I said.

"Okay," Fohl replied.

"No, it's not okay. When will we get to see Mr. Naofumi again?" Atla asked the lion.

I stood up to go back to my room. Atla made it clear that she was upset as she questioned the lion.

"You'll be eating breakfast with the Shield Hero later, so please be patient," the lion replied.

"There you go. See you then," I said.

"Understood," Atla replied.

I went back to my oversized bedroom and had a staring contest with Raph-chan to pass the time until breakfast.

Hmm . . . If something was bound to happen, maybe I should go ahead and bring Filo back with me to the room as another pet to ensure mobility. I wasn't sure, but maybe she could transform into a filolial chick and then she could be another secret weapon like Raph-chan. I could use her to get away if things went south.

Yeah, I was going to try that. Raphtalia and the others could get away using some other means. I had a feeling this idea was a stroke of genius.

The time came to go eat breakfast. I was taken to a terrace with a really nice view. There was a table surrounded by a ton of people, and they sat me at the head of the table. I guess this was where we were going to eat breakfast. Raphtalia and the others showed up and sat down too.

"How is everything?" I asked.

“No problems so far. I do feel murderous stares every now and then, though,” Raphtalia said.

“I bet,” I replied.

I looked at the dishes that had been laid out before us. Hmm. Raphtalia and I squinted and stared at the food.

“Hm?” Filo muttered.

She seemed to have noticed right away too. I guess those were her filolial instincts.

“. . .”

Atla seemed to have a sense for that kind of thing too. But Fohl still had no idea. In that case, it must have been something that even your average demi-human or therianthrope wouldn’t catch.

“Oh my,” Sadeena whispered.

She’d noticed too. Raphtalia’s and Filo’s reactions had probably tipped her off. I really did have an observant bunch of companions. I looked over at each of them and signaled them with my eyes. They all nodded. I was going to stay quiet and see how things played out.

“Now then, let us all enjoy our meal,” Werner announced after standing up.

Everything hinged upon whether or not he knew what was going on. And then, almost as if they had arranged it beforehand, everyone present clasped their hands together in unison and began to pray.

“May all be as our Lord the Shield wills it. We are thankful for this food that nourishes our mortal bodies. May it give us the strength to carry out the wishes of our lord, the protector of this world.”

“May it give us the strength!”

Holy shit, I almost fell out of my chair! What kind of prayer was that?! I mean, I’d been called the saint of the bird god before, but this was way more awkward than that! I never imagined being worshipped this openly would be so creepy!

But whatever. I’d ignore that for the time being. Without saying a word, I put

a bite of stew in my mouth and pretended to swallow it before spitting it out in a napkin. Then I looked around. Hmm. I stood up and pointed at the stew I'd been served.

"Ahem! So you all just prayed to me, your 'Lord the Shield.' Well, as the Shield Hero, I'm ordering you all to eat a bite of this stew stuff that was served to me and my companions. Right now," I said.

"Umm, as you wish."

Werner and several other members of the Siltvelt leadership did as I ordered and ate a bite of the stew.

"Go ahead, Atla," I said.

"Understood!"

In a flash, she leapt behind the members that hadn't eaten the stew and delivered a quick jab to each of their backs.

"Gah! Wh-what's the idea?!" one of them shouted.

"She's just following my orders. Now then . . ." I said.

I pulled out several powerful antidotes from my shield and tossed them to the ones who had eaten the stew.

"I don't know how fast-acting the poison is, so you should probably go ahead and drink the antidote. Now then . . ." I continued.

I leaned back and put my feet up on the table, like an ill-mannered twerp, and glared at the members of the leadership.

"So who wants to explain?" I asked.

That's right. The food we'd been served had been poisoned. My shield and Raphtalia's katana had the ability to detect poisons. The ability was called "poison sensing," but that was beside the point. If we put any kind of poisonous plant in our weapons and analyzed it, a warning would pop up.

I had no intention of forgiving the scoundrels who had so blatantly tried to assassinate me and my companions. Being a political enemy was no excuse. Anyone willing to make an attempt on another's life needed to be held

accountable.

“Apparently you weren’t involved,” I said as I glared at Werner.

It seemed like he really hadn’t known. He was in a state of shock. The person in charge of tasting for poison must have been in on it, because he was looking at me with a disgusted look on his face.

“What were you thinking!?” Werner slammed his hands down on the table and shouted at the members we’d exposed.

“Ugh . . .”

“I’m absolutely horrified! Execute them at once!” he continued.

“That would be letting them off easy,” I said.

I looked over at the lion therianthrope who hadn’t eaten the stew. He thought no one had noticed, but I saw him smirk ever so slightly when I pretended to take a bite.

And then without delay, I swung into action. We left breakfast uneaten and moved to the throne room. I sat on the throne and had the perpetrators kneel before me.

“I’ll see to it that everyone who was involved is smoked out. Please give me some time,” Werner said.

“Sorry, but I’m done waiting. I’ve had enough of your stalling!” I shouted.

I glared at Werner and he simply bowed his head. I guess that meant he wasn’t going to try to argue.

“Listen up. We want to get to Q’ten Lo as soon as possible and we need you to arrange for that to happen. I have no interest in doing anything that will cause problems for any of you. If you want to engage in a power struggle, that’s fine, but leave me out of it,” I said.

There was no way I was going to stick around with a bunch of bastards who’d tried to assassinate my whole party. The lion therianthrope had been staring at the ground, but he looked up and took a step forward.

“Making such a demand is easy, but if there is backlash from the people, I

don’t know if we will be able to keep them under control,” he said.

“You ‘don’t know’? Bullshit,” I replied.

“Not at all. I’ve heard that assassins are being sent to your territory. If there is backlash, I can’t deny the possibility that some of Siltvelt’s citizens might join those assassins in their mission,” he went on.

“Oh really? And why is that?”

“Is it not obvious? A Shield Hero who is content with staying in Melromarc is of no value to them. To them, such a Shield Hero is but an imposter, presuming to be a god. It would be no surprise if we saw the emergence of a faction of citizens driven to violence by their own sense of justice,” he explained.

I had to admit that what he was saying did make sense. So in other words, he wanted to say that it was my fault that there was unrest within Siltvelt.

“It’s only natural that we would want you to do everything you can to help resolve this issue. Whether you do that directly or leave it to your underlings is of little consequence,” he continued.

“And what exactly do you want me to do?” I asked.

“I’m sure you already know the answer to that. It’s the same thing Werner desires as representative of the shusaku. The same thing all members of the Siltvelt leadership desire. Indeed, it is the same thing that all of Siltvelt desires,” he replied.

I stood there silently, looking at the lion therianthrope and wondering what he wanted to say.

“First of all, it goes without saying that you would commit to acting as the Shield Hero solely on behalf of Siltvelt,” he said.

“Solely?” I asked.

After the incident with the Spirit Tortoise, the waves had stopped occurring in this world for the time being. But that was temporary, and when they started again it would be up to me, Ren, Itsuki, and Motoyasu to travel around the world taking care of them.

That went for the seven star heroes too, of course. I didn’t know where they

were or when I would see them, but if we didn't all cooperate to put an end to the waves, we would most likely end up facing the same kind of problem Kizuna's world was up against. I really wanted to talk to the seven star heroes about all of that now, before the waves started again.

"That is correct. You would act not on behalf of our enemy Melromarc, but as Siltvelt's hero, and only Siltvelt's hero," he replied.

"The heroes have to fight waves all over the world. Are you saying you have a problem with that? If there's something you want me to do here in Siltvelt, then I might be able to agree, depending on what it is," I said.

The lion therianthrope sneered and gave an instigative response.

"Are you that naïve? Do you really think Siltvelt is going to send its hero to other countries? Don't be absurd. Leaving the country without permission would be inexcusable," he said.

"So basically, you want to put me under house arrest here in the castle."

What a joke! I was so mad I could feel smoke coming out of my ears. I'd experienced all sorts of ridiculousness in this world, but it had been a long time since a request had pissed me off so much.

"Furthermore, you will take one wife from each tribe and produce an heir with each. Once you have done that, you will have fulfilled the absolute minimum of your obligations as the Shield Hero. Do you even have any idea how much discontent has accumulated among the tribes?" he continued.

So he was saying I was supposed to form a harem and get all of my wives pregnant?

"If you cannot even do that much, the tribes' dissatisfaction with the current Shield Hero is certain to remain. You say Q'ten Lo assassins are being sent to your territory? That's your own fault. That country is undoubtedly after you, the Shield Hero. To say that they would come after a pathetic racoon such as her is absolutely ludicrous," he went on.

And to top it all off, he glared at Raphtalia like she was a piece of trash while he insulted her. I wasn't sure I could resist the urge to kill him anymore.

That did it. I'd activate my Shooting Star Shield and parade around the castle town, declaring that the country's leaders were rotten to the core and needed to be overthrown immediately. I'd start a revolution. If I didn't, I was never going to get to Q'ten Lo.

"Jaralis! Hold your tongue! Shield Hero, I beg of you, please ignore him!" Werner exclaimed.

He must have sensed my anger, because he got down on the ground and prostrated himself, begging for forgiveness. But I wasn't the type to let something go so easily.

"Do not misunderstand. What I have told you is the collective opinion of the people of Siltvelt. That is a fact. However, I am not like them. Leave the arrangement of your trading ship to Q'ten Lo to me, Shield Hero," Jaralis said as he approached me.

He clenched his fists tightly as he openly defied Werner.

"Jaralis! You bastard!" Werner shouted.

"That is right, Shield Hero. I shall prepare a ship for you. You have my word," Jaralis continued.

"Hmm . . ."

Did this guy think I was an idiot or something? The members who'd tried to poison us were all glaring at him, and it was obvious that they wanted to say, "That's not what we agreed on!"

He probably just planned on running if I pointed it out. But surely he, of all people, knew just how much influence I had as the Shield Hero. I might have even been able to get away with having Raphtalia and the others kill him right there on the spot by just saying I'd told them to.

"Heeeey Maaasteerrr, why is that person saying something he doesn't really meeeaan?" Filo asked.

She pointed at Jaralis.

"Are you implying that I'm lying? Ha! I wonder what gives you that idea," he said.

“Huuuh? But when you said you would prepare a boat, you had the same look in your eyes as a person who’s lyyyying. Just like Mel-chan’s big sister or that armor guy that worked for the bow guuuy,” Filo replied.

Just like Witch or Armor, huh? Yeah, this guy was definitely just about as untrustworthy as those two.

“It’s unfortunate that you think that. Regardless, I am being quite sincere,” he said.

“Huuuh? But when Master was about to eat that stew, you were clenching your hands under the table in anticipation. I saw yooou,” Filo replied.

“I saw that too. You should have done a little better about hiding it,” I said.

“Y-you’re mistaken! That’s purely a coincidence! Does clenching one’s fists make one a criminal?! Do you enjoy framing people, Shield Hero?” he asked.

Hmph. So he knew about my past trauma and was using that to try to manipulate me. But I saw him smirk ever so slightly when I pretended to eat the stew. He was undeniably rotten. It was obvious he was trying to use me for his own political purposes. Now I just needed to decide how to cook his goose.

“Framing, huh? I have no problem with presuming innocence when in doubt, but I saw you smirking. Or do you have an excuse for that too?” I asked.

“Your eyes were clearly playing tricks on you,” he replied.

That was a ballsy answer. So I guess he was going to insist that what I’d witnessed was just me seeing things.

“That’s not truuuue. You were acting fidgety before Master took a bite toooo,” Filo said.

She really was good at seeing through others’ lies.

“Why are you doing thiiis? Why don’t you tell the truuuuth?” she asked.

With a little bit of guidance, she could come in handy during the interrogations. Actually, I guess I’d used her against Melty before too. Her tactics didn’t work on me, though.

“Alright then, maybe I’ll put Filo in charge of questioning the poison taster. If

he doesn’t know anything, then we’ll just question the next person. You’ll be last. Then again, even if things don’t lead back to you, you’ve done plenty of other shady things too. I refuse to trust you,” I told Jaralis.

“Oh, dear!” he replied.

He made an exaggerated show of being mortified when I pointed at him.

“Reprehensible! I can bear no more of this!” Atla declared loudly as she took a step forward.

“Huh?”

Chapter Seven: A True Siltveltian

“What is this insolence? You and your brother are hakuko half-breeds. You have no right to speak here! Be gone!” Jaralis shouted.

“Half-breed? Right to speak? Pathetic! Have the people of Siltvelt — those of you here in this room, especially — not forgotten the most important thing of all?” Atla replied.

She may have only been a child, but she brushed off Jaralis’s angry response as if she were completely unaffected.

“What?!” shouted Jaralis.

“Hold your tongue!” yelled another member.

“A-Atla?” Fohl stuttered.

“I will not. I would not be able to forgive myself if I stood by and watched this farce without speaking up. My intellect, my intuition, and my heart are all telling me that your actions are wrong,” she replied.

As Atla was speaking, I could sense some kind of energy erupting from her body. The energy took on the form of a tiger and bore down on the Siltvelt leadership. It felt similar to bloodlust, but not quite the same. I wondered if it was some kind of advanced application of life force.

Atla stomped a foot down in front of her and the impact caused the floor to split open. The surrounding members of the Siltvelt leadership gulped.

“C-could she be . . .”

“Impossible . . .”

The way they were trembling in fear seemed to imply they knew something I didn’t, but that wasn’t really my concern at the moment. I decided to just cross my arms, sit there like a king on a throne, and hear her out.

“I want you all to recall the original purpose of Siltvelt. Recall why it came to exist in the first place. You say you worship the Shield Hero, but here you are treating him like dirt!” she shouted.

“Wh-what are you saying?! Have we not welcomed the Shield Hero back — ”

“Then tell me, why does Mr. Naofumi, the Shield Hero, look so upset?! Do you really think we have not noticed the innumerable times you have treated Mr. Naofumi rudely since we arrived?!” she continued.

They were all trembling like a group of children being scolded by their mother.

“I’m ashamed that I ever admired your so-called religious devotion!” she shouted.

Oh yeah. Atla had gone on about how fantastic their devotion was several times earlier. I’d been planning on having a talk with her about that before long.



“Now then, people of Siltvelt, do you know how this country was founded? Can you tell me why it exists?” she asked.

“O-of course! It was founded by the Shield Hero and exists for the sake of the Shield Hero!” one of them replied.

He’d taken the bait. Atla pointed at the man.

“That’s right! Siltvelt was built by the Shield Hero, just like that village in Melromarc was rebuilt by Mr. Naofumi! And yet you make veiled threats of sending assassins to the village! Your actions are a disgrace to the founding of your own country!” she exclaimed.

“N-nonsense!”

“Siltvelt is a huge country! That village in Melromarc is — ”

“And did Siltvelt start out as a huge country? Are you saying the village that Mr. Naofumi, the Shield Hero, is rebuilding is insignificant simply because it is small?” she snapped.

There was no end in sight to Atla’s castigation. She was really on a roll.

“Do you want the history books to tell of a world that longed for something fresh and new rather than settling for worn, old fossils?” she asked.

“Ugh . . . But . . .”

“What is the purpose of our power — these claws and these fangs of ours — in the first place? Think about it! Is it world domination? Or is it to protect others? It is neither! It is all for the sake of Mr. Naofumi, the Shield Hero!” she shouted.

The members of the leadership — Werner, in particular — began nodding repeatedly.

“Have you not spent years upon years sharpening those fangs to prepare for when they would be needed? You can insult me and call me a half-breed if you like, but that doesn’t change what this blood running through my veins is telling me. It demands my loyalty to Mr. Naofumi!”

Some kind of strange aura began to form around Atla, and the leadership gradually began clapping. I couldn’t believe it. Would they swallow anything dished out to them?

“That’s right! The waves of destruction are upon us! The fate of future

generations lies in the hands of the Shield Hero! Have we not sharpened our fangs so that we may assist him? Then declare your loyalty to Mr. Naofumi! Serve him as a retainer should!”

The roar of applause filled the air. I was only looking on vacantly. Raphtalia had a look of disbelief on her face. There was a single lion therianthrope, along with his sidekick, who refused to join in on the applause. It was Jaralis, standing there with a scowl on his face.

“A-Atla?” Fohl muttered again.

He was staring at her with a look of amazement.

“I don’t know. Nothing she said seems outright wrong, so I can’t really argue with her,” Raphtalia said.

She seemed to mostly agree with Atla.

“Yeah. Her reasoning for being loyal to little Naofumi and her willingness to fight can’t be faulted,” Sadeena replied.

“Hm? We fight against the waves because Master asked us to, right?” Filo said.

They all voiced their support like it was completely obvious. Seeing this, the members of the Siltvelt leadership all knelt down, as if they had suddenly returned to their senses.

“I can’t believe I had to be told such a thing by a little girl like this. But it is just as she says,” Werner replied.

“We exist for the sake of the Shield Hero! Our purpose was supposed to be to rescue the world from the coming destruction. And yet we tried to treat the Shield Hero like a tool to gain power for ourselves. It’s unspeakable!” shouted another one of the members.

Everyone that had been clapping bowed to me. In a stark contrast to all of them, Jaralis and his sidekick glared at me and Atla.

“Objection! I submit that this Shield Hero standing here before us is not the true Shield Hero that Siltvelt has so longed for!” Jaralis roared.

“Jaralis, you bastard! Your insolence has crossed the line!” Werner snapped,

rebuking Jaralis.

“Insolence? You’re mistaken. It is exactly because I care deeply about Siltvelt that I am calmly stating my opinion so that we might avoid making any foolish decisions,” Jaralis replied.

Hmph. His wording was a bit sensationalistic, but I had a feeling what he was saying wasn’t wrong. The whole “Shield Hero’s word is law” attitude was a bit too blindly accepting in the first place. That could easily lead to trouble. If the situation had been different, I might have agreed with him. But at this point, he was only getting in the way. In which case, I wondered what to do about him.

Hm? Atla must have had something else to say, because she took in a deep breath and . . .

“Mr. Naofumi — nay, our god makes no mistakes!” she screamed at the top of her voice.

That little twit. I was starting to think she might be a genius when it came to stirring up trouble. And what the hell? These people were actually nodding in agreement. Even I could admit I made mistakes from time to time! I’d have to talk some sense into Atla later.

“Or are you foolish enough to try to say that Mr. Naofumi is a fake hero?” she asked.

“Not at all. I have no intention of going that far. I am simply saying that I don’t believe he is the Shield Hero that we have been waiting for,” Jaralis replied.

He was trying to avoid attracting further disapproval by objecting without denying outright that I was indeed the Shield Hero. It was the response of a true politician.

“I am questioning whether what we are seeing now are truly the waves of destruction spoken of in the legends. As they say, haste makes waste. If these truly are the waves prophesied to destroy the world, then why was the Shield Hero successfully summoned by our enemy, Melromarc?! Indeed, the fact that the Shield Hero was called to our enemy’s territory is the ultimate proof that now is in fact *not* the time that has been foretold!” he roared.

There was no arguing that things might have turned out differently if I’d been

summoned to Siltvelt by myself. I'd probably be spending time with my harem, engaging in some of that "rampant debauchery" that Sadeena liked to talk about, although I wanted to believe that wouldn't have happened.

"No, I'm afraid that theory doesn't hold water," Atla replied.

She shook her head in disagreement. Oh? Was she going to argue?

"It is exactly because this is the prophesied time that the Shield Hero was summoned together with the other three holy heroes. The true power of the heroes lies in sharing their individual powers with each other. In other words, Mr. Naofumi was summoned to Melromarc because it is an appropriate location for the other three heroes to be summoned to. *That* is your proof that the world is in danger!" she continued.

"Keep your sophistry to yourself!" Jaralis roared.

"Who is the true sophist here?! I speak as one who has sworn my loyalty to Mr. Naofumi!" she snapped.

The members of the Siltvelt leadership gulped and fell completely silent. Just then, a voice came from near the entrance of the throne room.

"You ridicule the young child, yet she has a strong will and is as fierce as a tiger. If one were to ask which of you were the true Siltveltian, I suspect anyone here would answer the girl," said the voice.

Everyone turned around. Standing in the entrance was a therianthrope that resembled a turtle. And standing next to him was Fohl's contact — the hakuko that I'd met early that morning. The turtle's tail looked like a snake. Perhaps it was just my imagination, but something about him made him seem plump.

"Who are you?" I asked, confused.

Werner's expression of surprise softened. He regained his composure and answered for the man.

"He is a genmu, and one of the country's most well-known nobles. He is among perhaps the top two most influential people here in Siltvelt," Werner explained.

Genmu? Was that supposed to be genbu? Ah, so the genmu race resembled

the Black Tortoise. All that was left was to find an aotatsu, or whatever they called the race that resembled the Azure Dragon. Then we would have all of the four symbols.

“Greetings, Shield Hero. I have heard of your many deeds. It is a true honor to make your acquaintance,” the turtle said.

“Thanks . . .” I replied.

“Might I remind you that you stand before the Shield Hero! No matter how powerful you may be, using that form here is unforgivable!” Werner snapped.

He spoke in a threatening voice, but he grinned at the genmu.

“My, my! I remain in this form at all times to keep myself protected, so I had completely forgotten,” he replied.

The genmu returned to his demi-human form. What had been a turtle was now a plump little man. He appeared to be rather elderly — around 60 years old, perhaps. The way he walked with a cane had already given that away. There was nothing particularly dislikable about the way he looked.

“Gentlemen, we have sharpened our fangs in preparation for the coming of the prophesied time. We have kept this country alive and strong so that it might support the Shield Hero. To imply that Siltvelt will fall apart if the Shield Hero does not remain here is utter foolishness. Do you not agree?” the man asked.

Aside from Jaralis and his sidekick, everyone nodded in agreement.

“Are you suggesting that we listen to this half-breed?! Nothing about her actions strikes me as being worthy of being called a true Siltveltian!” Jaralis roared.

That threatening aura erupted from Atla’s body once again.

“Is that so? If you insist on standing in Mr. Naofumi’s way no matter what, then . . .”

Atla pointed at Jaralis and issued a bold statement.

“Mr. Naofumi’s word is the law. If you are going to stand in his way, then I shall remove you using physical force!” she declared.

Gasps of surprise erupted from the Siltvelt leaders.

“Hmph! A most welcome proposition! Werner, I see no way of avoiding this,” Jaralis replied.

“Very well, then. In accordance with Siltvelt tradition, I permit you to engage in a duel!” Werner announced.

The leadership immediately broke out into a murmur.

“Then I shall serve as the guardian of the Shield Hero’s hakuko girl. Jaralis, you will personally accept the duel to show that you stand true to your beliefs,” the genmu said.

“Those are some big words, old man. Are you truly prepared to accept the consequences as her guardian should she lose the duel?” Jaralis asked.

“I am,” said the genmu.

It certainly seemed clear that the old man had a ridiculous amount of influence. But what was a traditional Siltvelt duel, anyway?

“First, the four ‘elite’ races of Siltvelt will relinquish their overinflated say in matters. Second, you will accept our claim to the Shield Hero as the sole property of Siltvelt. And finally, you will permit the severe punishment of that insolent little brat there,” Jaralis said.

“Th-that is — ”

Werner attempted to intervene, but the old man stopped him.

“If I lose, then so be it!” Atla shouted.

“Those conditions are a joke. They all favor him. I’d rather not accept them if there’s another way . . .” I said.

But I could see Atla’s firm determination written all over her face. I would have refused if it was me in her place. I was basically being treated like the prize here. Part of me wanted to tell them all to just go to hell.

“May I assume you will not object to us specifying equally severe conditions?” the old genmu asked.

“You may,” Jaralis answered, nodding calmly.

He seemed like the type that had confidence, if nothing else. But he also seemed to have a subtle charisma, or some lion-like quality, that gave him a regal air. I had no personal obligation to accept his terms, honestly. But it would be worth it if it meant being able to deal with Raphtalia's issue while also making these fools pay.

"Fine. Why not? I'll accept your conditions. In return, you'll agree to follow my orders if we win," I said.

"Why, of course! As you wish, great Shield Hero," Jaralis replied.

Could the bastard have been any more provocative?

"Then let us confirm the conditions. Should Jaralis win, the four noble houses of Siltvelt will relinquish their right to speak, the Shield Hero will remain in Siltvelt, and the half-blood hakuko will be punished. Should the Shield Hero win, Siltvelt will follow his orders. Are both parties in agreement?" Werner asked.

"Agreed," I replied.

"Then I shall explain the rules of the duel. According to Siltvelt tradition, those who initiated and accepted the duel each get to choose who will fight for the opposing party," Werner said.

"I choose . . ." Jaralis began.

He pointed at Atla and Fohl.

"The two hakuko half-breeds!" he roared.

"Huh?" Fohl muttered.

He was at a loss for words upon being chosen to fight. But seriously? I could understand Atla, but to pick Fohl too?

"You've got a big mouth for a half-breed! I'll show you the true power of pedigree!" Jaralis roared.

"I'd like to see you try! Although, I am a bit worried about Brother," Atla replied.

"A-Atla?!" Fohl stammered.

I was starting to feel sorry for him again.

“I would prefer to be paired with Mr. Naofumi,” Atla said.

“Am I allowed to participate in the duel?” I asked.

“Let the Shield Hero — the reward — participate? You’re quite the comedian, aren’t you?” Jaralis said sarcastically.

The bastard pointed at me and sneered with a provocative look in his eyes.

“I hope you realize you’re going to regret this later. Then how about Raphtalia or Filo?” I suggested.

Raphtalia would be able to crush him. I’d brought a real all-star lineup of formidable fighters, actually.

“You sure talk big, half-breed, but it would seem the Shield Hero has little faith in you and your brother. This is a real masterpiece,” Jaralis scoffed.

What an asshole. I sure hoped he wasn’t planning on trying anything sneaky to push the fight in his favor.

“Just to be clear, this is a duel between men. The use of monsters is not allowed,” Werner said.

“Hm?” Filo muttered.

“Rafuuu?”

Raph-chan and Filo both looked confused. I figured Filo might be able to participate in her human form, but I guess that wasn’t allowed.

“The fact is, I don’t really trust him to play fair, but . . . fine,” I said.

I realized that if I tried to swap the duel participants and send Raphtalia instead of Fohl, it would probably cause problems, but . . .

“You need not worry, Mr. Naofumi! Even if Brother is defeated, I will win the fight on my own!” Atla exclaimed.

“Atla?! I won’t be defeated!” Fohl replied.

She was basically declaring Fohl as useless. What a poor guy.

“I do feel a bit uneasy about it . . .” I admitted.

“To accept the opposition’s designations and still come out on top — *that* is a

true testimony to our strength! Even if Brother loses, I will not! Mr. Naofumi! Please allow this!" Atla pleaded.

I really would have rather been extra careful, but I guess it *was* partially thanks to Atla speaking up that we'd been able to specify the conditions we had. If worse came to worst, I could just make up some excuse and ignore their conditions. Besides, that Jaralis bastard really pissed me off. And I'd seen how formidable Atla could be recently too.

"Fine. I will allow it," I said.

"Thank you! Now then, we have Mr. Naofumi's permission. Let the duel begin!" Atla declared.

All of the hot-blooded members in the room nodded excitedly, and everyone was taken to the hall where the party had been held the night before. Apparently that was where the duel would be held.

Jaralis's sidekick was a brawny minotaur therianthrope who looked like some kind of legendary warrior. He was gripping his weapon tightly and raring to go. The guy was even bigger than the minotaur who had taken our carriage the day before.

"Oh my . . . I see you have chosen one of the surviving heroes of the great wars to fight by your side," said Werner.

"Indeed. With the Shield Hero at stake, this is a battle of utmost importance. I can't risk bringing along some nobody that I can't trust. Of course, I fully expect him to go all out from the get-go," Jaralis replied.

"All for the sake of Siltvelt!" exclaimed the minotaur.

He seemed eager to fight too.

"I'll have the Shield Hero take my daughter in marriage," he added.

Hell no. Even if this muscle-bound beast's daughter was the most beautiful girl in the world, I would still refuse. I disliked women as a general rule. And being used for breeding like a stud was inexcusable.

"But . . . Is this really . . ." Werner's voice trailed off.

He glanced over at me with a worried look on his face.

“Oh my . . . The boy certainly does seem to know how to handle himself. He might even be stronger than little Sasa,” Sadeena said.

I wanted to retort with a “who the hell is that?!” But I vaguely recalled that being the name of one of the fighters I’d seen in a Zeltoble coliseum match.

“We have no choice but to fight, regardless of who the opponent may be. Atla will just have to defeat him. Can you do that, Atla?” Raphtalia asked.

“You shouldn’t even have to ask, Raphtalia. If it will prove my loyalty to Mr. Naofumi, then I will smash through any obstacle, no matter how great it may be!” Atla replied.

“I . . .” Fohl started.

He seemed to be wavering. Whatever, I wasn’t expecting much from him anyway.

“And I’m supposed to just watch?” I asked.

“That’s right,” Werner replied.

Hmph. So this was how it felt to be treated like a prize. I couldn’t help but wonder if Raphtalia felt the same way when Motoyasu challenged me to a duel. Anyway, we’d managed to make it this far without losing. Doing so here wasn’t an option.

“Atla! Fohl! You better win, no matter what!” I said.

“Of course we will!” Atla replied.

“Ugh . . . I’ll win for Atla and for our father!” Fohl said.

Oh? He was starting to show a bit of verve too.

“Hmph! Good luck with that, you hakuko half-breed!” Jaralis snarled.

“I heard you fought alongside my father. What kind of man was he on the battlefield?” Fohl asked Jaralis.

I’d almost forgotten about Jaralis being there to witness his father’s last moments. His father’s death had been suspicious too, so it only made sense for him to ask.

“Ha! You are but a pale shadow of the man. If you really want to know, then

ask me with your fists!” Jaralis replied.

“Fine. Whether or not I am stronger than he was . . . I’ll let you see for yourself!” Fohl shouted.

“Very well. Are both parties ready to begin the duel?” the announcer asked.

He gave the signal to get ready and Jaralis and the minotaur both took on a fighting stance. Atla just stood there casually, as if completely relaxed and unaffected by any of this. Judging by the way Fohl was starting to get worked up, he might have actually enjoyed fighting after all. I was still a bit worried, though. Arguing with his sister was the only fighting I’d seen him do so far.

And then the sound of a gong echoed throughout the hall.

Chapter Eight: Honor in Battle

Atla exhaled powerfully and the sound of her breath resonated throughout the hall. The air around her rushed outward, as if a shockwave had erupted from her body. The opponents — Jaralis and the minotaur — must have sensed the incredible power accumulating within Atla, because they both gulped unwittingly.

“Hmph! We are pureblood warriors! A pair of hakuko half-breeds could never defeat us! Let’s do this!” Jaralis roared.

He pulled a pair of brass knuckles out of his back pocket, slipped them on, and rushed toward Atla and Fohl. The minotaur held his ground to the rear, waiting for an opening.

“Atla!” Fohl shouted.

He leapt forward to protect Atla, but Jaralis’s target appeared to have been Fohl from the beginning. The minotaur leapt over the both of them and swung his massive axe down at Atla. He looked like a heavyweight, but he was surprisingly quick! He’d sprung toward Atla at unbelievable speed, given his massive body. The sight of him flying through the air as he swung his axe was, in a word, astounding.

“Too slow!” Atla scoffed.

She dodged the axe by the breadth of a hair as it came flying at her and then used the force of its impact to launch herself high up into the air.

“To think you would be able to dodge that . . . It looks like I might get to have a bit of fun, after all,” said the minotaur.

He must have been one of those bellicose, muscles-for-brains types, because he grinned with excitement when he saw the way Atla moved.

“I’ll leave her to you! This all-show-and-no-go hakuko half-breed is mine!” Jaralis roared.

Oh wow, he called Fohl “all show and no go.” That wasn’t funny, considering the fact it was pretty much true.

“Say what you like! I don’t plan on letting you beat me! I have to protect Atla, after all!” Fohl shouted.

He ran toward Jaralis swinging, but Jaralis just grinned.

“Ha! Do you really think I’d lose to someone with a swing like that?” he snarled.

Jaralis moved so quickly that his afterimage seemed to linger behind. In a flash, he buried a fist deep into Fohl’s stomach.

“That was too easy! Your defense is weak, hakuko half-breed!” he roared.

Without even giving him a chance to breathe, Jaralis unleashed a flurry of attacks on Fohl.

“This miserable nothing is supposed to be one of the Shield Hero’s soldiers?! Don’t make me laugh!” he sneered.

He kicked Fohl, delivered a powerful hook, and then followed up with a straight jab. After that . . . he cast a spell?!

“Zweite Accel Boost!”

Jaralis appeared behind Fohl almost instantaneously, as if he had teleported. He then clenched his hands together and smashed them into the ground. There was a loud rumble as a tremor shot forth, shaking the earth below.

To be able to deliver such a barrage of attacks in mere moments . . . I’d heard that Siltvelt was a militant country. It wasn’t hard to believe after seeing such combat prowess. I wondered if Fohl would be alright.

“Hmph. Finished already? How boring!” Jaralis growled.

“Raahhhhh!” bellowed the minotaur.

I looked over toward Atla just in time to catch a glimpse of the instant the minotaur swiped his axe at her. He must have used the axe version of a Hadouken or something, because the pillar behind Atla split in two.

“Jaralis, you better not try to interfere!” the minotaur shouted facetiously while grinning.

“I’m afraid I can’t let you have all the fun this time. This duel is sacred. That

hakuko half-breed disgraced me, and for that I'll make her pay," Jaralis replied.

"Oh really? I don't mind fighting you both by myself, but it's a bit early for you to assume that you've defeated my brother," Atla said.

She dodged the minotaur's swing and attempted to close in on him in one fluid motion, but his guard was tight. He deflected her attack with his axe and then used it to repel her, tossing her into the air.

"I've fought people like you before. I know taking any of your attacks head-on would have dire consequences. I can see why the Shield Hero chose you," the minotaur said.

"Oh? Should I parry that comment too, then? Gosh, I never expected this to be so difficult," Atla taunted.

"You seem to be convinced you've won, Jaralis. You better keep your eyes on your own opponent," the minotaur said.

"Hmph! You warrior types are too serious. Look at this! My victory is already __"

Jaralis had grabbed Fohl by the leg and lifted him up into the air as if he were about to finish him. But Fohl kicked Jaralis's hand away with his other foot, landed on his hands, and sprung backward away from Jaralis in one swift movement.

"You're quick, but you hit like a girl. Actually, you make yourself seem quick, but you're really not all that fast," Jaralis taunted.

Fohl brushed himself off, faced Jaralis, and readied himself to fight again.

"What did you say?!" he shouted.

"Oh? You're pretty tough after all, Brother," Atla said.

"This is nothing compared to my training back at the village. I hope you're not going to tell me those attacks were you being serious," Fohl taunted Jaralis.

Jaralis snarled and his aura grew even more threatening than before. I guess that meant he had been holding back. His attacks *had* been slow enough that I was able to follow them easily, after all. Raphtalia or Filo would've had no problem dodging and counterattacking.

Now that Fohl mentioned it, I remembered that he'd not only been training daily, but he also had to do battle with Atla every night. "Tough" might have been an appropriate description, after all. Maybe he'd purposely taken the attacks to get an idea of his opponent's strength.

"Why would I fight seriously against a hakuko half-breed? Don't insult me," Jaralis replied.

"Nothing is more insulting than not taking an opponent seriously!" Fohl shouted angrily.

His eyes were ablaze.

"Have you ever even been on a real battlefield before? It's not a place for aristocrats to play tough," Fohl codded.

Jaralis let out an angry roar.

"You mouthy brat! You'll regret that!" he thundered.

The two of them went on bickering, but I turned my attention back to Atla and the minotaur. This duel was supposed to be a tag team battle, but it had just ended up being two one-on-one fights. Not that I actually cared either way.

"Here I come! Aiya!" Atla cried out.

The minotaur bellowed out a battle cry and swung his axe down with all of his might! But the path of the axe mysteriously shifted sideways, and the blade fell just to the side of Atla.

"Hmph . . ."

"I wouldn't get hit by an attack like that in a million years. If all you have is your superhuman strength, parrying is easy as pie!" Atla taunted.

"This is getting interesting! Then how about this?!" the minotaur shouted.

He gripped his axe with both hands and held it out directly in front of himself. He then took a wide stance and closed his eyes. Huh? What was he doing? The axe started to glow faintly.

"Do not underestimate pure strength. Your little tricks won't work if the strength is so great that it cannot be parried," he said.

“Impressive. Attacking is everything to you. I admire that. In that case, I won’t hold back. I’ll divert anything you can throw at me!” Atla replied.

“You better not think that strength is all I have!”

The minotaur bellowed out another long, ear-piercing war cry. Strange patterns suddenly appeared on the surface of his body and his muscles began to bulge. But was that war cry really necessary? It lasted so long that I zoned out for a second there.

“Th-that’s . . .” Raphtalia muttered.

She was at a loss for words.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“It’s not quite the same as the Muso Activation technique, but it’s similar to Filo’s toned-down version of haikuikku. He’s increasing his stats by circulating magic power throughout his body,” she explained.

Hmph, I guess he really was a legendary warrior.

“Oh? That’s interesting. Let me give that a try,” Atla said.

And just like that, something like magic power began to accumulate around Atla. I could sense it thanks to my training with the Way of the Dragon Vein.

“Just as I suspected, you must be a prodigy. Here I come!” shouted the minotaur.

Atla exhaled powerfully and the sound of her breath filled the hall. The minotaur was fast! Seeing a body of that size move so quickly reminded me of Filo fighting in her filolial queen form.

“Wooow, they’re both so quiiick,” Filo said.

She was able to follow their movements with her eyes. I guess that wasn’t surprising, considering that she could move like that too.

“Let’s see you take this! Crushing Bull!”

The minotaur planted his feet down firmly and swung his axe down toward Atla.

“Indeed, it would be the end of me if that attack landed. But I’m not going to

just stand here," Atla replied.

She hopped to the side with a light step and anticipated the path of the axe, delivering a swift kick to the blade from the side as it came crashing down. In one fluid motion, she followed up with strikes using her elbow, heel, and fist before delivering one final thrusting jab. There was a loud bursting sound, and something like magic power exploded out of the axe and dispersed.

"Hmph! To think such an evasion would be possible!" snarled the minotaur.

"I drew out the power you concentrated in the blade and used it to counter the power of your swing. It's a technique I often use to divert my rival's attacks," Atla replied.

The minotaur gave a slightly irritated grunt.

"Making such an indiscreet show of life force is just asking for it to be repelled. You need to either wait until the moment before impact to channel the life force in or just make it so concentrated that it is undetectable. You'll never land the attack otherwise," she continued.

I glanced over at Raphtalia without saying anything.

"She's right. That's the least you have to do to make it through Atla's defense," she said.

In other words, Atla had no problem thwarting the minotaur's finishing move, thanks to having sparred with Raphtalia. I guess that meant their sparring was at least as intense as this fight was.

Hmm, it sure was inconvenient not being able to see life force. I wanted to learn how already, but I just couldn't seem to catch a break. Then again, I had a feeling I was starting to be able to see it lately.

"I see! You mean like this!" the minotaur shouted with excitement.

Just as Atla suggested, he swung his axe across and power erupted out of the blade at the very last second, just before impact.

"You need practice! Now it's my turn!" she said.

Having crouched down to dodge the minotaur's attack, Atla delivered a swift jab to his stomach, arm, and finally his back after passing under his arm and

circling around him. Immediately after, a loud splitting sound rang out.

“Urg . . . gah! Not a bad attack for such a frail little body . . .”

The minotaur swallowed the blood that had filled his mouth and flashed a feisty grin at Atla.

“Oh? It would seem you are far tougher than I expected,” she said.

“It’s been a long time since I last fought someone who stirred my blood this much. This is starting to get fun. The effortless grace of your movements is unusual for a hakuko. I want more! Don’t let the fun stop yet!” the minotaur exclaimed.

Atla’s opponent sure seemed to be enjoying their fight.

“I don’t have time to spend all day fighting you, but I will admit that I’m enjoying this!” she said.

“Then let’s do this!” he shouted before bellowing out another war cry.

I don’t know if the minotaur used magic or what, but his horns suddenly grew longer and sharper. He crouched forward like he was about to charge and pointed his horns at Atla.

“Oh my, that appears to be a savage attack, indeed. I’m guessing you will charge forward and then use that momentum to attack with your axe — a transfer of kinetic energy,” she said.

“Well read, blind girl. I can confidently say that you are one of the most formidable fighters I know of, even within Siltvelt,” the minotaur replied.

“You flatter me! I suppose I should go ahead and do something about that superhuman strength of yours,” she said.

She stood on her tiptoes like a ballerina and held her hand out toward the minotaur. Atla sure was a lot flashier than Fohl when it came to fighting.

I glanced over at Fohl. He was exchanging blows with Jaralis. Well, no. Actually, it was Fohl doing all of the swinging. It was a stark contrast to Atla’s defensive approach. That said, Jaralis was dodging all of his punches with some fancy footwork. On top of that, Jaralis must have been more tactically inclined than Fohl, because he was also using tools to his advantage.

“Take this!” Jaralis shouted.

“That again?!” Fohl moaned.

Jaralis hurled a smoke bomb at the ground and smoke billowed up around Fohl. I really wished he would stop doing that, because it made the fight hard to see. Fohl seemed to understand the potential danger of such a thing, because he made his way out of the smoke immediately. But just as he did, Jaralis flung something that looked like metal spikes at him. Was he supposed to be some kind of ninja assassin or something? There were a bunch of similar weapons scattered around the area.

“You fight dirty! I thought this was supposed to be a barehanded fight!” Fohl shouted.

“Dirty? I prefer to say I fight smart!” Jaralis replied.

He pulled out a long sword that was covered in decorations and swung it at Fohl. It must have been hidden under his cloak all this time.

“I never said anything about bare hands. Whatever happens, the victory goes to the last man standing,” he said.

I guess we hadn’t really set any rules regarding finer details. And Atla’s opponent was using an axe too. There were no rules against weapons. Regardless, I still didn’t like how he’d started out unarmed and then suddenly began using concealed weapons later on. Did he think he could just weasel out of things if I objected?

“What happened to all of that confidence?!” Jaralis taunted after cutting into Fohl’s arm with the sword he’d been hiding.

“Ugh!” Fohl groaned.

After being attacked, he looked at the wound on his arm and then held a hand to his forehead like he’d become dizzy.

“How underhanded can you get?” he muttered.

“Were you not listening? Winning is all that matters!” Jaralis roared.

“You fool. You have no concept of honor in battle. You’ll never know true strength!” Fohl shouted.

It looked like he might pass out for a moment, but he quickly regained his composure and glared at Jaralis, standing as steady as if nothing had happened.

“What?” Jaralis muttered.

“I don’t know what poison you used, but it will take more than that to defeat me!” Fohl exclaimed.

Oh! He sounded like a real tough guy now. Out of curiosity, I took a look at Fohl’s stats. I should have been able to tell if he’d ingested any poisons, but nothing looked out of the ordinary. I guess that meant he’d already nullified it.

“Just as expected of a hakuko,” the old genmu whispered.

Fohl was growing tougher by the day, thanks to Atla. Practicing with her was supposed to help me awaken some kind of latent strength, but it almost felt like he’d beat me to it.

“Hmph! You sure talk big for someone who can barely stand!” Jaralis roared.

“I’ve had enough of your dirty attacks!” Fohl shouted.

He blocked Jaralis’s swing and snapped his sword in half before slugging him in the face.

“Gah!”

Blood poured out of Jaralis’s nose. He grabbed his face and groaned in pain.

“Ugh . . . How dare you . . . How dare you leave a mark on my face! You’re nothing but a pathetic hakuko half-breed!” Jaralis roared.

This guy reminded me of someone—his hubristic way of speaking. Who was it? I knew it was someone I hadn’t interacted with much. I just remembered he had an overbearing sense of pride and managed to present himself as well-mannered while still being insolent. If you paid careful attention, it became clear he was a selfish megalomaniac.

And then it came to me! Jaralis gave off the same vibes as Armor, one of Itsuki’s old party members. I was glad I figured that out, because it would have bothered me forever.

“Umm, Mr. Naofumi? What are you thinking about? It’s something that has

absolutely nothing to do with the duel, isn't it?" Raphtalia asked.

"Huh? No, not really," I replied.

I brushed her question off, satisfied with my revelation. It made total sense. Jaralis was a megalomaniac who was trying to take advantage of a hero. Just like Armor. And he was arrogant as hell!

"'Half-breed! Half-breed!' You're so annoying! Are your dirty tactics supposed to be noble, then?!" Fohl trounced.

"Ugh! You never stop! The way you constantly insult me reminds me of your father!" Jaralis replied.

"I was wondering when you would mention my father. You told me to ask with my fists, but your fists tell me nothing of him. I was just thinking how disappointing it was," Fohl said.

"Bah! The man was disowned by his parents and left his own country, and he still seemed to know everyone! Just thinking about him pisses me off!" Jaralis growled.

Was he jealous? Something seemed fishy here.

"Yeah, I talked to a hakuko who knew my father earlier this morning. He told me that you fought in the same war that my father died in," Fohl said.

I turned to the hakuko who was standing behind the old genmu.

"What's the story behind that?" I asked.

The old genmu replied, "That hakuko boy's father was most likely the son of Tyron, a man who once ruled over Siltvelt with his extraordinary charisma. Tyron's son was a brave man, but he disliked war and his relationship with Tyron suffered for it."

I could've guessed that much. What I was interested in was what came after that. I seemed to remember something about him getting engaged to Trash's younger sister.

"One day, Tyron's son was in Melromarc attempting to finalize a peace treaty. I didn't know this until later, but he was set up by someone in Melromarc. They murdered the members of the pacifist faction he was meeting with and then

shifted the blame onto Tyron's son," he continued.

"Oh?"

"After that, Tyron's son went missing. That is until the country, where he was hiding, got mixed up in a war. When his true identity was discovered, he was forced to go to war as a soldier for one of Siltvelt's allies. That is most likely where he came to know Jaralis," the genmu explained.

Hmm . . . Having seen how that lion-bastard fought, I could imagine what might have gone wrong when the two met. Fohl's father was a brave, valiant man. Jaralis liked to fight dirty and probably loved making surprise attacks.

"Come on, spit it out! Tell me about my father's final moments!" Fohl demanded.

"Hmph! He charged straight at the enemy like a fool and died in battle, of course! The fool was vastly outnumbered and couldn't even defeat a single enemy!" Jaralis snorted.

"Lies! There's no way my father was that weak! He was a kind man, but he bravely stood his ground when it came to battle!" Fohl exclaimed.

I wondered just what kind of father he'd really been.

"He enjoyed reading books when he was a child. His natural talents surpassed even those of Tyron's, but he did everything he could to avoid fighting. Even so, he was no less impressive than his father when he did decide to fight," said the old genmu.

"So he was more of a Mr. Nice Guy?" I asked.

The old genmu nodded. I hadn't actually expected Mr. Nice Guy to translate. Anyway, that made sense. So he was willing to fight when necessary but tended to be mild-mannered otherwise. I was totally imagining him as a character from an anime show, manga, or some game. That type was so cliché.

"Kind of like Master when he's coddling Raph-chan?" Filo asked.

"You might be on to something. Mr. Naofumi doesn't go easy on his enemies, but considering the way he looks after everyone, they do seem pretty similar," Raphtalia said.

“You’re wrong!” I snapped.

I was a tyrant. I was no Mr. Nice Guy. And to be honest, before I came to this world I was just some frivolous otaku! What were they thinking?!

We went on talking and Fohl took another swing at Jaralis. Determined not to lose, Jaralis pulled a collapsible spear out from behind his back and attempted to counterattack with it while dodging Fohl’s fierce swing. The head of the spear suddenly detached and shot straight toward Fohl’s face. But Fohl must have anticipated the attack, because he tilted his head to the side and dodged it.

“Ha! Did you really think an attack like that would work? The mercenaries in Zeltoble are a lot dirtier than that!” he exclaimed.

Well, yeah, Zeltoble was basically a huge collection of cowards, after all.

“You say you were comrades in arms? Sacrilege! Whatever the truth may be, I don’t trust a word that comes out of your mouth!” Fohl continued.

“What?! You dare attempt to disgrace me?! A pathetic half-breed like you!? You’ve gone too far!” Jaralis roared.

“No way . . .” mumbled Werner.

He must have known something I didn’t, because he looked horrified. But that didn’t concern me at the moment. The lion’s roar filled the hall. I thought the lion was supposed to be the king of the savanna. Were they really such dastardly creatures? Well, I guess this *was* a different world. And this bastard was just a therianthrope. He probably thought nothing was off limits as long as he won.

On the contrary, this fight was making Fohl look better. He’d been on the verge of being declared the weakest of us all.

“Stop screwing around! Help me finish this bastard already!” Jaralis shouted at the minotaur.

He ordered the minotaur to help defeat Fohl, but the minotaur was completely absorbed in his fight with Atla and wasn’t listening.

“I’ve never seen someone dodge like that. Trying to hit you is like batting at a feather dancing in the wind — so difficult!” the minotaur said.

Every time the minotaur attacked, Atla would divert the attack with her bare hands and then go spinning around. He was marveling at the way she maneuvered to divert each and every one, no matter how skillfully the attack had been executed. I would've expected him to be overcome with rage and go into a swinging frenzy, but he seemed to be more of the "intellectual warrior" type . H e remained calm and level-headed during battle. It was clear he was a formidable fighter.

"Then how about this?!" he shouted.

With a loud clunk, his axe split right down the middle, transforming it into two single-handed battle axes. He swung the axes at Atla from both sides in an attempt to sandwich her so that she couldn't divert the attack.

"That can be diverted like this," Atla replied.

As the axes came barreling at her from both sides, she placed a hand on each one and then leapt up into the air as gracefully as if she were dancing. With a determined shout, the minotaur altered the path of the axes in an attempt to crush her from above and below. But Atla carefully placed her hand on the blade of the top axe and pulled herself up over it in one swift, flowing movement.

"You're not getting away!" the minotaur bellowed.

"Indeed. Because now I have you right where I want you," she replied.

The minotaur thrust his horns at Atla and she gave him a light jab right between the eyes.

"What?!" he exclaimed.

"You finally left yourself open. Now then, I wonder how much stamina you have left after all that. As for me, I've just been hopping around and diverting your attacks," Atla said.

Atla landed on the ground and closed in on the minotaur in a flash before unleashing a barrage of jabs into his chest.

"Ugh! Gah! Argh! I'm not done with you!" the minotaur bellowed.

Despite being bent over backward and falling toward the floor, he caught

himself and returned to an upright position, but his axes slipped out of his hands and fell to the floor.

“You won’t be able to use your strength for a while. I sealed it off with those jabs,” Atla said.

“I’m still not going to let you win!” he shouted.

The same magic power that he’d channeled into his axe when he swung it earlier suddenly began erupting from every inch of his body.

“Like a true legendary warrior, you never give up,” Atla said.

“Your lofty sense of composure reminds me of that man’s spirit. Ha! I love it!” the minotaur exclaimed.

The two of them were really getting into the duel. In the meanwhile, Jaralis was still yelling at the minotaur to focus his attacks on Fohl.

“Ugh! Why am I surrounded by barbarians?! Do you not understand the concept of strategy in a battle?!” Jaralis growled.

“Strategy? Ha! Don’t make me laugh,” I said with a chuckle.

Jaralis glared at me.

“That’s not strategy. That’s you begging for help because you’re on the verge of losing. The way you’re fighting is far too sloppy to be called strategy,” I continued.

Even if the minotaur had been listening, what was Jaralis planning on doing about Atla? It’s not like she was going to just stand there quietly and watch the two of them finish Fohl off. Well, I guess it was possible in Atla’s case. But either way, there would have undoubtedly been consequences.

“You use a bunch of concealed weapons and surprise attacks, and then you go begging your friend for help when you’re about to lose. I can just imagine you blaming it all on him when you lose the duel too. Sorry, but I’m not going to let you do that. I’ll use my authority as the Shield Hero to make sure he’s protected,” I said.

“Ugh . . .”

Oh! Nice! I liked the way that made him look at me. He acted like propriety was so important, but he was really just a greedy bastard. Frankly speaking, I hated his type. That's why pissing him off felt so good. The slave traders were scum too, but this guy was a different kind of scum. I could tell he despised me deep down. In fact, he made the slave traders seem like good guys, since you could never actually tell what they were thinking.

"Jaralis, was it? It only makes sense that you'd take full responsibility, right? There's no way in hell I'm going to let you off the hook," I said.

"Umm, Mr. Naofumi, why do you look like you're enjoying this so much?" Raphtalia asked.

"Huh? Because he's probably the one behind all of this. If things work out, I plan on using any means necessary to make him confess, whether that be torture, drugs, or whatever," I replied.

"I can't believe you just openly admitted something so extreme. Even I wasn't expecting that," Sadeena said.

"Hm?" Filo asked.

"Hey, Filo, if that guy tells any more lies, feel free to force the truth out of him," I told her.

"Okaaaay, I will!" she replied.

"I'm pretty sure I can make a truth serum with my shield. I never had a reason to before now. Maybe I'll make an absurdly powerful one and try it out on him," I said.

We'd almost been poisoned, after all. Surely it would be okay to use a truth serum on the prime suspect.

"Or maybe we should see if you can outdrink me. I'll even give you a handicap. I mean, we'll be competing using rucolu fruits, so it probably won't help," I continued.

The Siltvelt leaders all gasped and covered their mouths with their hands. The thought of eating a rucolu fruit seemed bizarre to them.

"Oh my! I want to play too!" Sadeena exclaimed.

“Oh yeah, you were telling me all about rucolu fruit before, weren’t you?” I replied.

She’d mentioned that the fruit was sometimes used to assassinate people. It could induce acute alcohol poisoning.

“That sounds good, right? You get the privilege of drinking with a hero. Even if you get drunk and end up dead, you’ll be dying happy, right?” I continued.

Everything he said was a lie. He was just a piece of scum dragging this country down. Nothing bad could come from getting rid of him.

“Regardless, you can’t seriously think I’m going to let you off the hook after you lose. Don’t underestimate the heroes,” I said.

“Get over yourself, otherworlder!” Jaralis roared.

His eyes were burning with rage. I guess he was finally going to show his true colors. I’d barely had to bait him at all—setting him off had been a breeze. But seriously, I’d just gotten tired of hearing his excuses.

“Fohl, hurry up and finish him off. Atla is enjoying her fight too much. She’s just going to keep going forever if you don’t stop her,” I said.

“You don’t have to tell me that! I’m done playing games!” Fohl snapped.

Fohl crouched down low, held his hands out, and pressed his palms together. What was that? It looked like a pose a character in a fighting game might make before using a really impressive finishing move. Or maybe a special move that belonged to some Super Vegeta . . . ble Man. Either of those would’ve been fine, as long as his hair didn’t turn all spiky and blonde. That would have been unacceptable.

“Hengen Muso Fist Technique . . .” Fohl said quietly.

I could tell he was concentrating hard. I saw something appear between his hands before he gripped them tightly to form fists. Did that mean nothing was going to shoot out of them?

“Why are you looking at Fohl with a disappointed look on your face, Mr. Naofumi?” Raphtalia asked.

“It’s just that I expected him to shoot something out of his hands after making

a pose like that. I mean, even Melty holds her hands out in front of her when she fires off magic and stuff, right?" I replied.

"I think I understand what you're trying to say, but I have a feeling you're imagining something different than we would," she said.

No I wasn't. I just wanted to see some kind of super-secret move is all.

"Fist of the Tiger Slayer!" Fohl shouted.

He dashed toward Jaralis and smashed his fist right through the spear in Jaralis's hands and into his stomach. I hadn't expected him to land a clean hit that easily.

"Gaaaahhhhh!"

Fohl's powerful punch sent Jaralis flying through the air and into the wall, which cracked when his body smashed into it. He'd flown right between Atla and the minotaur while they were staring each other down, and they both turned their attention to him in surprise.

"Hmph! That was too easy!" Fohl declared.

He folded his arms confidently. I couldn't tell if Jaralis had just been weak or if Fohl was actually strong.

"Oh my, that was impressive," said Sadeena.

"I guess so," I replied.

"Atla! I'm coming to help!" Fohl shouted.

"That won't be necessary. It is I who must fight this battle," she replied.

"Hmph . . . I don't mind! Bring it on!" the minotaur exclaimed.

"Atla!" Fohl whined.

"You're in the way, Brother!" she shouted.

Atla gave Fohl a sharp jab to the chest when he ignored her and tried to interfere anyway. He gripped at his chest and fell to his knees.

"Ugh . . ."

"I guess that means Atla is the strongest one here," I said.

Fohl appearing strong must have been an illusion. But seriously, Atla! What happened to showing the people of Siltvelt her pride and dignity as a retainer of the Shield Hero?

“Alright then, here I come! This ends here!” the minotaur bellowed.

“So it shall!” Atla replied.

The minotaur fused the two battle axes back into a single axe and held it behind him like he was going to drag it along the ground.

“That again? Techniques are far less exciting once they’ve already been used,” she said.

“This one is different. You’ll see when it hits you,” he replied.

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I’m going to see through this one too.”

“Ha! This was fun, heiress of Tyron!”

“D-don’t tell me . . . Shield Hero, we are in danger here!” Werner warned me.

“We’re fine. Who do you think I am?” I replied.

I was the Shield Hero. My worth as a hero would be questionable if I couldn’t withstand an attack or two. And if there *was* an enemy capable of delivering an attack I couldn’t withstand, it would probably be in everyone’s best interest if I stuck around and made sure the enemy went down with me.

“I’ll catch any stray bullets that come our way. That’ll make things simple if that’s all it takes to prove I’m the Shield Hero,” I continued.

The minotaur went charging forward, and the floor below his feet cracked and crumbled with each step. Atla dashed straight at him.

The minotaur bellowed out an earth-shaking battle cry and a swirling mass of magic power poured out of his mouth and took on the form of a bull. It was an incredible sight. Even if it was me trying to block that attack head-on, the impact probably would’ve sent me and my shield flying. Not that I planned on ever being careless enough to have to take such an attack head-on.

“Stampede of the Iron Bull!”

The minotaur lifted his axe high into the air and then hurled it toward Atla.

The axe took on the form of a bull and went flying at her.

“Oh my, that is indeed a potent and fearsome attack. Such an arcane technique is certainly worthy of praise,” Atla said.

And yet she looked completely relaxed. The attack charged straight at her in the form of a raging bull. Atla leapt straight at the bull and jabbed her finger right between its eyes. With another thundering battle cry, the minotaur went charging after, as if to fuse with the raging bull made of magic power. Atla exhaled powerfully and a loud hiss reverberated throughout the hall.

“Haaa!” she cried out.

She switched from using a single finger, to her whole hand, and then to both hands to stop the raging bull in its tracks. I had a feeling I could see something like concentrated life energy emanating from her hands.

“I shall take the liberty of attacking as well. This is my imitation of the Hengen Muso technique Point of Focus—no, make that *Orb* of Focus!” she exclaimed.

Atla held the raging bull in place with one hand and began to form a small orb of light in her other hand. It grew for several seconds before she injected it into the bull’s body at the point between his eyes. The minotaur began to howl but then stopped suddenly.

“Urgah?!”

Despite the fact that we were watching from relatively far away, we could see the small orb of light make its way through the raging bull’s body toward the heart, where it then burst. The magic power that had taken on the form of the raging bull shattered and dissipated, revealing the minotaur once again. He was standing there motionless with Atla’s finger resting on the point between his eyes.

“Superb. Your softness, rather than hardness, distinguishes you from Tyron. But you are clearly the reincarnation of his spirit,” the minotaur said.

“Coming from you, there could be no higher praise. I accept your words with gratitude,” Atla replied.

“I wish I could say I look forward to meeting you on the battlefield again . . .

some . . . day.”

The moment he finished his sentence, the minotaur collapsed onto the floor with a loud thud. Atla didn’t seem to have taken much damage at all. That didn’t make the minotaur seem very strong, but maybe I was mistaken.

“Hey, Sadeena. How strong was that guy Atla just fought?” I asked.

“Hmm . . . Strong enough that I’m not sure I could have beaten him without your hero stat boosts,” she replied.

Using herself as the standard didn’t make things any clearer. I guess it was my fault for asking her. Regardless, putting it that way must have meant he was pretty powerful.

“He had not only power, but also speed. His fighting style was creative and daring. And each of those aspects was of the finest caliber. I can confidently say that he was a one-of-a-kind warrior,” Atla said proudly.

I looked over at Werner and the genmu and they nodded in agreement.

“He was considered one of the most powerful warriors in Siltvelt, second only to the Claw Hero. Practically speaking, that places anyone that could defeat him among the most elite of warriors,” Werner said.

“Half-breed or not, that girl’s hakuko spirit could be no purer. There is no truer embodiment of a warrior of Siltvelt than her. That is a fact,” added the genmu proudly.

“I hate to admit it, but you’re right. She is worthy of being considered a hakuko and a member of one of Siltvelt’s four elite races. As a retainer, though, I still have doubts about her strength, among other things,” Werner said.

“A hakuko? That is irrelevant. I simply did my duty as Mr. Naofumi’s retainer. Whether or not I have human blood running through my veins is of no consequence,” Atla replied.

“Oh? Well, that’s fine too. We can decide who will stand at the lead of Siltvelt’s four elite races at a later date. What is important now is pledging our loyalty to the Shield Hero. Nothing more,” Werner said.

“I’m not sure I agree with any of you,” I mumbled.

I just couldn’t wrap my head around the way they did things in this country. But regardless, this meant that we would finally be able to get that ship to Q’ten Lo and—

“Not yet . . . I’m not done . . . yet . . . I haven’t lost yet . . .”

Battered and bloody, Jaralis mumbled defiantly as he crawled to his feet.

Chapter Nine: Beast Transformation

“It seems your claws need sharpening, Brother,” Atla said.

“A-Atla?! Fine! I get it! I’ll finish him for good this time!” Fohl exclaimed.

Just as Fohl readied himself to attack, Jaralis pulled a vial out of his pocket. It seemed to be filled with some kind of concoction.

“Hmph! I never imagined you would drive me this far. But this is a fight that I can’t afford to lose!” Jaralis roared.

He snapped the end of the vial off and gulped down whatever had been inside. I could suddenly hear his heart throbbing loudly, even from as far away as we were standing.

“Did he just drink some kind of crazy drug?” I asked.

I guess we hadn’t banned doping or anything, so it wasn’t like I could say he’d broken any rules. But regardless, did he really think I was just going to let him do whatever he wanted? This guy just couldn’t get it through his—

“Shield Hero? Ha! This fool is far too arrogant and troublesome to serve as our puppet!” Jaralis growled.

“My bad. I’ll get to work on that,” I said.

Jaralis’s wounds began to close up right in front of our eyes and the look of urgency in his eyes was replaced by a calm, smug expression.

“Jaralis! Watch your mouth!” Werner shouted.

“Yes, I’m afraid that judging from your earlier performance, the result will be the same no matter what kind of drugs you choose to rely on. Stop wasting time and surrender already,” the genmu added.

They both scolded Jaralis harshly. But Jaralis just started cackling as if he had no intention of listening to a word they said. I’d seen that face before. Anyone that made a face like that was certain to be up to no good.

“Surrender? What are you talking about? This is the beginning of a new era! The time has come to throw away our obsolescent faith in antiquated legends

of so-called heroes and worship a new god—me!” he roared.

What was this crackpot going on about? Did he really just declare himself a god? I was trying to figure out how to even respond to such absurdity when Jaralis’s body began to grow rapidly. Finally, he dropped down onto all fours and roared. He was basically just a huge lion now. The transformation left him panting.

“This is incredible. My body is surging with power,” he said.

“Jaralis . . .” the genmu whispered.

“Have you managed to surpass your therianthrope form?! Could this truly be the beast transformation that is spoken of in the legends?!” Werner exclaimed.

Beast transformation? I slowly shifted my gaze over to Filo.

“Huuuh? What is it, Master?”

Filo had switched into fight mode in reaction to Jaralis’s menacing aura, but Atla and Fohl were technically still his opponents in the duel.

She was a filolial monster to start with, so I guess she didn’t have what would be considered a therianthrope form. Jaralis didn’t really look all *that* different now, but maybe I just couldn’t tell. Werner must have noticed I was confused, because he looked at me and began to explain.

“We have a legend here in Siltvelt. You already know there are demi-humans who can use therianthrope forms to increase their abilities. This legend tells of a transformation even more powerful than that,” he said.

“And you’re saying he managed such a transformation?” I asked.

“It would seem so,” Werner replied.

Hadn’t he really just taken some dangerous drug and spun out of control? I had a feeling that was closer to the truth, to be honest. But whatever.

“With this much power, the Shield Hero is no longer necessary! Yes! The whole world should praise and adore me!” Jaralis roared.

“Looks to me like you’re just full of yourself after managing to get a little bit stronger,” Fohl mumbled.

What a coincidence. That was exactly what I was thinking.

“Hmph! You’re the one who’s got a big head, hakuko half-breed!” Jaralis growled.

As soon as he finished his sentence, Jaralis’s appearance seemed to blur. He was fast! But he wasn’t so fast that I couldn’t follow his movements with my eyes. He approached Fohl from the front. Aside from me, Raphtalia, Filo, Sadeena, and Atla would probably be able to see his movements too. That was quite a few of us, actually.

“What?! He teleported?!” Werner exclaimed.

I guess it was safe to say that Werner and the others couldn’t keep up with Jaralis’s speed. I wondered what level Jaralis would equate to now, by ordinary standards. At the very least, it was unlikely that any of the village slaves would be able to react to his current speed. And with that breakneck speed, Jaralis moved his massive body to Fohl’s position.

“Grrraaaahhh!”

Jaralis roared loudly and swiped at Fohl with his claw. Fohl immediately took a defensive stance to guard himself from the massive lion’s attack.

“Ugh!”

Fohl was tough, but Jaralis’s claw drew blood when it sliced into his arm. Fohl went flying through the air.

“What?! His speed is ridiculous! Gahhh!” Fohl exclaimed.

He stumbled a few steps before steadying himself and moving back into a defensive stance. As soon as he had, Jaralis charged at him for a follow-up attack, batting at Fohl repeatedly with his claws.

“How does it feel?! You get to be the guinea pig that I try this magnificent power on! It’s more honor than you can handle, right?! How about it?! Take this!” Jaralis roared.

“Ugh! Gah! D-damn you!” Fohl stammered.

He was being beaten to a pulp. He dropped down onto a knee and tried to defend himself. Defense was all he could manage now. Things weren’t looking

good.

“Hahahaha! Is that all you’ve got?! Just like I thought, you hakuko are all simple-minded fools who go rushing headlong into danger! You and your father both! *‘Leave this to me and get out of here!’* he said! Ha! The truth is we sacrificed him to save ourselves! I couldn’t have him resisting unnecessarily, you know!” Jaralis sneered.

“What?! No way . . . Did you do something to my father?!” Fohl snapped.

“That’s right! I gave him a little shove from behind! I went to all that trouble to leak our strategy to the enemy. We were supposed to look like we were losing. We would retreat temporarily, only to come back and achieve an overwhelming victory thanks to *my* strategic guidance. But that bastard kept turning the tables! It was so irritating!” Jaralis moaned.

What the hell? The bastard just started confessing everything. Even if he did manage to defeat Fohl, didn’t he realize he’d be going straight to the slammer now? I glanced over at Werner and the old genmu. They both seemed to be lost deep in thought.

“Die!” Jaralis roared.

He swung his claw powerfully in what appeared to be an attempt to finish Fohl.

“You bastard!” Fohl screamed at the top of his lungs.

It all made sense now. Fohl’s father had interfered with Jaralis’s plan, so Jaralis caught him off guard and killed him. Could it get any dirtier than that? Yeah, nothing good would come from having this bastard around. I’d have to think about what to do with him later, but whatever that was, he needed to be permanently stripped of all authority for sure.

“Once I’ve killed these half-breeds, I’ll show the rest of you too! I’ll show you who the strongest one here really is! Now! Attack!” Jaralis roared.

A bunch of monster-looking creatures suddenly appeared and began attacking our group and the Siltvelt leadership.

“What?!”

Werner and the other Siltvelt leaders readied themselves to fight. The demi-humans switched to their therianthrope forms, and the ones who were already therianthropes braced themselves for the incoming attacks. But . . .

“Ugh! What are these things?!”

“We are Siltvelt’s warrior elite! Can these abominations really be faster and hit harder than us?!”

“Keep calm! We must protect the Shield Hero!”

Jaralis’s followers must have been planning on starting a revolt here and taken some of those drugs to undergo beast transformations. There were quite a few of them too. They probably had some lame aspirations of killing everyone in the castle and claiming they were supreme or something. That must have been why Jaralis confessed earlier. He figured he would tell Fohl the truth since he was about to die anyway.

Well, at least things had become crystal clear now. There was no reason to hold back anymore.

“What do you mean protect me? Protection . . .”

I slowly rose to my feet. A massive gorilla leapt at me swinging and I caught his fist with a single bare hand.

“. . . is my business! Raphtalia! Filo!” I shouted.

“I had a feeling things would turn out like this. On it!” Raphtalia replied.

“I’ll do my beeessst!” Filo cried.

Immediately understanding what I wanted her to do, Raphtalia lunged at the gorilla and cut it down. A large wolf leapt at us and Filo kicked it out of the air. Her kick produced a powerful shockwave the moment it made contact. Hmm, they did say Fitoria’s so-called advance payment had boosted Filo’s stats. The way she was moving now definitely made her look like a beast of a fighter.

“You really shouldn’t get too carried away with the tomfoolery. I do believe you’ve forgotten about me,” Atla said.

She mowed down the beasts approaching her and was about to run to Fohl to protect him. But Fohl held his hand up and shot her a glare that made it clear he

wanted her to stay back.

“Atla! Jaralis is mine! This is an opponent I must defeat! Stay back!” he shouted.

“Oh? In that case, I guess you don’t mind if I run to Mr. Naofumi and hold him in my arms?” she replied.

I minded! What was she saying in a situation like this?! And Fohl must’ve already completely flipped his lid, because he just nodded forcefully. What the hell?!

“Yeah. I’ve seen how tough he is in our other battles. I won’t say I like it, but you should let him protect you for now,” Fohl replied.

“Umm, Brother? You misunderstand. It’s my job to protect Mr. Naofumi,” Atla said.

She corrected Fohl’s misunderstanding with her own nonsensical misunderstanding.

“Whaaaat?! You plan on hiding behind Atla?!” he screamed at me.

“Like hell I do, you knucklehead!” I shouted.

Raphtalia and the others were busy mowing down the attacking beasts, but they looked over at me like I’d done something appalling.

“Anyway, Fohl, if you’re going to claim that bastard as your prey, then hurry up and take care of him!” I added.

Fohl looked back and forth between me and Atla a couple of times before nodding forcefully.

“My father fought bravely and believed in his fellow soldiers. I can’t forgive anyone that would do such a contemptible thing to him!” Fohl thundered.

“Oh, spare me! I’ll send you to be with daddy right now! I have other things to attend to, after all! You know, like daring to kill a god!” Jaralis shouted.

He let out a loud, annoying roar and then lunged at Fohl swinging, as if to finish him once and for all. But Fohl blocked Jaralis’s huge claw and let out a thundering howl of his own. That was when I heard a loud thumping sound

coming from Fohl.

“Wh-what?! Are you telling me this hakuko half-breed can use a therianthrope form?!” Jaralis cried out incredulously.

Fohl howled once again and his whole body began pulsating and swelling. I was confused at first, but then I figured he was changing into a therianthrope form, since it looked pretty much just like when Sadeena transformed into a killer whale.

“Brother? Are you really going to use a therianthrope form?” Atla asked.

“Oh my! It sure looks that way. I knew you had potential, little Fohl, even though you couldn’t make the transformation before. It looks like you’re finally going to pull it off,” said Sadeena.

“Is it one of those things where once you’ve done it, you can do it again any time?” I asked.

Sadeena nodded as she showered several attacking beasts in magical lightning attacks.

“Brother, please don’t tell me you plan on transforming into an adorable therianthrope form in an attempt to steal Mr. Naofumi’s heart,” Atla said.

“That again?” I mumbled.

After seeing how I’d reacted to Keel’s therianthrope form, Atla had gotten the idea stuck in her head that I would be smitten with Fohl’s therianthrope form.

The crunching sounds slowed as Fohl’s transformation approached completion and the details of his new form grew clearer. He seemed to be slightly taller than me now. He was quite muscular, but not needlessly so—he didn’t look unnaturally bulky like the minotaur had. If one imagined a tiger-man, they probably wouldn’t be far off.

Fohl was now a muscular, white tiger therianthrope, standing there blocking the fierce attack of a massive lion. He looked pretty macho. This was nothing like a cuddly Siberian husky that would go fetch a stick if you happened to throw one. This was what a therianthrope form was supposed to be. It made me kind of happy that his transformation had turned out exactly like I’d

imagined it would.

“Let’s do this!” Fohl shouted.

He blocked Jaralis’s swift attack and countered with a kick to his face.

“Gah! You impudent brat! I need more! I’ll unleash even more power!” Jaralis cried.

The flow of magic power surrounding him intensified and he let out a thundering roar that echoed throughout the hall.

“Oh my, our little Fohl sure is looking cooler than usual,” Sadeena said.

“That form certainly is impressive. I wonder if I should be jealous,” Raphtalia whispered.

She was staring at Fohl in his new therianthrope form. I’d wondered what Raphtalia would look like if she had a therianthrope form several times. Would it be a female version of the Shigaraki ceramic tanuki statues? Or would she look like Raph-chan?

“Mr. Naofumi, what are you thinking about at a time like this?” Raphtalia snapped.

“Ugh! I sense that Mr. Naofumi has lost interest in my brother and is looking at Raphtalia!” Atla exclaimed.

Their intuitions were incredible!

“Maaasteerrr, we’ve defeated most of them,” Filo called out.



She was stomping on several monsters that were lying on the ground squirming. I guess I didn’t even need to get involved in the end.

“Ugh . . .” one of the Siltvelt leaders moaned.

“Get ahold of yourself! Those wounds are nothing!” shouted another.

Apart from Werner and the old genmu, the members of the leadership had stepped forward to try to protect us. It was great that they had managed to ward off the fierce attacks of the beasts, but it looked like most of them had been seriously wounded. I quietly rushed over and applied my healing magic.

“Drifa Heal!”

Just as I cast my spell, Jaralis unleashed a loud roar and the incapacitated beasts suddenly rose up like zombies. Their eyes were freakishly ablaze. They unleashed a chorus of savage roars and began attacking us once again. We were all gathered together in one spot now, and the beasts were even faster than before.

“Shield Hero! You’re in danger!”

Several of the leaders tried to charge forward to protect me, but I pushed them back and called out the name of a skill.

“Shooting Star Shield!”

The beasts crowded around us attacking, but their claws smashed fruitlessly into my barrier.

“Grrraaaaahh!”

“Raawwwrrr!”

The beasts were drooling and foaming at the mouth like a pack of rabid dogs. They clawed at the barrier and tried to bite into it.

“Eww . . . They just keep coming no matter how many times I kick theeem,” Filo moaned.

She was in her filolial queen form, kicking the beasts away as they continuously lunged at her.

“Yeah, this is starting to get irritating, even for little ol’ me,” Sadeena replied.

She launched her lightning magic at one of the beasts that had been thrown off guard by Filo’s kick. Raphtalia and Atla joined the fray, determined not to be

outdone.

“Hmph, these things are tougher than I expected,” I mumbled.

“Yup! They seem to recover almost as soon as I kick theeem. I think the way they move their bodies is letting most of the power of my kicks get awaaaay,” Filo replied.

Oh? Filo was absolutely terrible at explaining things, but that actually wasn’t a bad description. The beasts attacking us were probably some of Siltvelt’s top warriors who had undergone beast transformations. That meant we probably wouldn’t be able to finish them off with half-hearted attacks.

“But there’s something weird about them toooo,” Filo added.

“She’s right. Something about their bodies is off,” Sadeena said.

“Weird in what way?” I asked.

“They seem to be patched together,” Atla replied.

Hmm . . . I took a closer look at the beasts. I could see what looked like scar tissue where the bodies had been patched together. Jaralis or somebody must have been dabbling in human modification. It was similar to what Kyo had done in the other world. Rat probably would have been ecstatic if I’d brought her to do an in-depth inspection.

“And that ‘grraahh’ voice seems to make them stronger toooo,” Filo said.

So Jaralis’s howls had an effect similar to support magic. What a hassle.

“Hiyaaaa!”

Fohl parried Jaralis’s attack and then lunged forward and delivered a powerful straight, burying his fist deep within Jaralis’s gut.

“Gaaahh!”

Blood gushed out of Jaralis’s mouth.

“I’m not finished yet!” Fohl shouted.

He opened his hand wide, leapt at Jaralis, and then swiped his claws at Jaralis’s face, cutting deep into the flesh.

“Urgaahhhh! M-my eyes! Gaahhh! You bastard!” Jaralis roared.

He wailed and covered his eyes with his hands. But the tissue of his eyes began to swell up and within a matter of seconds they had completely regenerated. It was a grotesque sight.

“Blood! I need more blood! I need flesh! No, more power! I need more power!” Jaralis screamed.

He was looking around frantically. His eyes stopped on the nearby group of beasts that we had defeated and then he leapt at us.

“Watch out!” I yelled.

Filo and the others distanced themselves from the fallen beasts, but Jaralis simply began to devour the beasts.

“Urgahhh!” cried out one of the beasts.

“J-Jaralis?! Wh-what are you—” began another.

“Silence! Consuming your bodies will give me more power!” Jaralis roared.

He crushed one of his followers’ heads and began to devour the beast whole. So now he had turned to cannibalism!

“That’s just . . .” Fohl muttered.

Even Fohl was horrified by the sight. His face turned pale.

“Enough of this! This has gone way beyond a one-on-one fight with Fohl!” I shouted.

“Understood! Everyone, you heard the Shield Hero!” Werner cried out.

“Here I go!” Raphtalia chimed in.

She dashed toward Jaralis and attempted to unleash one of her quick-draw attacks, but the flesh of the beast he was eating formed something like a tentacle and batted her katana away.

“Ugh!”

The blade of Raphtalia’s katana sliced clean through the tentacle, but there was a bigger problem. The chomping sounds came to a halt, and Jaralis seemed

to be done chewing on the flesh of the beasts. The corpses he'd chewed up began to merge with his body and form more tentacles, which gathered up more of the fallen beasts. Jaralis's body continued to grow as it went about assimilating the corpses.

"Mwahaha . . . Mwahahahaha! Yes, that's it! So the power can be used like this too!" Jaralis exclaimed.

Oh, man. Didn't he know that getting power in such a horrific manner never turned out good in the end? Just what kind of dodgy drugs had he taken anyway?!

"It is I who reigns supreme now! I have become more powerful than any god! With this much power, the whole world will be mine!"

Jaralis was just a huge mass of flesh now. When he talked, it looked like a big chunk of clay being kneaded or something. And now the clay was starting to take on form. But we sure as hell had no obligation to wait around and find out what that would be.

"It's a big clump of gooey flesh-claaay! Ewwww!" Filo cried out.

She came over and hid behind me, cowering. Ahh, I guess she *had* been taken prisoner by a similar abomination not too long ago, after all. It felt like we'd been facing a lot of similar enemies lately. But this one was far more grotesque than any of those.

The stench of blood filled the air. I couldn't take much more of it.

"Mr. Naofumi!" Raphtalia shouted.

"Go for it," I replied.

"Looks like we'll just have to deal with this thing," Sadeena interjected.

"Mr. Naofumi gave the order to attack, and so I shall!" exclaimed Atla.

"Atla! Ugh . . . I'm helping too!" Fohl cried.

Our group seemed to be doing fine. As for the Siltvelt bunch . . .

"You guys stay back. I don't want you getting caught in the line of fire," I told them.

I'd have trouble sleeping if any of them got in the way and ended up dead.

"As you wish!" shouted one of the leaders.

"U-understood! May the Shield Hero protect us!" Werner cried.

"Yes, we should leave this one to the Shield Hero," the genmu said.

The other leaders nodded. Fohl stood in front of everyone and faced Jaralis.

"Jaralis! Your life ends here! This is for my father!" he shouted.

According to Jaralis's confession only moments earlier, he had killed Fohl's father. To think he'd come up with such an underhanded scheme and ambushed Fohl's father from behind. Just how low could one go? I absolutely despised bastards like him. He was no better than Trash or Witch. I'd make sure he paid the price for his actions!

"I can get on board with that. But, Fohl, considering the circumstances, I can't ask you to defeat him by yourself. You have a bunch of people here who can lend you a hand. Don't forget that," I said.

I prepared to cast support magic on Fohl. Sadeena and I began reciting the incantations for Descent of the Thunder God.

"No problem. It doesn't matter what power I use or who helps me. I have to defeat him!" Fohl shouted.

And then suddenly a new icon appeared on my screen.

Would you like to empower the target and force a beast transformation?

Yes / No

A beast transformation? Was it asking me to make the choice? The icon was hovering over Fohl. It seemed like there might normally be more options. But at the moment, Fohl was the only one I could choose. It was probably worth a try.

"Hey, Fohl," I said.

"What?!"

"Mr. Naofumi called your name, Brother! Come now! Answer him properly! You shall obey his every command!" Atla snapped.

“Shut up for a minute, Atla! It looks like I can use an ability to give you some kind of special power, Fohl. Do you want me to try it?” I asked.

Fohl stood there trying to make up his mind for a few moments.

“Fine. More people are going to get hurt if I don’t defeat this scumbag. So for myself and for Atla, let’s try it!” he replied.

“Got it. Here I go,” I said.

I held my shield out toward Fohl and selected “Yes.” The shield began to shine brightly, and then light shot out and poured over Fohl in the form of support magic.

“Wh-what is this?! What’s happen—”

Fohl began to float up into the air as the magical light enveloped his body.

“M-Mr. Naofumi! What did you do?!” Raphtalia exclaimed.

“Just like I said, I used some ability to give Fohl more power. That’s all,” I answered.

“Th-this is . . .” Werner’s voice trailed off.

He and the other Siltvelt leaders clasped their hands together and began praying.

“This is truly a miracle of a god. It seems the legends are true after all,” the old genmu said before he began praying with the others.

I guess this power was something mentioned in their legends of the heroes.

“My body . . . It’s overflowing with power!” Fohl cried out.

The light that was surrounding him dispersed and a different creature drifted down to the ground. There, before us, now stood a huge white tiger.

“Th-this is . . . Have I turned into a white tiger?!” Fohl asked.

“It sure seems that way,” I said.

I casually pulled up Fohl’s stats. What I saw was . . . incredible! Every single one of his stats had been massively boosted!

More specifically, the equivalent of my own stats had been tacked onto the

majority of Fohl's. Filo had gotten a lot stronger too recently, but this was on a completely different level. These numbers were even higher than Raphtalia's! Now *this* was offensive capability I could get excited about. But I also noticed my own magic power seemed to be falling by the second.

"There seems to be a limit to how long this will last. Get out there and finish him!" I shouted.

"Mwahahaha! The time has come! A new legend is born! It's time to lay the old god to rest!" Jaralis roared.

He rushed toward me and began to take on a new form. It was some kind of grotesque monstrosity that resembled a chimera. And he was fast! I wasn't even sure if I would be able to react in time anymore. But then a flash of white appeared in front of Jaralis and dug its claws into his face.

"Gah! Wh-what?!" Jaralis groaned.

"What's with that leisurely jog? Are you fooling around?" Fohl asked.

Jaralis went flying through the air. Fohl didn't seem to have any problems adjusting to his own new form, judging by the way he'd turned and spoke to Jaralis so casually.

"You're just a coward who accepted a wretched blessing from the Shield Hero! I hope you don't think that will let you win!" Jaralis roared.

"I should probably point out that you're the last one who should be saying that," I shot back at him with a sneer.

"First you take some fishy drugs. Then when you still can't win, you assimilate your followers and act like you've suddenly become king of the mountain. Who in the world would worship such a hideous monster? Seriously, think about it," I continued.

"Monster?! Are you saying I'm a monster?!" he growled.

"That I am. You're repulsive! You look like some kind of chimera!" I shouted.

Jaralis must have finally come back to his senses, because he transformed the tentacles into eyeballs and then cried out in surprise.

"Impossible! I'm a monster?! I can't believe it! It can't be!"

He unleashed a beastly roar and charged straight at me.

“I won’t let you!” Fohl shouted.

“Brother!”

For whatever reason, Atla jumped up onto Fohl’s head and turned toward Jaralis. She began to prepare for an attack.

“Concentrate all of your power into a single point and run him through!” she exclaimed.

“Got it! You better not fall off, Atla!” Fohl replied.

His body began to radiate light, which then formed a vortex of magic power. The magic power began to take on some kind of shape in front of them. Wasn’t this basically the same attack that the minotaur had used against Atla? The light enveloped Fohl and Atla, and they took on the form of a radiant tiger and charged forward.

“Th-this must be the ancient technique that only the hakuko can use—the legendary Assault of the Ferocious Tiger Tyrant!”

I guess that was the name of the skill. But really, the people in this world sure seemed to like offering explanatory narrative like that. Rishia and Ren too. I just kept my mouth shut and focused on maintaining my magic power. Fohl was sucking up more of it than I would have expected, and it was starting to make me lightheaded.

Fohl and Atla both unleashed long, drawn-out battle cries as they charged at Jaralis in unison. A loud slicing sound rang out as they shot right past him, and then Fohl’s transformation wore off. He and Atla landed on the ground.

“Gaaahhhh! I-impossible! That drug was supposed to make me the strongest therianthrope of them all! That bastard! I’ve been tricked! I don’t believe it! I . . . I . . .”

As soon as Fohl and Atla landed, light began to flood out of Jaralis’s body. And then it split wide open! The light was so bright it forced me to squint my eyes. It swallowed up whatever that thing was that Jaralis had become and then exploded, dissipating in all directions. Not to sound overly dramatic, but the

massive impact made the whole building shake too.

“Father, I have avenged your death,” Fohl whispered.

“We did it! We exterminated the traitor!” Atla exclaimed.

Their reactions were on completely different ends of the spectrum. The siblings both turned to the rest of us and waved.

“Umm, I think this goes without saying, but we have a winner! The victory goes to the hakuko siblings who serve the Shield Hero,” Werner announced loudly.

“That means we’re free to do as we please now, right?” I asked.

“It does. You may do whatever you wish, Shield Hero. On behalf of Siltvelt, we recognize that you are the Shield Hero we have all been waiting for,” he replied.

“I didn’t expect you to submit so easily,” I said.

Then again, the fact that we’d just stamped out Jaralis’s little rebellion for them probably had a lot to do with that.

“Yes, well, that is largely due to seeing the beast transformation your power induced,” Werner replied.

“Our legends here in Siltvelt tell of such a transformation. They say that it is only the Shield Hero who can unleash the true form—the true power—of our people,” added the old genmu.

“Ah, so that’s why,” I replied.

Werner bowed his head to Atla and Fohl.

“I was wrong to insult you and call you half-breeds. More than anyone, you two are true subjects of Siltvelt,” he said.

“You’re wrong. I am Mr. Naofumi’s subject,” Atla replied without hesitation.

“I . . . I’m . . .” Fohl stammered.

He didn’t seem to know how to respond.

“You looked so cooool! I want to be able to transform like that toooo!” Filo told Fohl.

She was a beast by nature. Still, I kind of wanted to see what a half-bird, therianthrope-type Filo would look like. But then again, maybe not.

“That sure was something, little Naofumi! I wonder if you can do the same thing for me,” Sadeena said.

“Who knows?” I replied.

A sense of exhaustion suddenly took hold of me. Fohl must have felt the same, because he fell onto his back.

“What is it?!”

“Ugh . . . I feel . . . so weak,” he said.

He moaned and did everything he could to try to stand up. I was feeling pretty beat too.

“Allow me,” Atla said.

She jumped up onto Fohl’s collapsed body and held her arms up in the air victoriously. Umm, why did she feel the need to stand on her brother’s body again?

“This is your reward, Brother. You actually managed to follow through,” she said.

“Atla! S-stop that!” Fohl cried out.

Why the hell did he seem to be halfway smiling?!

“What are you doing?!” Raphtalia snapped.

“Oh my . . .” Sadeena giggled.

“Rafuuu?”

“Hm?”

And so our duel in Siltvelt came to an end. Afterward, we did some investigation into the drug that Jaralis had used and the source of his plans for revolt. We found out that some mysterious group had been involved, but they’d suddenly disappeared as soon as Jaralis was defeated.

We decided a specialist should analyze the drug, so I brought Rat back from

the village to take a look. I didn’t like the fact that we hadn’t been able to figure out who the drug had come from. In the end, I could only assume it had probably been either one of S’yne’s enemies or one of Witch’s lackeys.

Chapter Ten: Assigning the Heroes

Siltvelt gave us their full support after that. We loaded up onto one of their ships and set off for Q'ten Lo. After some time had passed, we dropped anchor at the port of a small country to the east. I registered the spot as a portal location and we returned to the village temporarily.

"Oh! Welcome back, Shield Hero!" Imiya exclaimed.

She and the other villagers welcomed us back when we arrived at the village.

"Thanks. It took a while, but we're back," I replied.

"We were all worried," Imiya said.

She updated me on how things had been, and I looked around at all the villagers. S'yne was there too. As far as I could tell, not much seemed to have changed.

"S'yne was a bit on edge a few days ago," Imiya said.

"Ah, so you saw that?" I asked S'yne.

She'd probably wanted to help but resisted the urge to come since I didn't call on her. It didn't feel like we were in danger of losing at the time. We weren't even really struggling.

"S'yne's familiar gave us periodic updates on what you were doing, so we have a pretty good idea of how things went," Imiya continued.

"I———" S'yne began and then cut out.

Hmm, I wasn't sure whether that was convenient or if I should feel like I was being spied on. But I guess S'yne was kind of like my bodyguard, after all. It only would've been a problem if I got accused of a crime and S'yne served as a witness to testify against me or something. But judging from her behavior so far, it was probably safe to assume that wouldn't be an issue.

"Were there any attacks on the village?" I asked.

"Several," Imiya replied.

“Ah, so there were after all,” I said.

There’d even been an attempt in Siltvelt too, apparently. The guards there were really sharp, though, and they took care of the Q’ten Lo assassins before they ever reached us. Sadeena jumped in the water and started firing off lightning several times while we were on the boat earlier, so I knew the assassins were still coming. But they hadn’t made any more large-scale attempts yet. Q’ten Lo probably couldn’t risk making any big moves against a powerful country like Siltvelt.

“We were able to successfully fend them off with the help of the Sword Hero and the Bow Hero. But the attacks were smaller in scale than the first one,” Imiya explained.

“Oh yeah? Where are Ren and Itsuki?” I asked.

“They’re training in the neighboring town at the moment,” she replied.

That meant they were with the old lady.

“Mel-chaaaan!” Filo exclaimed.

“Hey, Filo. If you’re going over to the town, let Ren and Itsuki know that I’m back,” I told her.

“Okaaaay!”

She was energetic as usual. I think she might’ve enjoyed playing with Melty a bit too much, actually. But they were good friends, so I guess it was fine.

Not long after, Ren, Itsuki, and Rishia returned to the village.

“We heard you were back, Naofumi. We came to check in,” Ren said.

“Yeah. We pretty much resolved any issues with Siltvelt,” I replied.

“I heard you got tangled up in some pretty messy stuff. Maybe we should have gone, after all.”

“Nah. It probably would’ve made things even more complicated if you guys had been there.”

I was sure the Siltvelt leadership would’ve treated us quite a bit differently if Ren and Itsuki had been there. That lion bastard would’ve most likely spouted

off something about not being able to trust a Shield Hero who'd established amicable ties with the heroes of a hostile country.

"Everything went smoothly, thanks to me," Atla said.

". . ."

She sure chose the perfect timing to gloat about her performance. The fact that I couldn't say she was wrong was really depressing. It really came down to that powerful attack in the end, and it was thanks to Atla's and Fohl's performances that the Siltvelt leaders finally gave in too. So I couldn't really argue with her. I shrugged it off and ruffled Atla's hair before telling her to settle down.

"Atla! Ugh . . ." Fohl moaned begrudgingly.

It was the truth, so he'd just have to shut up and deal with it. I wasn't sure if taking them had been a good or bad decision, because now I really owed them one. I'd have to think about how to settle the score.

"I hate to admit it, but . . . I can't deny that Atla did play a big part," Raphtalia agreed reluctantly.

"It sounds like you had a lot to deal with. So how long until we're able to get into Q'ten Lo?" Ren asked.

"If everything goes as planned on the water, they say we should be able to get there by the day after tomorrow," I said.

"Oh? Is that you, kid?"

The old weapon shop guy showed up out of nowhere for some reason.

"How are things going so far?" he asked.

"We were just discussing our progress. But what are you doing here?" I replied.

He'd gone back to the castle town last I knew.

"I never heard back from you after that mess, so I closed the shop down temporarily and brought Tolly to come check on you," he explained.

"Ah, I see. Sorry about that. I've had my hands full," I said.

After we got everything settled in Siltvelt, thanks to Atla, I'd been pretty busy with other things. After looking into the Jaralis thing and searching his house, we rushed around getting the ship ready and then set sail for Q'ten Lo. I hadn't had time to return to the village, much less stop by the weapon shop to give the old guy an update.

"So you'll be able to reach the country you're headed for by the day after tomorrow?" he asked.

I pointed at the map.

"Oh, so that's where it is. That's perfect. Do you think I could tag along? There are some materials around there that can't be found anywhere else. If you're heading into Q'ten Lo, I'd like you to take me with you," the old guy pleaded.

He clasped his hands together for dramatic effect. When I didn't say anything, he pulled out the assassin's broken weapon that I'd given him after the attack.

"Tolly and I took a look at this weapon and I think we figured something out," he said.

"Oh yeah?"

I'd asked him to check the weapon out. Did that mean there had been some kind of development?

"It seems like our master is the one who crafted it," he continued.

"What?"

I remembered hearing the old guy and Imiya's uncle talk about their master a little bit before.

"You're telling me your master is the one who forged Q'ten Lo's mysterious weapons?" I asked.

"There's a good possibility he did. So could you take me with you? I'd like to look into it some more," he replied.

"But . . ."

Even if that were true, did I really need to take the old guy with me? I would've preferred to have him stand by at the village or go do some work in

the neighboring town while he waited. Then again, I did owe him after all he'd done for me.

"It'll be dangerous," I said.

"I'm aware of the dangers, kid. I can hold my own in a fight too, you know. I won't go down easily," he replied.

Hmm . . . This *was* a request from the one-and-only old weapon shop guy, after all. I was still thinking about it when Ren raised his hand.

"I think he should be fine. He's even given us a few lessons while we were training over in the town," he said.

"Now that you mention it, he's the one that taught me how to use a sword too," Raphtalia said.

She stood there reminiscing for a moment.

"Only the most basic of basics," the old guy said.

"I've been teaching her a little something too, lately," Sadeena interjected.

"Yes, I'm finally starting to understand how to use a katana properly," Raphtalia replied.

"I've noticed that, now that you mention it. You've become a rather troublesome opponent," Atla said.

"I don't plan on losing to you, Atla," Raphtalia replied.

Now that they mentioned it, I did notice Raphtalia training with Sadeena while we were on the boat. Sadeena had been giving her a detailed explanation of how to use a katana. Sadeena was most proficient with harpoons and spears, but she seemed to know how to handle a variety of weapons. Was there anything she couldn't do?

"What's your actual level?" I asked the old guy.

"I used to be an adventurer, you know. I'm level 87, give or take," he replied.

That was higher than I expected! In that case, he would probably be fine. I guess. It still made me a bit uneasy, though.

"Hmm . . . Alright, then. But I'd prefer to bring you once we've landed in Q'ten

Lo and made sure things are safe," I said.

"Oh, come on. I could use a little bit of adventure every now and then too. Besides, you or the little miss might end up killing the master if he happens to be on the enemy's side for some reason. That would defeat the whole purpose, right?" the old guy replied.

He had a point. All I knew about their master was that he was a swordsmith. Checking the identity of every enemy we fought probably wasn't feasible. I could always take Imiya's uncle instead, since he knew their master's face. But considering their levels, the old guy made more sense.

"You better not do anything crazy. And I want you to stay close by," I said.

"I know all of that! You sure are a worrywart, kid," the old guy replied.

Well, yeah. He'd done so much for me. It was only natural that I'd worry about him.

"Naofumi has a sharp tongue, but generally speaking, he's always thinking about protecting others. It only makes sense that he would worry," Ren said.

Ren spoke up on my behalf. Why was he acting like he suddenly knew all about me? I had a feeling commenting would only cause trouble, though, so I kept my mouth shut.

"And what about us? Should we go with you too?" Ren asked.

"I was planning on having you stay here to deal with any attacks on the village. I don't want to leave the place without anyone to fight back," I replied.

I mean, it wasn't like the villagers were helpless. But they still needed someone here to fight alongside them as their leader. And when all was said and done, Ren and Itsuki were pretty much a dream team. The two of them together would basically be considered OP, or overpowered, in gamer terms.

It would be nice to have them with me when I invaded Q'ten Lo, but that would mean neglecting defense back at headquarters. It helped that there hadn't been many attacks so far. But it would be a real problem if the enemy managed to capture the village while I was gone and then held the residents hostage.

“Of course, that’s only until we make it into Q’ten Lo,” I continued.

I could teleport back and forth with my portal skill, so I could return to the village at any time. I figured things would work out if I used that advantage to keep the village defended. That was why I had S’yne keeping tabs on me at all times from a distance, after all.

“Besides, we’re still traveling by boat, so we have to think about fighting on the water. Putting you in a situation like that could be dangerous, right?” I told Ren.

“Ugh . . .” he groaned.

That’s right. Ren couldn’t swim. On top of that, there was a good possibility we would end up facing enemies that were like mass-produced Sadeena clones. Putting Ren in a situation like that would be too risky. I couldn’t have him getting killed in battle right after we’d finally gotten him on our side.

“Why don’t you try working on your swimming if you have some spare time? Luckily for you, some of the weapons you can unlock using sea monster materials have adjustments that make swimming easier,” I said.

“Okay, I’ll do that. Still, it will take time . . .” he mumbled.

“Of course. I realize that. That’s why I want you to watch over the village and town for me. I’ll use my portal to call for you if you’re needed,” I replied.

“Okay. Sorry I can’t do more,” he said.

Ren was always so serious now. My opinion of him improved with each day.

“Don’t worry about it. More than that, I really wish you two would hurry up and go to the Cal Mira islands to get rid of those curse effects,” I said.

We were on high alert and didn’t have time to go register the hot springs as a portal location. But it would still be a while before they fully recovered from their curses, and that was a problem. I wasn’t sure what to do about that.

“Itsuki, you can swim, right?” I asked.

“Yes. I can swim,” he replied.

Itsuki hadn’t changed. He always responded, but he still seemed to lack any

emotion due to the effects of the curse. That made him far easier to deal with than before, but the complete absence of emotion was kind of creepy.

“If I’m going to take one of you with me on the way there, it would be better to have Itsuki, since he can make ranged attacks from the ship,” I said.

“If those are your orders . . .” Itsuki replied.

Hmm . . . Deciding what to do with Itsuki wasn’t any easier than it was for Ren. Having him there during the trip would be nice too, of course. But even more than that, if something were to happen upon our arrival in Q’ten Lo . . . I had to consider the possibility that we might end up having to fight as soon as we got there. In that case, it definitely made sense to have him with us at that point.

I couldn’t expect Ren to help fight while we were on the boat, but Itsuki could still prove useful. He came as a set with Rishia too, and the two of them together were pretty formidable. I was worried about the Q’ten Lo equipment that weakened attacks made by heroes, but that would be an issue no matter where we were fighting.

“Hey! Hey! Little Naofumi!” Sadeena called out.

“What?” I asked.

She spoke up as soon as I finished talking.

“Considering what lies ahead, I think you should take Gaelion with us too. Being a dragon, he should be able to sense when we approach the water dragon,” she said.

Was that because of dragon territorial marking or something? If that were the case, I wanted to say that Filo could probably do the same thing. But then again, Gaelion could fly too. That might come in handy if we got into trouble.

“Fine. It’s starting to look like we’ll be invading with a pretty big group,” I said.

When I really thought about it, taking the whole village to invade was a possibility too. But the villagers were busy peddling our wares and taking care of routine operations. We needed money. I could probably get a substantial amount of support from Siltvelt if I asked, but I didn’t want to rely on them any

more than I already had. Doing so would probably just be digging myself into a hole. And seeing them all lined up like a bunch of pigeons bobbing their heads and praying to me was super creepy.

“It doesn’t matter, either way. We set sail tomorrow morning, so be ready,” I told everyone.

“Understood!”

And so time marched on.

Chapter Eleven: The Flawed Master

The next day, I rounded up my best fighters, boarded the ship, and set sail for Q'ten Lo. The ship crew was all from Siltvelt. They seemed a bit wary when Itsuki got on board, but I shot them a stern look and that shut them up.

It was around evening that day.

"Rafu!"

"Tadaaaa!"

"Stop posing like that on the ship's bow! It's bad luck!" I shouted.

Filo and Raph-chan must have lost their minds. They were standing at the front of the ship and holding their hands up in the air. It was the exact same pose made famous by that movie about the luxury cruise liner that ended up sinking. Where did they learn that? From Ren or Itsuki, most likely.

There was a lantern with fancy decorations hanging near the front of the ship and burning brightly. According to Werner and the old genmu, it was some kind of special item that would enable us to enter Q'ten Lo. They said something about it allowing us to navigate around the raging currents.

"That sure is a mysterious light," Raphtalia whispered.

She approached the lantern and peered in at the flame.

"I can sense the flow of some peculiar power. We probably just need to follow that flow, but it seems to change randomly and quite often. It would be difficult to mimic the lantern's effect on my own," Atla said.

"Ugh . . ."

Fohl had gotten seasick and wasn't doing too well. He'd been like this ever since getting on board. The difference between him now and when he'd won the duel in Siltvelt was like night and day. It was pitiful.

"Little Naofumi! Little Raphtalia! Look at those whirlpools," Sadeena said.

She pointed at a whirling current near the ship. When I looked more closely, I realized we were actually sailing inside of an eddy too.

“If you watch carefully, you’ll notice that the current flows outward. Do you see it?” she asked.

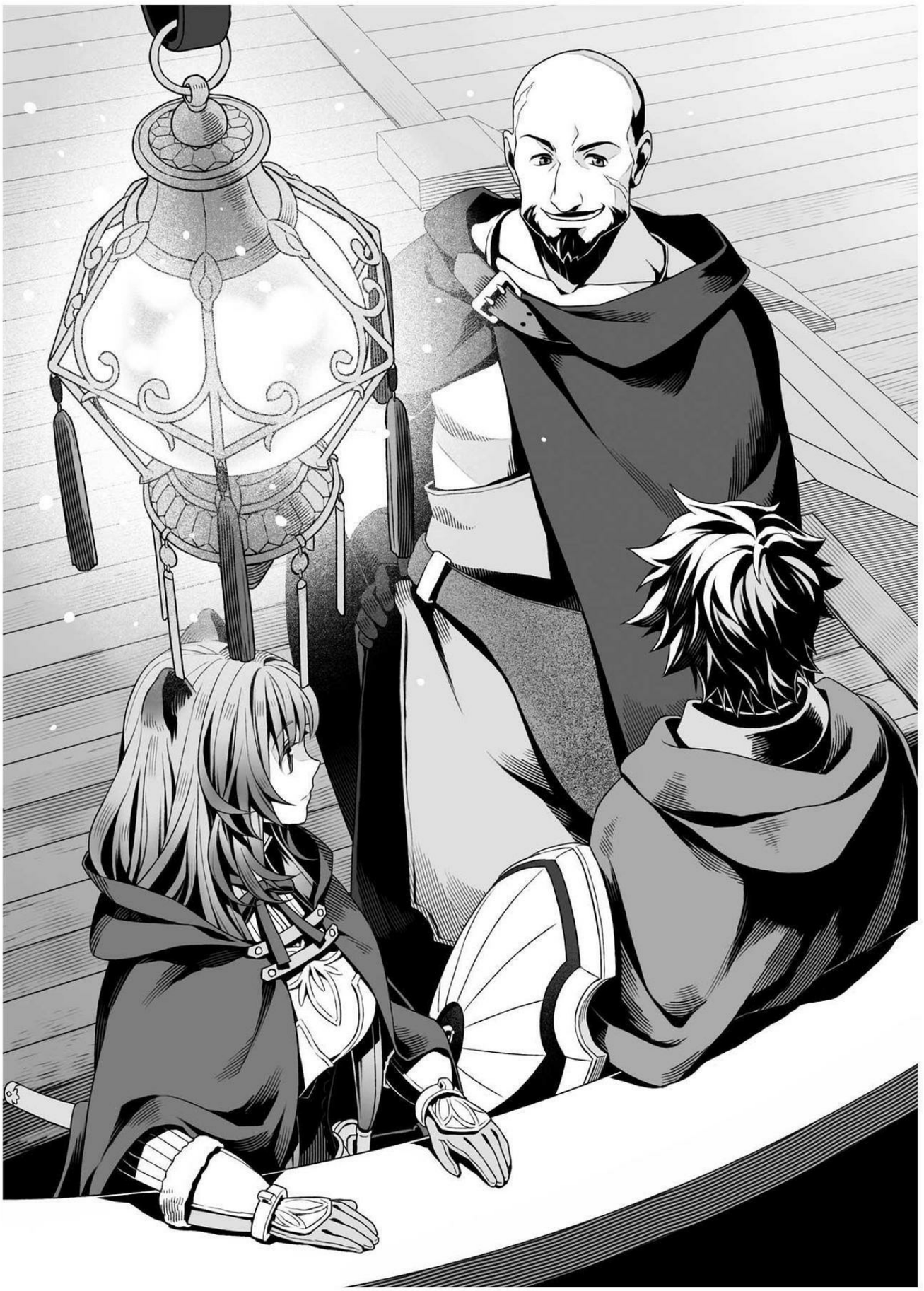
“Yeah, now that you mention it,” I replied.

The whirlpools were all flowing in a set direction. It looked really creepy. But now it made sense that it would be easy to leave and tough to get in through these waters.

“So you and Raphtalia’s parents made your way through all these whirlpools?” I asked her.

“We sure did,” she replied.

It was hard to believe anyone could make it through waters filled with so many whirlpools. I was honestly impressed.



“It must be nice having such a lively bunch of friends, kid,” the old guy said after coming over to join us.

Before we left port, he'd wandered around the area buying all kinds of stuff and then asked me to transport it back for him. We had a bit of extra time, so I agreed. He said he'd make us some nice weapons after we got back, so I was looking forward to that.

Speaking of the port area, something about the countries beyond Siltvelt all reminded me of Japan. We'd seen a good mixture of humans and demi-humans of all races, but they seemed to be getting along well regardless.

"What kind of guy is your master, anyway? I remember hearing something about him being like Motoyasu," I asked the old guy.

I couldn't help but wonder about his past.

"Hmm . . . Well, he's about as skilled as they come. I'm still not confident even I could match his craftsmanship," he replied.

"And you say the weapons those assassins who attacked the village were using look like your master's work?"

"Yeah, there's no doubt about it. But if you asked me whether he was from Q'ten Lo, I really have no idea."

"Oh really?"

"I guess you could say he was a bit of a vagabond. I wandered around from place to place studying blacksmithing at first too. But the moment I saw his work, I fell in love. I became his apprentice after that."

To sum up what the old guy told me, he'd gone traveling from country to country as an adventurer when he was younger. He wanted to expand his horizons to make himself a better blacksmith. One day, he stopped in at a weapon shop that carried weapons made by local smiths. After spotting several masterfully crafted weapons there, he went and started an apprenticeship under the blacksmith who'd made them.

The masterpieces he'd seen were a katana and a sword. The old guy mentioned his own specialty had been making swords up until that point.

"Now that you mention it, I ask you for all kinds of different equipment, like it's the norm. But now that I think about it, being able to handle all of that is

really impressive," I said.

I'd heard that even just making a sword was an incredibly complicated process. But on top of that, he was able to handle spears, bows, short swords, all kinds of other weapons, and even armor and shields. He honestly deserved the praise.

"If you say so. But yeah, I handle a little bit of everything at the shop. I do my best to fulfill custom orders too," the old guy replied.

He acted really embarrassed.

"Master used to say that blacksmiths who specialize in a certain type of weapon always end up hitting a dead end, so we should keep an open mind and try to craft a variety of weapons and equipment," he continued.

"That must be why you even make pajamas," I retorted.

"That one was your fault for bringing me such a strange request in the first place, kid," he shot back.

I guess a Filo Kigurumi wasn't any stranger than a Pekkul Kigurumi.

"I do consult with specialists from time to time, but I always do my best to analyze materials and figure out how to make the most of them," the old guy continued.

"Yeah, I've noticed. So what? You became an apprentice and worked on all kinds of different stuff, then?" I asked.

"Pretty much. We traveled the world and did all kinds of things. Like getting into messes because of the master's womanizing and me being forced to pay off his massive debts. I got all kinds of experience," he replied.

"Umm, none of that has anything to do with blacksmithing, does it?" I said.

A bitter smile crept across the old guy's face.

"That's why very few of the master's apprentices stuck with him until the end, despite how skilled he was. Aside from me and Tolly, everyone else ended up running away," he replied.

"You mean Imiya's uncle. But he ended up leaving before he finished too,

right?” I asked.

“Yeah, right when the master was about to fully certify him, he had some family issues come up,” the old guy explained.

“I heard he was working at an ironmonger’s shop or something,” I said.

I mean, that wasn’t completely unrelated. But would a blacksmith really be content working at an ironmonger’s shop?

“Back to what I was saying. So I was still in the middle of my apprenticeship, but one day the master just left a letter on the table and disappeared. It said he had nothing left to teach me and that I should open shop wherever I wanted,” the old guy continued.

“That makes the guy sound kind of cool, but I’m guessing there’s a twist,” I replied.

I stared at the old guy suspiciously and he let out a loud, bitter laugh.

“Yeah, it was only a matter of hours before the women and debt collectors came flooding in like a tidal wave,” he said.

Yeah, his master was a complete deadbeat. If we ran into him, we should probably punish him right then and there on the spot.

“Now I understand what it is you want to do. We can settle your grudge and secure your future at the same time,” I said.

“I just realized that talking to you was a huge mistake, kid. I’ve never felt more certain of anything in my life,” the old guy replied.

He was squinting his eyes at me. What was that supposed to mean? Had I said something wrong?

“Am I wrong?” I asked.

“Well, I do wish he’d do something about his womanizing and irresponsible spending habits. I won’t deny that. But that’s not what I’m after,” he replied.

Hmm, I guess that meant the old guy had something else in mind.

“It might just be a coincidence that those assassins were using weapons he made. It’s possible we won’t find any clues to his whereabouts in Q’ten Lo,” he

continued.

“That’s true,” I said.

It’s not that it would be a problem if he wasn’t in Q’ten Lo. But the old guy still had a lot of respect for his master and felt like he still had more to learn. I figured that’s what he was trying to say.

“Either way, if the master’s weapons are causing you trouble, then I need to look into it. You’re a loyal customer, so that’s my duty as your blacksmith,” he added.

So it was something the old guy felt he needed to do for my sake and ultimately for his master’s sake.

“And that’s not all. If I can follow the trail of the master’s weapons back to him, I might be able to resolve this issue I’ve been stuck on. That’s the feeling I get,” he said.

Oh yeah. I almost forgot I’d asked the old guy to make me a new shield. But the Spirit Tortoise materials were supposedly really difficult to work with and he was having trouble crafting anything worthy of actually being called a shield. Talking it over with Imiya’s uncle had given him some promising ideas, but he still wasn’t happy with the results. Addressing his concerns might mean being able to make me a better shield.

In that case, I should probably do what I could to help out. After all, the old guy was the first person to recognize the truth and offer me a helping hand after I came to this world and was framed.

“Got it. I’ll do my best to help you look for clues,” I said.

“Thanks!”

After we finished talking, I turned and gazed off into the direction of Q’ten Lo.

“Kwaaaa!”

Gaelion was circling around above the boat like a seagull. S’yne and Wyndia wanted to come with us too, but they ended up going to Siltvelt with Rat to investigate things there. S’yne in particular seemed to have picked up the enemy’s scent, so I pretty much left things to her.

Gaelion changed into his baby dragon form and landed on my shoulder.

“Hmm, the breeze feels nice here. But as soon as I leave the ship, the wind suddenly becomes so strong that it feels like I’ll be blown away,” he said.

The adult Gaelion was talking freely since neither Ren nor Wyndia was around.

“Let me know if you sense anything unsettling,” I said.

“I will. But that’s not to say I don’t already sense something out of the ordinary,” he replied.

“Oh really?”

“It’s not something that I can detect clearly. But if I had to say, it certainly seems like the distant presence of a dragon.”

“Is it the water dragon that Sadeena mentioned?”

“Most likely. My senses are telling me that he is busy maintaining the barrier and does not consider us hostiles.”

“I see.”

“But it would probably be wise to remain on constant alert and be ready for anything.”

That went without saying.

“I’ve been informed we’ll be entering Q’ten Lo waters shortly. However, it will still be some time before we arrive, so please remain patient,” Werner said after he came over and bowed to me.

My shield’s jewel suddenly flashed.

“Hm?”

I wasn’t sure what I should expect, but nothing else happened after that. Our voyage continued on without issue.

It was later that evening. We were sailing through a dense fog when the ship suddenly began rocking violently.

“Huh? What was that?” I asked.

We'd been relaxing inside of our cabin. I opened the door to look outside.

"It's an attack! We're under attack!" screamed a crew member.

"An attack?"

Well, I did figure this might happen. They never learned.

"The enemy has boarded the ship! We're currently engaged in battle!" Werner shouted.

He came running over to notify us of the situation.

"Please take refuge in a safe location!" he went on.

"Why the hell would I take refuge from the enemy?" I replied.

"That's right! We should make them pay with their lives!" Atla exclaimed.

Everything was always so extreme with her.

"Oh my . . ." Sadeena muttered.

"I guess we're not going to be able to sneak in undetected," Raphtalia whispered.

It sounded like she was halfway ready to give up even trying.

"What? Whaaat?" Filo asked with a sleepy, confused look on her face.

Gaelion had been lying at her feet snoring before the commotion woke him up. I was starting to think the two of them actually got along surprisingly well.

"Well, they are after Raphtalia, so it's no surprise we'd be attacked," I said.

"I've been told that the Bow Hero has already engaged the enemy on the deck," Werner replied.

Itsuki and the others had been resting in a different cabin, but I guess they'd already joined the fight. I wanted to think they'd be able to handle it, but I figured I should go check things out.

"Let's go," I said.

"Ugh . . ." Fohl moaned.

He was still suffering from seasickness. I wasn't sure what to do about him.

“Brother, how long do you plan on letting yourself look so pathetic?” Atla asked.

Pathetic? That sure was a heartless thing to say to her brother when he was trying to deal with excruciating seasickness. He couldn’t help it if he had a predisposition to getting seasick. But as soon as she finished speaking, Fohl sat up abruptly and shook his head.

“I’m coming too, Atla!” he said.

I guess he’d push himself through anything to satisfy his little sister. It was pretty impressive, actually. I guess if he was fine with that, I wasn’t going to complain.

“Alright! Let’s capture the bastards this time and make them talk!” I shouted.

“Understood!” Raphtalia replied.

“That would be nice, but don’t get your hopes up,” Sadeena said.

“I’ll do my best!” Atla exclaimed.

“Me toooo!” cried Filo.

“Rafuuu!”

“Kwaaaa!”

We all headed up to the deck. I looked around. A group of several killer whale therianthropes who looked like Sadeena clones had gathered on the deck. Down in the water, I spotted some enemies that looked like merfolk and a few with turtle-like features that made them look like kappa. There were also several therianthropes that resembled albino snakes and then some goblins with bird beaks. There was actually quite a bit of variation.

The enemies were firing off magic at the ship from down in the currents and the Siltvelt mages were firing back at them.

“Kappas, huh?” I said.

“Fehhhh,” Rishia whined.

She’d been with me when I fought some kappas back in Kizuna’s world. That must have been why she was eying them so warily.

“Are kappas considered monsters in this world? Or would they be therianthropes?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” said Sadeena.

“It’s just that they were monsters in Kizuna’s world,” I explained.

I guess now wasn’t the time for a casual chat, though. I prepared to engage the killer whale therianthropes and kappas.

“Shooting Star Shield!”

I activated my Shooting Star Shield to protect any nearby party members.

“Drifa Chain Lightning!”

Sadeena cast her magic, shooting bolts of lightning at the enemies on the deck.

“Ugh . . .”

They must have been seasoned fighters, because they used their harpoons as lightning rods to divert Sadeena’s magical lightning attack.

“Don’t underestimate Siltveltians!” a member of the crew cried out.

Werner and the crew members were all on the deck fighting too. They seemed to be a pretty even match for the enemy.

“Shooting Star Bow!”

Itsuki synchronized his movements with Rishia and fired off an attack at the approaching enemies.

“Let’s do this, Brother!” Atla exclaimed.

“Okay!” Fohl shouted.

Upon Atla’s command, Fohl rushed forward and delivered a powerful kick to one of the enemies. The enemy must have been pretty tough, because it still wasn’t quite enough to incapacitate them. But Fohl seemed to have the advantage from a physical strength perspective. He was driving the enemy into a corner, if not winning.

“Stardust Blade!”

Raphtalia drew her katana and used a skill. The results of her recent training showed. Her katana moved with fluidity and grace, and she landed a direct hit.

“Gahhh!”

She cut cleanly through the therianthrope charging at her. The enemy fell flat onto the ground.

“You’ve gotten pretty good with that katana, little Raphtalia,” said Sadeena.

“Not good enough. I still need to learn how to use it better,” Raphtalia replied.

“There can be only one Heavenly Emperor! Die!” shouted an assassin while swinging a sword.

Umm, the assassin seemed to be confused as far as I could tell. What was she thinking, turning her back to Raphtalia and attacking the air?

“Rafuuu!”

Raph-chan squeaked and hopped up and down on the ground directly below where the enemy had attacked. Ah, so she had shown the assassin a hallucination.

“Either way . . .” I began.

The assassins all started to focus their attacks on Raphtalia. I glared at them and activated Air Strike Shield and my other skills to impede their movements.

“Their guard is airtight, so I’ll create an opening! You finish them off!” I told Raphtalia and the others.

“Understood!” Raphtalia replied.

“Here I go!” Atla exclaimed.

She charged at one of the assassins and delivered a sharp jab with her hand.

“Guh!”

That was all it took to make the assassin crumple forward onto the ground. Filo followed with a flying kick.

“Yaaaah!” she cried as she flew through the air.

She landed the kick on one of the killer whale therianthropes, who then went flying off the deck. Filo started to chase after the killer whale to deliver a follow-up attack.

“Filo! Don’t go after her! They have the advantage in the water!” I shouted.

“Okaaaay!”

“Kwaaa!”

Gaelion was fighting the crow-billed goblins in the air, but it seemed like they were both getting tossed about by the strong winds. The goblins clearly knew how to move, but Gaelion was breathing fire all over the place and quite a few scorched goblins had fallen out of the sky.

“Take this!” shouted a therianthrope assassin.

“Not so quick!” the old guy retorted.

The therianthrope had swung one of those fishy katanas at me, but the old guy jumped in and blocked the attack. They locked blades and began to struggle, but the old guy seemed to have a slight advantage.

“How did you get your hands on that katana? I’d appreciate it if you told me,” he said.

“Hmph! I have no intention of telling the enemy anything!” the assassin shouted.

“In that case, I’ll just have to force it out of you!”

The old guy gripped his sword tightly and thrust the enemy away. He then spun his blade around and drove it back up under the enemy’s katana. The katana went flying out of the enemy’s hands.

“Huh? Grrr!”

“You’re full of openings!” the old guy taunted.

With a loud thud, the katana landed blade-first and lodged itself deeply into the deck. The old guy pulled out a medium-sized war hammer and thrust it into the torso of the now-unarmed therianthrope. The powerful impact traveled through the enemy’s armor and into his body.

“Oof! Grrr . . . I won’t let you make a spectacle of me!” the therianthrope shouted.

Just before the enemy collapsed, he somehow managed to self-destruct and his body burst into smithereens.

“Jeez, he didn’t have to die . . .” the old guy mumbled.

“My thoughts exactly,” I agreed.

It wasn’t like we were going to eat them alive if they lost. We’d just torture them a bit to make them talk is all. I guess it wouldn’t hurt to feed them to Filo, though.

“I have a feeling Mr. Naofumi is imagining something even worse than death,” Raphtalia said.

“You think so?” I asked.

The enemy numbers had dwindled quite a bit. We did have some fierce warriors from Siltvelt on board, not to mention the all-star lineup I’d brought with me. There wasn’t a group of assassins we wouldn’t be able to deal with. The enemy must have realized that too, because I heard some kind of loud signal and they all started leaping off the ship into the water and fleeing.

“Wait!” called out a crew member.

“I wouldn’t recommend going after them,” Sadeena said.

Her warning made the crew hesitate to chase after the enemy. I seemed to recall someone mentioning that even the hakuko, who were unrivaled on land, were no match for those killer whale therianthropes—orcas, I think they were called—in the water.

“They might try attacking again later. All hands remain on full alert!”

“Aye!”

And just like that, the trusty Siltvelt crew members went back to business as usual. The old guy plucked the katana out of the ship’s deck and inspected the blade.

“This one was made . . . more recently than the last,” he said.

“Oh really?” I asked.

“Yeah. I thought it might have just been a coincidence that they were using one of the master’s pieces, but that doesn’t seem very likely now,” he replied.

“Hmm . . .”

Itsuki and Rishia came over to join us after making sure there were no enemies left.

“The enemies have all fled for now. Should we prepare the ballista in case they attack again?” Itsuki asked.

I’d almost forgotten that he could use the ballista. Now that he’d implemented the power-up methods, his attacks using the ballista would be on a whole different level than what Raphtalia had managed before, although the enemy was apparently using equipment specifically designed to counter the heroes.

“It’s incredible to think they would attack us in the middle of all these whirlpools. They were swimming around down there in the currents like it was completely normal,” Rishia said.

“Maybe they had some kind of special protection,” I suggested.

“It’s possible they were carrying equipment imbued with a blessing by the water dragon himself,” Sadeena whispered with a hint of concern in her voice.

“That just shows how much they don’t want us to make it to Q’ten Lo,” I said.

Making trouble for the enemy was one of the basics of war. Things were going smoothly, in other words.

“We did it!” Atla exclaimed.

“We wooon!” Filo squawked.

“I guess you’re right. Maybe I’m just being overly—”

But before Sadeena could finish speaking . . .

“Kwa?!”

Gaelion was the first to react. He turned toward us, and then it happened!

Fwoooosh!

Something shot down toward me and Raphtalia. It managed to avoid hitting anyone standing in the area and bored right through the deck of the ship, disappearing down into the water below. Immediately after, the whirlpool below us shot up like a tornado and sucked up a section of the deck that had been cut away.

“Whoa!”

Raphtalia and I quickly tried to move away, but I could feel the tornado pulling us in. I tried to cast my Air Strike Shield to give us something to stand on, but I didn’t make it in time.

“Little Naofumi! Little Raphtalia!” Sadeena cried out.

“Kwaaaaa!”

Sadeena and Gaelion leapt toward me and Raphtalia. Several seconds later, Atla came running after us too.

“Mr. Naofumi!” she screamed.

“Atla!” Fohl shouted.

“Brother?!”

He grabbed her hand immediately and held her back.

“Master?!”

“Fehhhh!”

“Naofumi!”

“Kid!”

Filo, Rishia, Itsuki, and the old guy all called out to us, but none of them could make it in time. They all went plunging down into the whirlpool below, and the tornado swallowed me and Raphtalia up. It tossed us around violently, and everything went spinning by at breakneck speeds.

“R-Raphtalia!”

“Mr. Naofumi!”

I instantly reached out and grasped Raphtalia's hand tightly so that we wouldn't get separated. It wasn't the first time something like this had happened.

"Little Naofumi! Little Raphtalia!"

Sadeena had leapt into the tornado in an attempt to protect me and Raphtalia. She was doing everything she could to swim through the swirling waters. It looked like Gaelion was clinging on to her back.

"Use . . . your portal . . ."

It took everything I had to focus my attention and call out the name of the skill.

"Portal . . . Shield!"

Teleporting back would mean having to retrace our steps, but oh well. I called out the name of the skill and a message popped up on my screen: "Unable to teleport." The thing never worked when I needed it most! We went spinning around inside of the tornado, and I felt my consciousness begin to drift away.

Chapter Twelve: A Little Help from the Water Dragon

“Ugh . . .”

A drop of water splashed on my cheek and woke me from my half-conscious daze. I opened my eyes and realized someone had laid me on my back. I looked to my right and saw Raphtalia laid out next to me in the same fashion. I must have been holding on to her hand the whole time.

“Oh? Did you finally wake up?” Sadeena asked.

I sat up and shook my head. Sadeena stood there peering down at me and Raphtalia.

“Kwa!”

Gaelion was perched on Sadeena’s shoulder. He sounded like he’d been worried about us.

“Where are we?” I asked.

I looked around. The walls seemed to be made of rock and had a faint green glow. We must have been in a cave. I could see water flowing into the cave not far from where we were. It smelled like seawater. To the rear, there appeared to be some kind of altar and a path leading deeper into the cave.

“The water dragon’s secret hideaway would be my guess,” Sadeena replied.

“That certainly seems likely,” Gaelion agreed.

“The water dragon? Does that mean he brought us here by force?” I asked.

“Probably,” Sadeena replied.

“Yes, I was able to confirm that much while spinning around inside of that tornado. The water dragon indeed pulled us down here,” Gaelion confirmed.

I wondered if that meant the water dragon had hostile intentions. We would need to be extra cautious.

“Raphtalia is—” I began.

“Ugh . . .”

Raphtalia regained consciousness at almost the same moment I turned to

look at her.

“Mr. Naofumi . . . Where are we?” she asked.

“Apparently the water dragon dragged us into his hideout,” I replied.

“What?! That means . . .”

Raphtalia gripped the handle of her katana and stood up, prepared to engage in combat at a moment’s notice.

“Where is this water dragon anyway, Sadeena?” I asked.

“I have no idea, unfortunately. But you should take a look at that altar over there,” she said.

“Huh?”

I looked over at the altar she was pointing to. What appeared to be a crystal ball was resting on top. I could sense some kind of force coming from its direction. It resembled magic power. Something about this crystal was different than the crystal balls used to learn magic spells, though.

“What is that?” I asked.

“I was a miko priestess, but this is the first time I’ve seen that thing,” she replied.

“That’s a dragon emperor fragment,” said Gaelion, pointing at the crystal ball.

“Why would something like that be enshrined here?” I asked.

“Who knows? Not me, at least,” Sadeena said.

Gaelion approached the crystal ball or, according to him, “the dragon emperor fragment.” It didn’t seem to be a trap.

“You remember what happened with that demon dragon. Are you sure it’s okay to mess with that thing?” I asked.

The crystal ball suddenly floated up off of the altar and shined a beam of light at Gaelion.

“Hmm . . . It appears to be safe. It’s telling me the dragon wanted to deliver a message,” he said.

The crystal ball turned into a sphere of pure light before being absorbed into Gaelion's body.

"Now I see. The water dragon seems to have left a souvenir for me. The fragment just raised my stats and increased my water-type resistances," he continued.

"A souvenir? Does that mean the water dragon isn't here?" I asked.

"It seems he brought us here to give you an invitation, as the guardian of this country. He was made aware of your approach some time back. He received your signal, apparently," Gaelion said.

Hmm, so the water dragon had his reasons for doing things this way. But what signal? Then I remembered seeing my shield's jewel flash earlier. Maybe that was a signal.

"And what if you hadn't been here?" I asked Gaelion.

"There was a message magically sealed within the crystal ball. It probably would have given you the same explanation," he replied.

"So what exactly does 'guardian' mean?" I asked.

Gaelion paused for a moment and seemed to be struggling to find the right answer.

"I'm having trouble reading that information from the fragment, but apparently there is a barrier around Q'ten Lo. It's meant to keep out certain . . . spirits? It only allows the entrance of spirits that are pure and innocent, it seems," he said.

"So the water dragon monitors approaching spirits?" I asked.

"To be exact, the water dragon's job is to maintain the barrier. What the barrier is guarding the country from, I'm not sure," Gaelion explained.

"That's right. I know about the water dragon maintaining the barrier. I had to participate in all kinds of ceremonies dealing with that when I was little," Sadeena said.

She seemed to be lost in thought for a moment, reminiscing about the past.

“There’s a whole town under the ocean. It’s deep down in the abyss, where the currents are strongest. You have to contact the water dragon directly to even get access, but I’ve seen it,” she continued.

“Umm, so why are we here again?” Raphtalia asked.

“Well, the barrier has been tampered with, it seems. Ships from Siltvelt are no longer ensured access to Q’ten Lo,” Gaelion explained.

“So there was no point in coming on a ship from Siltvelt?” I groaned.

That meant our trip to Siltvelt had basically been a complete waste of time.

“That’s not true. If we hadn’t come on the ship from Siltvelt, we probably wouldn’t have made it to the edge of the barrier, where the water dragon was able to summon us here,” Gaelion replied.

So we definitely wouldn’t have gotten in without the ship. I guess it was fine, in that case. But wait, didn’t that mean that the ship we were on wouldn’t make it to Q’ten Lo?

“The ship will probably be able to make its way to Q’ten Lo eventually, but it seems the government is trying to buy time. That’s why the water dragon created a distraction and brought us here,” Gaelion continued.

“So basically, the water dragon summoned us here by force, right?” I asked.

Gaelion nodded, showing no sign of protest.

“And? Does he have some kind of hidden agenda or something?” I continued.

“Why is that the first thing you think about?” Gaelion asked incredulously.

Whatever. That’s just how my mind worked.

“That’s just like Mr. Naofumi,” Raphtalia replied.

“Always approach with caution, right?” Sadeena said.

She stole my answer! Oh well.

“In summary, the water dragon is not happy with the situation in Q’ten Lo and he brought you here in an attempt to serve the country’s original purpose,” Gaelion said.

“Couldn’t he just have brought the whole boat?” I said, annoyed.

Gaelion looked at me like I’d asked a stupid question.

“So what? What is the country’s original purpose supposed to be?” I asked.

“Well, that’s another part of the fragment that I’m having trouble understanding, but it has something to do with the role played by your companion’s family line—the role of pacifier . . . of the spirit implements,” he explained.

“‘Pacifier of the spirit implements’?” I asked.

He was saying things that made no sense again. Going on what I knew so far, there was a good possibility that “spirit implements” referred to the heroes’ weapons. But I had no idea what “pacifier” was supposed to mean.

“You mean me?” Raphtalia asked.

“I don’t remember hearing anything about that,” Sadeena said.

She had a confused look on her face.

“Maybe it’s a concept that faded away over time since the country has been sealed off from the outside world for so long,” I suggested.

The queen and the leaders of Siltvelt mentioned that parts of the legends had been lost to war over the years. This country probably had a similar past too.

“The information we had access to differed with each division, though. It’s possible that others knew, even if I didn’t. Little Raphtalia’s father might have known something,” Sadeena said.

“My father . . .” Raphtalia whispered.

There was a sadness in her voice, probably because she had been reminded of her father. I wanted to say something that would comfort her. But I knew that looking for answers from a dead person probably wasn’t going to help anything.

“Raphtalia, are you . . .” I began.

I wondered if asking her more about her parents would bother her. Even I wasn’t so dense that I couldn’t tell she missed them.

“I’m okay. But if you want to ask whether my father ever mentioned anything,

there's nothing that I recall," she said.

Hmm, I wondered if that just meant her father was good at keeping secrets.

"That's fine. This is only speculation, but 'spirit implements' probably refers to the holy weapons. That's all I can really guess at this point," I said.

"It would seem so," Raphtalia replied.

"Yeah, that's what it sounded like the assassins meant when they were babbling on the other day. I think it's safe to assume you're correct," Sadeena said.

"So that leaves us with 'pacifier.' Judging from the word itself, along with that equipment the assassins were using, I imagine it refers to someone who is in a position to have some kind of influence on the heroes," I continued.

It reminded me of being taunted and referred to as "Shield Demon" in Melromarc. "Shield Devil" was another one of the countless names I'd been called.

Hypothetically speaking, what if a hero were summoned to this world and just ran rampant, doing whatever they wanted? Say they got their hands on some suspicious weapon with brainwashing abilities—like the one Itsuki was using when Rishia fought him—and then set out to conquer the world. Heroes were supposedly summoned when the world was in danger. But what if one of those heroes turned evil and started trying to conquer the world because of a curse or something? And what if that evil hero defeated the other heroes that had been summoned too?

The world would be in a real dark place. Even if they summoned new heroes, the evil hero would know they were a potential threat. He wouldn't just ignore them. If it were me, I'd kill them as soon as they were summoned, without a doubt. I wouldn't even let them summon new heroes in the first place. But what if there were people who could intervene and pacify a hero that had gotten out of control? And what if these so-called "pacifiers" were still out there but had simply erased all records and evidence of their existence? If such people did exist and had the ability to suppress the power of the heroes' weapons, then they might have a chance against said evil hero.

It wasn't impossible, but it seemed pretty farfetched.

"The water dragon seems to be adamant about there being a good reason for the isolation of Q'ten Lo," Gaelion said.

"Alright. I'm sure we'll find out more about that later. So what's this about not being happy with the country's situation?" I asked.

"You'll supposedly understand once you leave the cave and see the situation for yourself. The water dragon says he wants you to infiltrate the country with the miko priestess and weaken the barrier that is blocking the ship your companions are on," Gaelion continued.

"The water dragon wants to cooperate with us, in other words. So he created an opening and summoned us inside of the barrier. And now he wants us to weaken the barrier so that the ship can get in?" I asked.

Gaelion nodded.

"The location of the device that maintains the barrier is recorded here. It's telling me we should go there. What do you want to do?" he asked.

"This dragon sure is pushy, considering he won't even show himself. Honestly, I'm inclined to refuse to do anything he says, but that's probably not the best idea," I replied.

The dragon had resorted to rather forceful tactics. And it wasn't like just ignoring his message and leaving the cave wasn't an option. We didn't have to do what the water dragon said. But I couldn't deny that we didn't really have a next move without getting more information first.

"In any case, if it will get us out of this cave, then we might as well go. Whether or not we do what he wants us to when we get there is a different story, though," I said.

"That's just like you. But it sounds like a plan, either way," Gaelion replied.

"Oh! It's a signal from Raph-chan," Raphtalia exclaimed.

Oh yeah, I always seemed to forget she and Raph-chan were connected somehow. Raphtalia had her eyes closed and seemed to be concentrating.

"Umm, I'm not really sure what she's saying, but I think she's trying to tell me

she has a good idea of the situation here. She's updating Filo now," Raphtalia explained.

"I see. How are things on the ship?" I asked.

"They're trying to enter Q'ten Lo, but something is impeding their progress. She says they should be able to break through, but it will take more time."

Hmm, so the situation seemed to corroborate the water dragon's information so far.

"I guess we should get going then," said Sadeena.

"Agreed. For now, let's just try to get to some kind of human habitation," I said.

We began to explore the cave. Although, there was really only one path, which eventually led down into the water.

"I'll go check it out," Sadeena said.

"Be careful," I told her.

"Of course!"

She changed into her therianthrope form and went ahead down into the water. I wondered if she would be alright. But she came back up out of the water before I knew it.

"Well, I'll be! This waterway is camouflaged really well. I had no idea it was here," she said.

"I don't care about that. Just tell me whether we can get out of here or not," I replied.

"Yes, we can. It's a bit deep and getting in is complicated, since it's concealed so well. But getting out should be simple enough."

"Alright, let's head out then," I said.

"Okie dokie. Everyone hold on to me and don't let go!" Sadeena told us.

"Okay," said Raphtalia.

"I can hold my own in the water now. I'll be right behind you," Gaelion said.

I guess he could operate underwater now. He was gaining new abilities at a surprising rate.

Raphtalia and I grabbed on to Sadeena and we passed through the dark underwater passage before coming up to the surface of the water. The Pekkul Kigurumi would have been helpful, but I didn't have it with me, unfortunately. If worse came to worst, I guess I could always use my Bubble Shield skill as a way to breathe.

I looked around us as I floated on the surface. There was land nearby. I could see trees that looked like pines and some other plants that looked like bamboo. It reminded me of Japan. But I could see mountains that looked like the ones in China too, so I knew it wasn't actually Japan. It wasn't quite like Kizuna's world, either.

I saw what looked like a port town off in the distance. There seemed to be quite a few boats there too. They weren't normal sailing ships. They looked like those single-sail merchant ships used in Japan during the Edo period. It was the kind of ship I thought of when I imagined a treasure ship. This was the first time I'd seen ships like that in any world other than my own.

"We should probably head for shore somewhere further away from the port, if we want to sneak in," Sadeena said.

"I get that, but . . ."

I stuck my head in the water and looked around. Off in the distance, I could see aquatic therianthropes and demi-humans free diving and swimming around in the water.

"I'm not going to use my sonar since they might notice," she continued.

"Do you think they're our enemies?" I asked.

"They just normal civilians, as far as I can tell. But they don't seem to be fishing, either," she said.

Sadeena gazed in their direction with a confused look on her face. It suddenly occurred to me that I was swimming with a killer whale. That felt kind of strange.

“Ah, I see. They must be harvesting seaweed. That doesn’t make much sense when there are fish all around,” she continued.

“Who cares about that. Let’s hurry up and get to land,” I said.

Sadeena nodded.

“Good idea,” she said.

“Let’s go,” Raphtalia agreed.

Everyone nodded. We followed the shore reef to avoid being seen and eventually made it to land.

“Now then . . . Portal Shield!”

Hmph. We couldn’t use teleportation. I had a sneaking suspicion that would be the case. That would make it difficult to bring Ren to us. Things might be different if we found a dragon hourglass somewhere.

“The first thing you do is try to go home. You’re really something, little Naofumi,” said Sadeena.

“I won’t know if I can use it unless I try it out. Whether or not we’ll be able to escape in an emergency makes a big difference,” I replied.

“That’s a good point,” Raphtalia said.

She tried using her katana’s portal skill too. I think it was called Scroll of Return.

“Mine doesn’t work either. Something is interfering with teleportation,” she said.

“I guess that would have been too easy,” I replied.

“On with the infiltration then,” said Sadeena.

I had to wonder why we ended up sneaking into places so often. When I’d thought about invading Q’ten Lo, I’d imagined using Siltvelt’s influence to charge right through the front door.

I sighed.

“There were outfits prepared for us, so we should change,” Raphtalia said.

The clothes that the water dragon left for me seemed to be made out of hemp or something like that. Raphtalia got a hakama. It didn't look quite as good as the miko outfit, but it wasn't a bad choice. Sadeena had a similar outfit. Gaelion got to wear a tiny version of one of those straw ropes you always saw at shrines around his neck. I guess that was his collar. It had a little glass bead-looking thing hanging from it and actually suited him surprisingly well.

"Well didn't he just think of everything," I said.

"What is this for?" Gaelion asked.

"It basically shows that you're a sanctified monster. It's imbued with the water dragon's blessing, so it should make you seem important," Sadeena replied.

"Oh?"

We had effectively replaced our armor with ordinary civilian clothes. Sadeena and Raphtalia each draped a thin sheet over their heads and shoulders as a kind of cloak that would hide their faces. I had a feeling that would just make them stand out.

"Are people going to recognize you?" I asked Sadeena.

"It's been ten years since I left this country. I should probably be careful just in case, but there aren't many people that know my face. But little Raphtalia definitely needs to hide her tail and ears. Those might give us away," she replied.

"Is her race special or something?" I asked.

I wondered if her tail and ears would really give her away. People just assumed she was a racoon in Melromarc and Siltvelt. Her actual race was supposedly something else.

"Either way, you two should be careful," I said.

"Yeah," Sadeena replied.

"Are there humans in this country?" I asked.

Sadeena nodded.

“There are, but they’re not very highly regarded, just like in Siltvelt. That said, they don’t end up as slaves or anything like that,” she replied.

Oh? That was commendable. But I still wrapped a towel around my head to disguise my race, just in case.

“Alright, let’s do this. Where are we supposed to go?” I asked Gaelion.

“Hmm, it seems we need to head to the biggest building in the port town. It’s supposed to have a tower,” he said.

“Ah, that must be that lighthouse,” I replied.

And so we began to make our way toward the port town lighthouse.

I saw something that looked like an ancient burial mound on the way.

“Ah, so that’s where we are,” Sadeena said.

“You recognize this place?” I asked.

“Yeah, everyone knows this spot. The remains of a monster defeated by little Raphtalia’s ancestors are buried here,” she replied.

In the back of my mind, I imagined them building the burial mound because they were afraid of being cursed by some giant spider monster or something. That probably wasn’t far from the truth. And then I remembered the stone monument where the Tyrant Dragon Rex had been sealed away.

“The monster isn’t sealed away in there . . . is it?” I asked.

“I know what you’re thinking. I’m getting a really bad feeling about this,” Raphtalia said.

“Yes, I observed that fight from within your shield,” Gaelion added.

“I have no idea. Either way, I can’t recommend destroying ancient ruins,” Sadeena replied.

“I know that. Let’s hurry up and get out of here,” I said.

“Agreed. Any time Mr. Naofumi touches something, it’s like kicking the hornet’s nest, right?” Raphtalia replied.

“Where did you learn that?” I asked.

She probably heard it from the slave trader or something. That wouldn't have surprised me. It could have been Eclair too. Or maybe it was something Ren had muttered while they were talking. I probably needed to consider reeducating her from the ground up. I could teach her that "touching Mr. Naofumi is like kicking the hornet's nest," for example.

". . . ?"

Gaelion was tagging along behind me. He had his head tilted way off to the side and was staring at me with a confused look on his face. I wished he would stop that. It made me nervous.

We left the burial mound behind and made it to the port town shortly after. It definitely had an Edo period feel to it. But there were also buildings made out of bamboo-like plants that seemed out of place, but it still felt Japanese. There were trees with flowers in full bloom that looked just like the cherry blossoms in Japan. It really added to the atmosphere.

We stood still for a few moments and then Sadeena pointed to the cherry blossoms.

"That's a sakura lumina. It's a tree that produces this country's energy. They serve as lighting, since they glow at night, and they provide energy for all kinds of equipment," she said.

"Oh? They can do all of that? Sure sounds convenient," I said.

"I'm no expert or anything, but as far as I know, the trees will only grow within Q'ten Lo. I heard they tried to plant some in Siltvelt," she replied.

I wondered just what kind of tree it was. There might have been some kind of issue with climate or something. I figured it would be worth seeing if I could bioengineer it to make it grow elsewhere. Rat probably would have loved the thing. I had a feeling she could resolve the issues with the bioplant if she got her hands on one of them.

"Hmm . . ."

I kept spotting unique decorations that looked like tanuki all over the place. Like that! I saw one that looked just like one of those lucky cats. It reminded me of Raph-chan. There were some little tanuki stone statues that looked like the

guardian lions common in Okinawa too. But these tanuki were slightly different than the ceramic tanuki figures Shigaraki was known for. I don't know why, but even the roofs of the buildings made me think of tanuki.

"Mr. Naofumi, why are your eyes darting around so much?" Raphtalia asked.

"There are so many distractions. I feel like I'm in some kind of Japanese-themed Raphtalia Land," I replied.

"What does that mean!?" she shouted angrily.

I held a finger to my mouth and signaled for her to keep her voice down.

"Don't get so excited," I said.

"But—" she began.

"He isn't really too far off this time, little Raphtalia," Sadeena interjected.

Ah, that was right. Her family did rule over the country, I guess.

"But don't things seem really tense here in the town?" I asked.

"Now that you mention it . . . something does seem off," Raphtalia replied.

It wasn't because of our presence. It felt like the residents were all walking on eggshells or something.

"Maybe they have wanted posters up with sketches on them or something," I said.

I saw a signboard and headed over to see what was on it. But I couldn't read it, of course. It looked like the same writing I'd seen in Siltvelt.

"Sadeena, do you know what this says?" I asked.

"Let's see . . ."

Sadeena looked at the writing and furrowed her brow. It was rare for her to respond like that. And then—

"Waaahhhh!"

I suddenly heard a little kid scream. I looked over to see a huge bee called an "orange needle B"—that had to be a joke—pop up from out of nowhere and attack a kid. The residents were all just cowering in fear as they watched. I

immediately rushed over in front of the kid and blocked the orange needle B's attack.

"Raph—"

Before I could give Raphtalia the order, Sadeena ran over and held her back.

"You take care of it, little Gaelion! And whatever you do, don't use your counterattacks, little Naofumi!" she shouted.

"Huh?"

"Kwa?"

Gaelion leapt at the orange needle B. Just like Sadeena said, I focused on keeping my shield from activating any counterattack abilities. Gaelion bit into the orange needle B and it died.

"Th-thank you," the kid said.

"No worries," I replied.

The surrounding residents were all staring at me. They were white as a sheet.

"Y-you . . ." one began.

"Are you not afraid of the government officials?" another asked.

"Huh?" I replied.

And then several people wearing expensive-looking hakamas came running over.

"You there! We saw you kill that monster!" one of them shouted.

Sadeena stepped forward and addressed the man.

"All he did was protect a child from a monster. After that, another nearby monster just happened to eat that monster. That's all," she said.

"That's absurd! Do you not know the rules of the land?!" the man shouted.

"Kwa?"

Gaelion looked at the man with a confused look on his face. What was going on? What were they talking about?

“Of course we do! We would never break them. And even I know what kind of monster this is,” Sadeena replied.

She pointed at the glass bead on the straw-rope collar that Gaelion was wearing.

“Th-this monster is a vassal of the water dragon?! Our apologies!” the man said, and the group of government officials left.

“Kwaaa?”

As soon as the officials were gone, the surrounding residents began to applaud. What in the world was going on?

“Little Naofumi and little Raphtalia, we’re drawing too much attention here. Let’s keep moving,” Sadeena said.

“Uh, okay,” I said.

“U-understood,” Raphtalia replied.

“Oof!”

Raphtalia ran into a man who had followed the government officials over. The man seemed to be a rubbernecker. He looked like he was in his late thirties. His ears looked like dog ears. But then again, something about the shape was different than Keel’s or Wyndia’s ears. It was kind of like how there were tiny differences between Raphtalia and the racoon-type demi-humans. He was probably some race unique to the country.

“Oh my! Are you alright, little miss?” the man said.

He wrapped his arms around Raphtalia and caught her before she fell.

“Oh, umm, yes. I’m fine . . . So you can let go of me!” she said.

Raphtalia forcefully freed herself from the man’s embrace.

“Pardon me. It’s just that fate brought us together like this, little miss. How about you and I go somewhere to enjoy a cup of tea or nibble on some dumplings?” the man suggested.

“What the hell . . .” I said.

This bastard was clearly trying to hit on Raphtalia. I acted extra threatening as

I stepped between Raphtalia and the man. I glared at him.

“That’s my companion. If you’re trying to pick up girls, go try somewhere else. And think about your age too,” I continued.

He was clearly old enough to be her father. Even if demi-humans did initially mature rapidly, they obviously didn’t age rapidly, judging from Sadeena’s appearance. It only took one glance to know that this bastard wasn’t anywhere near Raphtalia’s age. I mean, I guess it was possible that age difference didn’t matter when getting married in this world, but still . . .

“Come, now. A man can never grow too old to enjoy the company of a female,” he said.

That bastard . . .

“Oh? Be careful about getting too feisty. You might just upset little ol’ me,” Sadeena said.

Sparks of lightning leapt from her skin and she glared at the bastard with a menacing look in her eyes.

“We’re in a bit of a hurry, so off you go,” she added and flashed him a big smile.

But he clearly had no intention of giving up. This time he grabbed Sadeena’s hand.

“My, oh, my. Aren’t you the lovely one, little miss? Today is a good day, indeed. To think I would have the chance to encounter such beautiful ladies!” he said.

We had another Motoyasu on our hands here. That’s who this bastard reminded me of. Even though Motoyasu was only obsessed with Filo now. Still, I decided to declare this guy Motoyasu #2.

“Come, ladies, let us enjoy a drink together!” he continued.

I guess his kind were always around, no matter what world you were in.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do that. I already have feelings for someone else,” Sadeena replied.

She gripped his hand tightly and fired off her lightning magic.

“Zweite Thunderbolt!”

The bastard screamed like a little girl. He nearly folded over backward as he was fried to a crisp, and then his body crumpled to the ground.

“Y-you’re a rough one . . . Ha, ha, ha,” he muttered and then lay there completely motionless.

They were really something—Sadeena and the bastard both.

“Alright, let’s go,” Sadeena said.

“Uh, yeah . . .” I mumbled.

I guess those government officials didn’t care if we zapped some guy. They were looking on disappointedly but showed no sign of coming after us. Strange. We followed Sadeena down a road with fewer people and continued toward the lighthouse.

Chapter Thirteen: Q'ten Lo Revolutionaries

"So? What the hell is going on?" I asked.

We saved a civilian by defeating an attacking monster and they scolded us for it. What was up with that?

"Apparently the country's ruler—the Heavenly Emperor—has issued a mandate declaring that all life must be treasured. In other words, anyone that kills a monster, or any other living thing, will be severely punished," Sadeena explained.

"Huh? Like some kind of law against cruelty toward animals?" I said.

They tried that in the Edo period and failed. I guess this country had to deal with such a ridiculous law too. Did they not realize how foolish that was?

"Is there something like that in your world too, little Naofumi?" Sadeena asked.

"Yeah, there was a shogun—a king, basically—that supposedly tried something similar a long time ago in my world," I said.

After hearing Sadeena's explanation, I understood why she had Gaelion kill the monster. Basically, if one of the townspeople killed a monster, they would be punished. But Gaelion was a dragon. If a monster killed another monster, there would be no punishment.

"That ornament the water dragon left Gaelion sure saved us," Sadeena said.

"So they can't punish a monster that's considered a vassal of the water dragon?" I asked.

"It was just a guess, but it worked," she said.

"Kwaaaa!"

Gaelion jumped up on my shoulder. He seemed happy that he'd been able to help out.

"If the monster is being controlled, then normally the owner would be punished," she continued.

"So that's why you acted like Gaelion was a wild monster. And a vassal of the

water dragon, on top of that," I said.

I guess the water dragon was pretty important in Q'ten Lo. I'm sure the Heavenly Emperor, or whatever, was more important, but bringing the water dragon into it complicated the matter enough that the officials didn't want to get involved. Besides, surely a law protecting all creatures would protect the water dragon too. That made it a legal gray area.

"It was a bold move, but it worked since little Gaelion is a dragon," Sadeena said.

"Me, someone's vassal? You insult me," Gaelion grumbled.

Oh? The adult Gaelion was speaking again.

"Well, technically, you do belong to me and Wyndia," I said.

He groaned. The baby Gaelion didn't seem to mind.

"Unbelievable . . . To think they would have such a terrible law," Raphtalia said.

"Now it makes sense why they see you as such a threat to their emperor," I told her.

By enacting such ridiculous laws, it puts the emperor out of favor with the people. Of course the leadership would get antsy if someone from the imperial bloodline showed up wearing the royal garb when public opinion of the emperor was volatile. Considering what had happened in my case, it wasn't hard to guess how the citizens would respond.

"I have a feeling I'm starting to really understand how you felt now, Mr. Naofumi," Raphtalia said.

"We're misery buddies!" I told her.

I understood what she was going through so clearly it hurt. But my shield had mostly helped resolve things in my case.

"Either way, this is the perfect chance. If we play our cards well, overthrowing the current rule should be easy," I said.

Judging from Sadeena's reaction, this law seemed to be relatively new. And

the citizens didn't seem to be happy with it, either. Dragging their stupid shogun—emperor in this case—down from the throne would be more than doable.

"Oh? Does that mean you have a plan, little Naofumi?" Sadeena asked.

"You could say that. Regardless, we need to get Filo and the ship with Itsuki and the others here first," I replied.

We began preparing to attack, once we got close to the lighthouse.

Sheesh . . . I'd been getting really tired of all this assassin business lately. It was time for them to see how it felt to be the ones attacked! I decided to make sure to go a bit overboard.

As we approached the lighthouse, I noticed something. The lighthouse was actually just a wooden structure built around a massively tall sakura lumina tree to help support it.

"Are we supposed to burn that thing down?" I asked.

"No. Once we defeat the guards, we're supposed to be able to gain access to that sakura lumina, using the Way of the Dragon," Gaelion replied.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

Hmm. We were hiding in an alley and observing the lighthouse when, all of a sudden, some guy who was wearing what looked like samurai armor came running toward us. That wasn't good. Someone must have alerted the officials or something.

"Let's withdraw. Just act normal. But move quick. Raphtalia, you get ready to use your concealment magic," I said.

"U-understood!" Raphtalia replied.

"Oh my . . . I suppose it does seem like forcing our way in could be difficult," Sadeena said.

"We could always destroy the lighthouse. Then I could fly us out of here using my larger form," Gaelion suggested.

His strategy could work too. But there was a risk of being knocked out of the air. If we were going to force our way in, it was probably best to wait until night and decide on an escape route beforehand.

We kept moving and Raphtalia continued reciting the concealment magic incantation so that we could escape from the samurai warrior.

“Okay, I’ll activate the spell once we turn that corner,” she said.

“Alright,” I replied.

We hurried around the corner and Raphtalia cast her magic.

“All Zweite Hide Mirage!”

The concealment magic embraced us softly. I assumed we’d disappeared. The samurai warrior came running around the corner and started looking all around for us. Nice! Now we just needed to leave the area without being noticed and wait for another chance to—

“I beg of ye, please show yourselves! I am no enemy of yours!” the man exclaimed.

He suddenly dropped to the ground and prostrated himself. We moved away several meters and began whispering to each other. The samurai warrior remained motionless with his forehead buried in the dirt.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“Umm . . . I’m not sure what to think,” Raphtalia replied.

“Well, my intuition is telling me he doesn’t have ill intentions. He doesn’t seem to be lying, at least,” Sadeena said.

“Didn’t something like this happen to you before?” Gaelion asked me.

That reminded me. Something similar did happen when I was getting ready to go fight the second wave. It had been the young soldier from Riyute that time, but Gaelion was right. This guy did seem to be acting the same way.

“It wouldn’t hurt to hear what he has to say, would it? I’ll make quick work of him if anything goes wrong,” Sadeena said.

“I have a feeling this is going to turn into a big headache, but fine,” I said.

I knew that getting access to the lighthouse was going to be a headache anyway. “Make quick work of him” made it sound like she was planning on doing something really violent, but I guess it would be best to see what the guy had to say, regardless.

“Alright then. Cancel the concealment, Raphtalia,” I said.

“Understood.”

Raphtalia canceled her concealment magic and we reappeared in front of the prostrated samurai warrior.

“What do you want from us?” I asked.

Even though we had showed ourselves and spoke to him, the samurai warrior remained motionless. What did he want? I tried asking him, but he didn’t move. I wondered if he was waiting for me to tell him to raise his head or something.

“Get up from there and tell us what you want,” I said.

When I said that, he finally lifted his head off the ground. But what he did next was unexpected. He looked at Gaelion first, and then Raphtalia, and then placed a hand over his heart and bowed his head.

“We humbly ask for thy assistance, soon-to-be Heavenly Empress,” he said.

“Huh? What? Umm . . . uhh . . .” Raphtalia stammered.

“Explain yourself. Otherwise, I don’t know what this drunkard companion of mine here is going to do to you, but I’m sure it’s not going to be pretty,” I said.

“Oh, you!” Sadeena exclaimed.

When I pointed at her, the samurai warrior shook his head several times as a sign of submission.

“U-understood! Please accompany me to the town mansion, where it should be safe to talk. If that’s not possible, then I’ll just give you a summary here,” he replied.

“Following you could lead us to a trap. Give us the short version now. And tell us who you are too,” I said.

The samurai warrior nodded, stood up straight, and began to talk.

“My apologies. I came searching for you by order of my father, who is the mayor of this town,” he said.

He was the mayor’s son? I wondered if he could prove that. And what was with his crazy outfit, anyway? He looked like a samurai warrior on his way to the battlefield.

“I assume Her Divine Majesty, the next Heavenly Empress, and those of you who accompanied her from Siltvelt have begun to understand the situation here in Q’ten Lo,” he continued.

“Yeah, I’m guessing you mean the law against killing monsters,” I replied.

“Yes. It has garnered nothing but criticism from all throughout Q’ten Lo, and that includes from my father. But as the mandate comes from the Heavenly Emperor himself, the government continues to oppress the people. However, one of our aquatic agents delivered a message from the water dragon earlier, informing us that he had brought the next Heavenly Empress to Q’ten Lo. I was sent to receive you,” the man explained.

Ah, now I understood what their objective was.

“Is this how you found us?” I asked.

I pointed at the straw rope around Gaelion’s neck and the samurai warrior nodded.

“We understand that ye still have other companions from Siltvelt that ye wish to get into Q’ten Lo. I believe we can help you do that successfully, but we should return to the town mansion to discuss our strategy,” he said.

Hmm, I couldn’t deny he had information that we hadn’t provided. He had all the facts straight too. But there was always a possibility it could still be a trap. What to do?

“Sadeena. Gaelion. If worse comes to worst, can we just burn this town to the ground and run?” I asked.

“Why do you just assume we’ll have to burn the town down?!” Raphtalia snapped.

“This guy clearly has connections with agents. I’m just considering the

possibility that this could still be a trap," I said.

"Oh my!" Sadeena exclaimed.

"I'm sure I could burn the town down if it came to that. Is that what you want to do?" Gaelion asked.

"Only as a last resort. I'm hoping we won't have to," I said.

The samurai warrior started trembling.

"P-please stop thinking about such terrifying things! We'll never get anywhere if ye don't trust me!" he pleaded.

"Yeah, yeah, alright. But you better not forget—we wouldn't rule out doing something like that," I replied.

"Alas, 'tis etched into my brain!" he exclaimed.

What was with this guy's speech? Surely my shield was translating it properly. But "ye"? He was using some strange word choices.

"Fine. But before anything else, take that helmet off and show us your face," I said.

"As you wish!"

The samurai warrior took his helmet off and looked up at us. Hmm . . . He was a bird-type demi-human. His hair reminded me of a falcon—not quite feathers and not quite down. He was young, perhaps in his early twenties, and had a Japanese air about him. He wasn't quite what I would have called handsome. He seemed more like the warrior type. I guess you could say something about his face made him look like a brawler. Kind of like a rough-looking samurai.

"Do you have a tail? Or would that be tail feathers?" I asked.

I circled around behind him and looked at his back. He quickly covered something with his hands.

"F-forgive me!"

The trembling samurai warrior took his hands away to reveal something that resembled tail feathers.

"Why are you worried about something like that, Mr. Naofumi?" Raphtalia

asked.

“I was just wondering what kind of demi-human he was,” I replied.

“He’s a shoon,” Sadeena said.

I stood there thinking while looking at his tail feathers. “Shoon”? That sounded like another pronunciation for hayabusa, which was Japanese for falcon. So he was a falcon, after all.

“So if he’s a bird-type demi-human, does that mean his arms are wings?” I asked.

Surely he didn’t have a pair of wings on his back like Filo did in her human form. I remembered the shusaku demi-humans in Siltvelt having wing-like arms and hands. I bet he had strong legs too. Kicking was probably his primary mode of attack when fighting.

“Umm, how long are you going to spend analyzing his racial characteristics?” Raphtalia asked.

I snapped back to reality and suddenly realized that staring at this guy’s tail and analyzing him wasn’t going to accomplish anything. I coughed nervously.

“Uhh, yeah, I’m done. Let’s go,” I said.

We followed the faintly blushing samurai warrior and he led us to the town mansion. It was definitely a big house. It had a Japanese feel to it, like a big samurai residence with a traditional Japanese garden. I could hear the quiet thumping sound of one of those Zen fountains—the ones with a bamboo tube that fell against a rock every time it emptied itself of water. Hearing that sound in a world other than my own just felt strange. There was even a rock garden. This place felt even more Japanese than Kizuna’s world had.

We were taken to a room with tatami-mat floors. And oh yeah, the samurai warrior’s father was a therianthrope, so I guess their race could use therianthrope forms. I tried to guess how old the father would be based on the son’s appearance. Demi-humans grew at different speeds depending on their levels, so there was really no way of knowing. Still, I could tell he was getting old even when he was in his bird, or therianthrope, form.

“Welcome back to Q’ten Lo, child of the Heavenly Emperor’s rightful heir. Should I call you Miss Raphtalia?” the man asked.

He prostrated himself before Raphtalia, almost as if he were praying to her. She seemed really uncomfortable.

“My name is Raluva. I’m pleased to make your acquaintance,” he continued.

“I’m Naofumi Iwatani. I’m not sure it matters here, but I’m the Shield Hero. You seem to know my companion, Raphtalia. And there’s Sadeena. She’s kind of like her big sister. The dragon is Gaelion,” I said, introducing everyone.

Raluva approached Raphtalia and hesitantly tried to peer in at her face through the makeshift cloak.

“Would you mind showing me your face?” he asked in a whisper.

“Uh, umm . . .”

Raphtalia glanced over at me. I sighed and nodded. She removed the sheet and showed Raluva her face and tail. He gasped and bowed his head.

Sadeena had nodded when she heard Raluva’s name.

“I know who you are. You were close to little Raphtalia’s father and helped him escape,” she suddenly spoke up.

“You must be the water dragon’s former miko priestess. Do you not remember seeing me?” he asked.

“I remember meeting you right before we left the country,” she said.

Raluva met eyes with Sadeena and nodded. He must have originally been one of Raphtalia’s father’s followers.

“So let’s get straight to the point. What is your objective?” I asked.

Raluva raised his head and looked at me.

“Are you asking what we would like from you all? That goes without saying. We would like Miss Raphtalia to take her rightful place as the true Heavenly Empress of Q’ten Lo. The responsibility of the throne is clearly too great for the branch family to bear. These senseless laws are causing our people immense suffering,” he replied.

Hmm, from the way the conversation was going, our interests seemed to be aligned for the most part.

“My family and the people of Q’ten Lo are prepared to provide any assistance needed in order to make that happen,” he continued.

“And are you already familiar with our situation?” I asked.

Raluva shook his head. Ah, so he’d only gotten orders from the water dragon to make it clear they were willing to do what we asked.

“Let’s start by clearing that up. So you have no idea why we came here in the first place, right?” I continued.

He probably just assumed that Raphtalia—the orphaned child of the man he once knew—lamented the current state of her country and that’s why she had returned. If we didn’t make our situation clear to him, they might try to put Raphtalia on the throne. Then they might just continue on with their policy of isolation, even after we managed to overthrow the current rule.

The negotiations had begun. I had to consider the possibility that someone who was now an ally could still become an enemy once we’d won the fight.

“You may not know this, since this country is cut off from the rest of the world, but the outside world is dealing with some complicated issues right now,” I said.

“I know that much. This town does trade with Siltvelt and I am the mayor, after all,” he replied.

I guess that meant he knew about the waves too.

“I also know that you are the one known as the Shield Hero outside of Q’ten Lo,” he continued.

“Well that should make things easier. We came to this country to defeat the people who are after Raphtalia’s life. We intend to leave once we’ve accomplished that,” I said.

Raluva and his friends might not want to hear that. But giving it to him straight and risking a breakdown of negotiations now would be better than ending up fighting about it later on. Actually, leaving things in the hands of

someone they favored after we'd resolved our issue was an option too.

"We are aware of that. Indeed, the Heavenly Emperor or Empress exists for the people and for the world. The rotten puppet government we have at present pushes the boundaries of foolishness. Now more than ever, I understand why Miss Raphtalia's father felt that way," Raluva replied.

Oh? I liked the sound of that answer. I didn't know what his true intentions were, but it should still be easy to use him.

"The barrier around this country is our point of contact with the outside world. We wish to dispose of the government officials who have recently seized control of that barrier," he continued.

The officials had apparently been using their authority to mess with the barrier that was blocking the entry of the Siltvelt ship. Raluva didn't like those officials, so he was proposing Raphtalia lead a revolution. That meant that malcontent among the citizens, and this mayor who represented them, had grown unbearable and they were ready to explode.

"Mr. Naofumi, you're smiling," Raphtalia said.

"Look Raphtalia, your miko outfit is ready!" I exclaimed.

"Why are you so excited?!"

I'd asked them to prepare a miko outfit for Raphtalia, and Raluva's son had just brought in the clothes.

"This miko outfit is designed to resemble the one said to have been presented to the Heavenly Emperor by the water dragon in ancient times. I hope it pleases you," Raluva said.

I unfolded the outfit and looked it over. The colors were a bit different, but it was still a miko outfit.

Miko Outfit of the Water Dragon

impact resistance (small), slash resistance (small), water resistance (medium), dive time up, magic defense processing, parry

The stats weren't quite as good as the White Tiger Miko Outfit from Kizuna's world, but it was still a really nice piece of equipment, although it didn't offer

much in the way of defense. Maybe the assumption was that the user wouldn't get hit.

"Go on, Raphtalia," I said.

Put it on! I thought as I handed her the outfit.

"Why do I feel like I'm being tricked into something?" she replied.

"You know this is the only way, right?" I told her.

"Well . . . Yes, I guess I do."

"Come on, little Raphtalia. I'll help you put it on," Sadeena said.

Raphtalia went with Sadeena to go change in another room.

"In any case, if you say you want to start a revolution, then you need to be ready to put your money where your mouth is!" I told Raluva.

"Of course! We would not be making such a proposal otherwise!" he replied.

A group of fierce-looking warriors, ready for combat, entered the room. He must have instructed them to gather at the mansion beforehand. It would be foolish not to take advantage of this! I'm sure they had other objectives in mind too, but our interests were still aligned. If they tried to cause us any trouble later on, we could just deal with them when the time came.

"Good! Listen up, men! I'll be commanding you on behalf of Raphtalia! We're about to go full metal jacket on this oppressive government of yours! If you're ready to do that, then join me!" I howled.

The men all roared out affirmatively. I was confident things were starting to go our way now.

"We'll start by bringing reinforcements to the town from Siltvelt. After that, we advance at full speed!" I continued.

The men let out another rallying cry. They were itching to go to war. Gaelion climbed up onto my shoulder.

"They really took the bait," he said.

"Sure did," I replied.

This kind of thing was all about momentum. The country's leadership foolishly assumed that Raphtalia intended to seize control of Q'ten Lo just because she happened to put on a miko outfit. They stuck their noses where they didn't belong, and they did it at a time when their current Heavenly Emperor was already losing credibility because of his own foolish actions. They'd sealed their own fate. If they wanted us to seize control so bad, then we would. I would show them that it was their own foolishness that brought about their downfall.



Driven by my determination, I was already cooking up a strategy when Raphtalia and Sadeena returned.

“We’re back,” Raphtalia said.

I looked at her miko outfit and nodded several times. Damn, that looked good on her.

“You sure do look good in a miko outfit, little Raphtalia. I guess it only makes sense that you would, though,” Sadeena said.

“Even so, I still think Mr. Naofumi likes miko outfits far too much,” Raphtalia replied.

She just had to get a complaint in. When the men I’d been rallying saw Raphtalia, their mouths dropped open and they fell to the floor and prostrated themselves before her. Huh? What were they thinking?

“Your Divine Majesty!”

“We are at your command!”

“Now I’m certain we’re doing what’s right for Q’ten Lo!”

“Risking our lives is the right decision! Yes!”

“As warriors, it is our duty to fight to the bitter end for Her Divine Majesty, Raphtalia, the Heavenly Empress!”

Things were starting to get out of hand now!

“I guess it’s your turn to be catapulted into the limelight, Raphtalia. Be sure to give Filo and Atla a run for their money,” I said.

Filo was actually pretty popular at the taverns. I wouldn’t mind seeing Raphtalia charm the audiences every now and then too.

“I don’t want to give anyone a run for their money! I know I have to do this, but why does everyone have to bow when I’m dressed like this?!” Raphtalia exclaimed.

I decided to ignore her whining.

“Come, Raphtalia, these men await your orders! They’ll happily leap headlong into the jaws of death for you!” I shouted.

“No thank you! I don’t want to bear that responsibility,” she replied.

“Warriors of Q’ten Lo, let us overthrow this rotten government of yours! In the name of God! For the people!” I roared.

I figured I’d stir them up a bit. This is exactly what I had to deal with in Siltvelt. I could totally sympathize with Raphtalia, but I felt like mimicking Atla at the moment.

“Proud citizens of Q’ten Lo! If you truly believe in the Heavenly Empress, then now is the time to prove your loyalty!” I continued.

The men all howled in unison.

“Mr. Naofumi! Stop acting like Atla! Everyone, don’t let Mr. Naofumi’s words —”

Before Raphtalia could finish her sentence, the thoroughly worked-up group of warriors sprang to their feet and rushed out of the room. Raphtalia held her head in her hands and looked on in disbelief.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure none of them get killed. I want you to be careful too, Raphtalia. The battle has only just begun,” I said.

“Now I’m really starting to get excited!” Sadeena exclaimed.

She sounded like she belonged to a tribe of warmongers or something.

“Kwaaa!”

Gaelion was fired up too. Now if either he or Sadeena could just access the sakura lumina at the lighthouse, we could disable the barrier that was keeping Siltvelt’s ships out. We had to give it a shot.

“Understood. If an obstacle can’t be avoided, then we’ll just have to smash through it,” Raphtalia said.

She sighed and followed me toward the door.

“Besides, I wouldn’t mind learning more about my father,” she added.

“I’m sure you’ll get plenty of chances to do that. Let’s just do our best to keep our losses at a minimum while maximizing damage on their side,” I replied.

If we barged in with this many people, we should be able to overwhelm them, even if these warriors weren’t that tough.

“I’m a lot stronger than I was before I left this country too. I should be able to play the part of a small army,” Sadeena said.

She spun her harpoon around cheerfully.

“I’m counting on it,” I replied.

Her origin story was still basically one big mystery, but she was strong enough that she’d been able to turn the tables on pretty much every attacker we’d faced so far. There was a lot we didn’t know about the enemy’s equipment too. But worrying about that all day wasn’t going to get us anywhere. We’d just have to round up what support we could and overthrow the government! Just like when I’d essentially conquered Melromarc!

“Heh . . . It’s never a dull moment with you,” Gaelion muttered.

The look of excitement in his eyes really stayed with me.

Chapter Fourteen: Sakura Stone of Destiny

We left the samurai residence and headed toward the lighthouse as one big group, charging through the entrance when we arrived.

“Who goes there?! This is a sacred place under governmental control by authority of the Heavenly Emperor!” announced a guard.

As soon as we entered, a group of enemy soldiers rushed over with weapons in hand. Did they really think telling a group of insurgents something like that would make any difference?

“Heavenly Emperor, you say?! Nonsense! This is the true Heavenly Empress! Your emperor is but a fraud from the branch family! Do you not understand the difference?!” Raluva shouted.

He pointed at Raphtalia as he spoke. The aura of power surrounding Raphtalia in her miko outfit—and the attractiveness of it—must have had a powerful effect, because the enemy demi-humans and therianthropes all began whispering amongst themselves.

“Do not waver! Surely the child of a false emperor, who abandoned our country, cannot be called the true Heavenly Emperor! Cut them down at once!” shouted some high-and-mighty frog therianthrope.

On our way to the lighthouse, I’d seen several rabbit-types and a whole variety of different races of demi-humans and therianthropes. And it occurred to me that this place was like a scene straight out of the *Scrolls of Frolicking Animals* from Kozan-ji Temple in Kyoto.

“Mr. Naofumi, please focus on the battle!” Raphtalia snapped.

She scolded me just as things were about to blow up.

“Attack! Take the rebels’ heads off! And don’t forget we have a holder of a spirit implement here! Use the proper weapons!”

There was that wording again! The people opposing us in this country definitely had anti-hero weapons!

“Permission granted to attack all hostiles! That includes the false god from a foreign land!”

“Shooting Star Shield!” I shouted.

One of the enemies charged forward and thrust his spear at us. My Shooting Star Shield barrier activated and blocked the attack, but just as I suspected, the effectiveness of my skills was reduced against these enemies—the barrier shattered instantly.

I hope they didn’t expect me to just be content with having my barrier shattered every time. I figured this might happen, so I’d spent some time making some new accessories while I was in Siltvelt. Fortunately, Rat had a good idea of how to tinker with their effects, since she was an alchemist.

As soon as Shooting Star Shield shattered, bright flashes of light began shooting out of the fragments.

“Gah!”

“Wh-what is that?!”

“Now!” I shouted.

I focused and cast Zweite Aura on Raphtalia.

“You’ve got this, little Raphtalia! Remember what we did in training!” Sadeena exclaimed.

“I will!”

Raphtalia crouched down and prepared to unleash a quick-draw attack. In a flash, she cut down the enemy standing in front of me and then charged toward the other soldiers without so much as a pause.

“Everyone! Do not falter! It doesn’t matter how many enemies there are! Only one of them is our true target!” the frog shouted.

“Come now, do you really think I’ll just let you ignore me?” I taunted.

“I can’t have you forgetting about me either!” Sadeena exclaimed.

She began casting a spell while helping protect Raphtalia.

I knew that one of the first things they did when they attacked the village was

to try to size up me and Sadeena. Surely they didn't think I wouldn't take that into consideration. They might've had ways to deal with the heroes, but Sadeena was just plain strong. They would be forced to fight her like a normal enemy. Judging from the assassins we'd faced so far, they only had a handful of comparable fighters, at best. And I could tell straight away that none of them were here.

"Hyaaaa!"

Raluva's son drew his katana and cut down an approaching enemy, determined not to be left behind. He handled himself better than I'd expected. Maybe the demi-humans and therianthropes born in Q'ten Lo were naturally strong fighters.

"I didn't know you could do that," Raphtalia whispered.

She was observing and analyzing Raluva's katana technique. His stance was slightly different than the one Sadeena had taught her. It was probably just a different style.

"The style I taught you is from where I grew up. It's called Form of the Sea God," Sadeena said.

She watched Raluva carefully for a moment as he swung his katana.

"That style is called the Blossom of Q'ten. It's worth paying attention to," she continued.

Raluva channeled magic power into his blade and closed in on his opponent rapidly. He swiftly passed under the opponent's arm as he delivered his attack, ending up behind him.

"Gah . . ."

Raluva shook the blood from his blade, and the droplets transformed into cherry blossom petals and floated away on the wind. Now that was impressive. But I seemed to remember Raphtalia having a similar skill.

"That reminds me of your Powder Snow skill, Raphtalia," I said.

"It does look similar. You'll be pretty formidable if you learn that style along with the one I taught you, little Raphtalia," Sadeena replied.

I guess she'd seen Raphtalia's Powder Snow skill too. Now that I thought about it, I did seem to remember them firing off skills during their training.

"Add the Hengen Muso style to that and you'll be unbeatable," I said.

"According to Eclair and the master, Hengen Muso techniques are meant to be applied to other attacks, so it's actually better to learn another style," Raphtalia replied.

Yeah, I remembered the old lady mentioning that. She said the good thing about the Hengen Muso style was that it could be applied to any school or style of fighting.

"Umm, like this? And then . . ." Raphtalia mumbled to herself.

She was trying to mimic Raluva's movements. He turned and bowed to her.

"If you so desire, I would be happy to teach you the style, Miss Raphtalia," he said.

"Oh, umm . . . Please do. I'm sure it would help in future battles," she replied.

Just then, a bear therianthrope who seemed to be the frog's boss came out from somewhere further within the lighthouse.

"How long are you all going to fool around?! You still haven't eliminated the false empress! And you call yourselves warriors of Q'ten Lo?!" he roared.

He launched at us with a winged spear in hand. He was fast. At the very least, he handled himself better than any of the other enemies in the room.

"Gah!"

He thrust his spear into one of our nearby men and sent him flying before I could even react. The injury didn't seem to be fatal, though. I caught the man and then held my shield up while I cast healing magic on him.

"You pathetic god of Siltvelt with your spirit implement! You have a lot of nerve bringing the false empress here! It's time for you to experience the power of the true Heavenly Emperor's blessing!" the bear roared.

He thrust the winged spear into the ground and began reciting some kind of incantation. Something like a big cage formed, enclosing the lighthouse and the

surrounding area. It was the same shade of pink as the cherry blossoms. It covered a rather large area—perhaps 100 meters across.

“This barrier . . . That’s a sakura stone of destiny barrier! Are they really going to use that here?!” Raluva exclaimed with a horrified look on his face.

“What’s that?” I asked.

Now that I thought about it, the assassins had mentioned those before when they attacked the village. Something about not bringing any with them. Sadeena didn’t know what they were either, apparently.

“The sakura stones of destiny are special items that weaken spirit implements while also maximally raising the abilities of anyone who has received the Heavenly Emperor’s blessing. Please be careful!” Raluva replied.

Before he’d even finished speaking, something like a pink force field sped by, combing the whole area.

“Wh-what was that?” I said.

Oh damn. My shield sparked. I felt a sensation like an electrical shock shoot from my shield into my body and radiate outward from head to toe. My body suddenly felt heavy.

“Th-this is . . .” Raphtalia’s voice trailed off.

She must have been feeling something similar, because the weight of her katana seemed to be pulling her to the side ever so slightly.

“Aww . . . It looks like the boosts you gave us have ceased functioning, little Naofumi,” said Sadeena.

“What?!”

I checked Sadeena’s stats. They were quite a bit lower than I remembered them being. That really complicated things.

“Now then, let’s do this!” the bear roared.

He deftly swung the winged spear up overhead and charged at us at an incredible speed. Shit! I was going to block the attack with my shield, but my gut reaction was to hop to the side and dodge instead. Instantly, I realized that

had been the right move. First of all, the bear therianthrope was now moving about three times faster than before. Second, his attack power must have increased too, because his spear split the floor open and caused a small explosion. Just how much had his stats gone up?!

“Zweite Aura!”

I tried buffing myself to help make up for my reduced stats, but the spell didn’t activate. Did that mean those stones even prevented heroes from using magic?! Just to be sure, I tried casting Guard.

“Zweite Guard!”

That one worked without a problem. No way! I guess the barrier prevented the use of any type of magic that only heroes could use. If that were the case, it would be iffy whether I could even use cooperative magic! Not that I actually had the leeway to even try casting any at the moment.

“Hurry up and finish off these traitors!” the bear shouted.

Their objective was to kill Raphtalia. I held my shield up to protect her. The enemies unleashed a chorus of battle cries. Damnit! What was I supposed to do in a situation like this?

“Little Naofumi!” Sadeena shouted.

The bear therianthrope and his men rushed at me, brandishing their anti-hero weapons. And then Sadeena finished reciting her incantation.

“*As the source of your power, I command you! Let the true way be revealed once more! Lightning! Strike down and penetrate those before me!*”

“All Drifa Chain Lightning!”

A bolt of high-voltage lightning pierced through all of the enemies in front of me.

“Gahhhh!”

“What?!” growled the bear.

He diverted the lightning with his spear and leapt at Sadeena.

“I don’t care who you are! I’ll protect little Raphtalia and little Naofumi no

matter what!” she exclaimed.

“I can’t have everyone forgetting about me,” Gaelion said.

While holding on to Sadeena from behind, he unleashed a breath attack that looked like a highly condensed heat-ray. The attack caught the bear off guard and hit him directly in the face.

“Gah! That was just dirty!” the bear growled.

“Dirty is my specialty. I usually just talk dirty, but I can play dirty too,” Sadeena replied with a wink.

She began transforming into her therianthrope form. The bear watched, speechless, as her body ballooned up.

“Now then, how about you and I have a little showdown? It’s been more than ten years since I left this country. I’m looking forward to seeing what its best warriors have to offer these days!” she exclaimed.

“You’re the priestess of carnage! Do you dare oppose us with those defiled hands of yours?!” the bear growled.

“Oh, but I do. And I think I’ll start by giving you a taste of that carnage,” Sadeena replied.

She glanced over at me and Raphtalia. She was trying to tell us this was our chance to figure something out. It was a bit depressing to think that I could tell what Sadeena wanted to say from a single glance now.

I tried to think of what our most effective attack in a situation like this would be. They’d put up some kind of barrier around us, our weapons weren’t functioning, and we couldn’t use our skills. In that case, we’d just have to rely on normal techniques and strategy.

“Can you keep going, Raphtalia?” I asked.

“Fighting is no problem,” she replied.

Raluva and his men, along with Sadeena and Gaelion, were managing to hold the enemy back, but that didn’t change the fact we were at a disadvantage. They were after Raphtalia’s life and my shield had completely ceased functioning. It wasn’t that I couldn’t fight, but all I could do was defend and now

I couldn't even use my skills. I couldn't use a good portion of my magic either. There wasn't really much that I could do in a situation like this.

"Die, false empress!" screamed one of the enemies.

"Not on my watch!" I shouted.

The enemy swung his katana and I parried it with my shield. I grabbed him by the collar and Raphtalia sliced into him instantly, as if by reflex.

My Demon Dragon Shield had a counterattack effect called "C demon bullet" and it seemed to be activating, but the effect was negligible now. Countering would be difficult, I guess. And relying on the Shield of Wrath was too dangerous. In the end, my fighting style depended almost completely on my shields.

Was there really nothing else I could do? Not being able to use my skills had suddenly exposed my own shortcomings. This was an issue I would need to address.

"Take this, false empress and holder of the evil spirit implement!" shouted the frog.

He and one of his men fired off their magic at me and Raphtalia.

"Drifa Aqua Slash!"

"Drifa Rock Blast!"

A highly condensed stream of water and mass of boulders both came flying straight at us simultaneously. I suddenly recalled the time Melty had surprised me with an unexpected magical attack. I was confident my shield wasn't going to break, even if an attack was so powerful that it pierced the shield and managed to injure me. I tried to remember how exactly I'd parried Melty's magic.

"Not happening!" I shouted.

I held my shield up. I then focused my attention and . . . I still didn't completely understand life force, but I did my best to channel it into the shield. And then I swung the shield up as hard as I could. The magic hit my shield and went flying off in a different direction. I needed to adjust the angle! I intensified

my concentration and managed to send the attacks flying toward the bear therianthrope, who was engaged in mortal combat with Sadeena.

“Hell yeah!” I shouted.

“What?! Damn you!” the bear growled.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Sadeena exclaimed.

The bear tried to dodge, but Sadeena held him in place and used him as a shield against the magic.

“Gahhh!”

That probably hurt at least a little bit.

“Ha! You come up with the strangest ideas, little Naofumi,” Sadeena said.

“I figured I could pull it off, and I guess I did,” I replied.

“You parried their magic and used it against me?!” the bear growled.

But he wasn’t ready to give up. He shoved Sadeena away.

“Hmph! I’m impressed that you managed to put up any fight at all. That was unexpected,” he said.

He was smiling, but I could tell he was upset. He must have been up to something.

“I wonder if you outsiders are familiar with this technique. It’s a secret technique whose use is permitted only for those who can draw power from the sakura stones of destiny,” he continued.

Raluva looked at the bear therianthrope and turned as white as a sheet.

“Impossible! Have you really been permitted to go that far?! Miss Raphtalia! Shield Hero! You must leave at once!” he exclaimed.

“It’s too late!” the bear roared.

Several of his men had been reciting incantations and as soon as he finished speaking they placed their palms together, as if praying.

“*Heavenly Emperor, we act on your behalf as pacifiers! Let our whole beings become our blade! We combine our power with yours to bestow upon the*

foolish a fate of destruction!”

“Astral Enchant!”

I could see something flowing from their bodies into the bear’s winged spear. In return, they began to fall over limp, one after the other.

“Wh-what the . . .” I mumbled.

“Hmph! This battle is as good as over! Take this!” the bear shouted.

As soon as he finished speaking, he seemed to blur as he came speeding toward us. My shield may not have been functioning like usual, but he wasn’t moving so fast that I couldn’t react! I read his movements and prepared to block the attack. Fortunately, my shield was able to block his winged spear successfully. I grabbed the shaft of his spear and gripped it as tightly as I possibly could, determined to keep hold of it no matter what.

“Is that all you’ve got?!” the bear thundered.

His strength must have increased exponentially, because he swung the spear up into the air with ease. I was jerked off the ground and went smashing into the wall, but I wasn’t going to let go! Just how powerful had this bastard become, though?! He probably could’ve defeated the Spirit Tortoise on his own now!

“Mr. Naofumi!” Raphtalia called out.

“Don’t worry about me! Just be ready to attack!” I shouted.

“U-understood!”

Raphtalia gripped her katana and prepared to attack. I was glad she always responded so quickly.

“I don’t like being ignored!” said Sadeena.

“I can’t have you forgetting me either!” Gaelion added.

Our whole group was doing their best to restrain the bear, but they couldn’t stop him. I’d avoided any serious injuries so far, thanks to my shield, but I had no idea how long I could last like this.

“What the hell is with this guy?! Is this because of that magic they cast?” I

asked.

“Yes. That was Astral Enchant. It’s specialized protective combat magic that allows one or more casters who have been blessed to imbue all of their stats upon someone who has received a high-level blessing from the Heavenly Emperor,” Raluva explained.

That was not what I wanted to hear.

“I never would have imagined he’d received such a high-level blessing,” Raluva continued.

But what he said reminded me of something. It sounded a lot like the buff I’d given Fohl just recently.

“Here I go! Hold him for me, little Naofumi!” Sadeena said.

“Got it!”

I planted my feet on the ground and crouched down low, holding the bear in place. But twenty or thirty seconds was probably my limit. After that he’d start swinging me around like a ragdoll.

“You just don’t know when to give up!” he roared.

Sadeena charged her harpoon with electricity and lunged forward powerfully, thrusting the harpoon at the bear. There was a heavy thud as it smashed directly into him—or so I thought, but it had crashed into a thin protective barrier similar to that of my Shooting Star Shield skill.

“Ugh . . . That thing sure is tough,” Sadeena said.

Just as her attack landed, blood began oozing out of the mouths of the enemy soldiers lying limp on the ground around us.

“How dare you injure my men!” the bear growled.

I guess that meant they were sharing their very life force with him. Combining the full abilities of multiple men would indeed make for an impressive soldier.

And then Raphtalia finished channeling magic power into her katana.

“Eight Trigrams . . .”

Huh? A magic circle formed around her and began sparking, as if attempting

to obstruct the skill.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

“Yes. Something is trying to interfere—probably the power of the sakura stone of destiny,” she replied.

“Are you going to be alright? Don’t overdo it,” I said.

“It’s not a problem. That won’t stop me! Watch out everyone! Blade of Destiny!”

She unsheathed her katana in quick-draw fashion and a rippling beam of light shot out of the blade, slicing through all of the enemies in the area.

“Like I’d let that hit me! You take it, spirit implement holder!” the bear thundered.

He swung his spear in an attempt to use me as a shield against Raphtalia’s attack.

“No thanks,” I said.

I let go of the spear and jumped behind the dumbfounded bear. I held him in a full nelson and forced him to take the full brunt of the attack.

“Ugh . . .”

Aside from myself, everyone else in our group crouched down and avoided the attack.

“You squirrelly little bastard!” the bear growled.

I’d managed to withstand the attack since I was behind the bear, but it definitely hurt. Taking it head-on would’ve killed me.

I was putting all of my past experience—and my training with Atla, in particular—into play now. I could dodge if the bear tried to attack me, and I could drag him down to interfere if he tried to attack Raphtalia. But how the hell was I supposed to stop this monster? The thought of there being even more powerful enemies to come made my head spin.

And then, all of a sudden, the same pattern produced by Raphtalia’s Eight Trigrams Blade of Destiny attack appeared on the trunk of the sakura lumina.

“Could it be?! Little Gaelion! Touch the sakura lumina!” Sadeena shouted.

She grabbed Gaelion, who had been perched on her back providing combat support, and hurled him at the tree.

“Watch how you treat me!” he grumbled.

Gaelion flew straight to the pattern on the sakura lumina.

“Ah, now I see. Like this,” he said.

The straw rope around his neck began to glow, and whatever power had enveloped the bear therianthrope seemed to weaken.

“What?! The power of the sakura stone of destiny is dissipating?!” he said.

I guess that was one more thing the sakura lumina could do. By seizing control of the tree, we had successfully weakened the opponent.

“It looks like I managed to weaken that nifty power of theirs,” Gaelion said.

He continued to access the sakura lumina.

“I’ve just disabled the barrier to the outside world. I’ve also made it so that the tree cannot be accessed for a short period of time. All that’s left is to finish the enemy off,” he continued.

Was that supposed to be good news? We’d completed our original objective, but we still hadn’t defeated this monster. And then . . .

“Use these!”

Several objects came flying at us from behind. Without hesitation, I caught the one coming at me. And when I did, my shield sparked again.

Chapter Fifteen: Sakura Sphere of Influence

Weapon copy system activated.

Sakura Stone of Destiny Shield conditions unlocked!

Sakura Stone of Destiny Shield 0/ 100 C

<abilities locked> equip bonus: spirit binding limited release 1, sealing resistance (weak), skill “Sakura Sphere of Influence”

special equip effect: spirit blessing, status chain, blossom blaze mastery level: 0

The shield in my hand was the most intricate and finely crafted shield I’d ever seen. It was round, with a design that resembled the yin-yang symbol. Decorative cherry blossoms were inscribed along the edges and there was a jewel set in the center, like the one on my legendary shield. A large cherry blossom hovered faintly over the jewel like a hologram. It was strangely beautiful. I could only imagine there was something magical about the jewel and I wondered if perhaps it was one of the sakura stones of destiny.



Just holding the shield, I could already tell that its basic stats were high. How strange. I'd never felt anything like that before. From my own legendary shield,

perhaps, but not from an original shield used to make a copy. When the copy completed, a list of categories appeared.

skills magic stat bonuses growth adjustments mastery level rarity refinement spirit enchants status enchants reinforcement item enchants job level remaining: 4

The categories were all grayed out. I selected “skills” and the category lit up and “remaining: 4” dropped to “3.” There was no doubt about it. This was an ability that could cancel out restrictions on the heroes’ weapons made by the sakura stones of destiny. It must have been the “spirit binding limited release 1” equip effect.

It wasn’t easy to decide, but I selected “skills,” “magic,” “stat bonuses,” and “growth adjustments” and then confirmed the selection. My shield sparked again, and I felt power flood back into my body. The only problem was that the shield’s abilities were locked, so I couldn’t switch to another shield.

I checked my status screen again and noticed that the stats of the shield itself had changed too. Maybe that had something to do with the “status chain” special equip effect. It didn’t look like I had any materials on-hand that I could use to power the shield up, but that ability was still sealed off anyway.

“You bastard!” the bear growled.

There was an expression of surprise on his face as he looked at the person who had just shown up and tossed us the weapons. It was the same bastard that tried to hit on Raphtalia! What the hell? But aside from the shield and katana he’d thrown at me and Raphtalia, he was passing out all kinds of equipment to everyone in our group.

“If you use those, your stats should get a boost even inside of the sakura stone of destiny barrier,” he said.

“I-I see!” one of the men replied.

The men gripped their new weapons and prepared to attack the bear therianthrope. Raphtalia did the same. But even if I could copy weapons, my legendary shield wouldn’t allow me to equip the original, so I threw the shield I’d caught to a nearby ally.

“I should be able to put up a bit of a fight now. Let’s try this again!” Raphtalia exclaimed.

“Oh? I’m suddenly feeling a bit feisty,” Sadeena said.

“Yes, it seems the effects of the growth adjustments have been partially restored,” Gaelion replied.

We still hadn’t defeated the enemy, but there was no doubt that our situation had taken a turn for the better. Now to use this momentum to pressure the enemy!

“Bastard! You dare betray us?!” the bear growled angrily at the skirt-chaser scumbag.

“Betray? Oh, come now. You misunderstand. It’s true that I made those weapons. I needed the money, so I accepted the order. But I’m no patriot,” he replied.

“And why are you helping this false god of another country and the false empress?! Answer carefully or face certain death!” the bear thundered.

His incredible bloodlust was palpable as he glared threateningly at the skirt chaser standing behind us. But the skirt chaser just shrugged and responded casually.

“You really don’t know? Come on, think about it,” he said.

He then stomped his foot down, clenched his hand into a fist, and shouted at the top of his lungs.

“If I have to pick between a whiny little brat and a beautiful young lady to be the Heavenly Emperor or Empress I worship, you bet your ass I’m going to pick the beautiful young lady!”

His voice echoed throughout the area. An awkward silence followed, and everyone just stared at the skirt chaser. Was he really that dense? And what the hell kind of proclamation was that, anyway?

Raphtalia and I were staring at him in disbelief, when all of a sudden he turned to us with a really smug look on his face . . . Hm? That was the same face Motoyasu had made when he first met Raphtalia. The skirt chaser strolled up to

Raphtalia and kissed her on the hand.

“We met earlier, didn’t we, little miss? You seemed to be in a bind, so I thought I would loan you some equipment to help out. Please use these weapons to slay that tyrannical government lapdog,” he said.

He probably thought he was acting like a gentleman, but his complete lack of refinement shined through clearly. “Please slay him”? Was that supposed to be classy?

“Umm, okay . . .” she muttered.

This bastard really pissed me off. But he *had* helped us in a really big way, so I couldn’t complain. Oh, hell yes, I could!

“Who do you think you are?!” I shouted.

“Oh! And you must be the other young lady from earlier. You’re just as beautiful in your therianthrope form,” he continued.

“Oh?” Sadeena replied.

Wow. He was hitting on Sadeena in her therianthrope form. Even Motoyasu hadn’t tried to flirt with Filo in her filolial form before he went nuts. They were like two models of the same product, and this one was an even more pathetic version.

After standing there flabbergasted for a few moments, the bear therianthrope began shaking with anger. His face turned a bright shade of red and he screamed out.

“You blundering fool!”

He charged straight for Raphtalia and the skirt chaser like a battle tank at full throttle. I stepped between them and held my shield up. And then I tried a little something.

“Air Strike Shield!” I shouted.

The skill hadn’t functioned before because of the sakura stone of destiny barrier. But now my Air Strike Shield appeared in front of my eyes.

“Hmph!”

The bear sliced through my Air Strike Shield like it was a toy. But it hadn't been completely effortless like before. I knew that because sparks flew when his spear made contact. The shield had simply been destroyed because my stats were too low at the moment. In that case, there was only one thing left to do.

"Second Shield! Dritte Shield! Chain Shield! E Float Shield!"

I produced two more shields and linked them with chains to restrict the bear's movement. Then I used E Float Shield to obstruct his vision.

"Pathetic!" he shouted.

As soon as I restricted him, he jerked on the chains and tore them to pieces. But his movements seemed too slow. I wondered if status chain had something to do with that.

"The Heavenly Empress is relying on us! Don't waste this chance!" Raluva shouted.

He and the other men all simultaneously began firing off their magic and skills at the bear. Several of them used spells to reduce his stats and ice magic to restrict his movement. His strategy had backfired. We could all focus our attacks on a single fighter. The bear's men had already been removed from the fight and couldn't even provide backup.

"Raphtalia," I said.

"What is it?" she replied.

"We know of skills and techniques that are even more effective against an enemy with increased stats, right? Can you use any of those yet?" I asked.

Those attacks were Atla's specialty and I was still in the middle of learning how to deal with them. But Raphtalia had been sparring with Atla a lot recently, so I was sure she had at least been dabbling with such techniques.

"Yes. I can't do anything like Atla or the master, but I can use one," she said.

I told her to get ready and she began preparing to attack.

"Alright!" I shouted.

Now we just needed to boost her stats, pure and simple. I motioned for

Sadeena to come over to me and we began casting our cooperative magic. I'd become fairly proficient with the Way of the Dragon, so I could do the incantation rather quickly now.

"You help too, Gaelion. I know you can give an extra boost," I said.

"You do, do you? I guess I'll just have to pitch in then," he replied.

The straw rope that Gaelion was wearing as a collar began to glow. The magical puzzle pieces faded into sight and we all began linking them together at incredible speed. But we each still had to do a lot of the work on our own too.

"Hmph!" grunted the bear.

He overpowered the interfering magic with brute force, brandished his spear, and went charging forward at Raphtalia and the skirt chaser behind her. I finished my part of the cooperative magic incantation and jumped in front of Raphtalia to protect her. She seemed to be channeling life force into her katana.

"Die! False god, false empress, and filthy traitor—all of you!" he roared.

"Shooting Star Shield!"

"Whoa! Why me?!" the skirt chaser shrieked.

The Shooting Star Shield barrier activated and repelled him and the bear both, giving us a few more seconds to prepare. At the same time, Sadeena and Gaelion finished their incantations and our cooperative magic activated.

"Descent of the Thunder God!"

Of course I selected Raphtalia as the target.

"Here I go!" she shouted.

With the borrowed katana in hand, Raphtalia charged at the bear therianthrope, who was still rubbing his eyes and trying to recover from the bright flashes of light created by the pieces of the shattered Shooting Star Shield barrier.

"Hengen Muso Technique . . . Point of Focus!"

The attack pierced cleanly through the bear's protective barrier and the life

force she had channeled into her blade poured into his body.

“Ugh . . . It will take more than that to stop me!” he roared.

He was a tough bastard! I guess that much was to be expected of Q’ten Lo’s warrior elite. The country was practically full of Sadeena-level fighters. Blood sprayed out of the mouths of the men who had lent the bear their power.

“I can’t have you forgetting about me!” Sadeena exclaimed.

She leapt up nimbly into the air and called lightning down from the clouds that had formed from Descent of the Thunder God. The lightning jumped to the spear she’d been given by the skirt chaser.

“Lightning Strike Harpoon!”

The electrically charged spear shot forward, slithering like a snake, straight into the bear.

“Gahhh!”

But he still didn’t fall. Sparks of lightning jumped from his skin as he pointed his spear at Raphtalia.

“I’m not finished!” she shouted.

She blurred, as if using haikuikku, and swung her katana down at the bear.

“I’m going to try a new skill!” she said.

“I can’t let you have all the fun!” I shouted.

I called out the name of the new skill I’d gotten from the shield.

“Sakura Sphere of Influence!”

A magic circle shaped like a big cherry blossom appeared under my feet. Was that all? Nothing else had happened. I guess the skill was useless. Oh well.

“Attack Support!”

I supported Raphtalia by firing off my Attack Support skill, which would double the damage of her next attack. But the instant I threw the Attack Support dart, it split into five cherry blossom petals and they all smashed into the bear.

“Ugh! Wh-what?!”

Aha! So Sakura Sphere of Influence must have been a skill that formed a magic circle that would alter other skills. That made using it well a real pain!

The cherry blossom petals wrapped around the bear’s body and restricted his movement, just like Chain Shield had before he destroyed it. On top of that, the petals came together to form a single cherry blossom while continuing to restrict the bear. To think that I could use Attack Support to restrict an opponent too—now that was convenient!

“Here I go! Kagura Dance of the Sakura! First Formation! Blossom!”

Raphtalia slashed at the bear powerfully as she sped past him. The cherry blossom restricting his movements shattered and faded away. And then, with a bright flash, a flurry of cherry blossoms rose up around the bear. At the same time, a magic circle appeared below him with the same pattern as the one made by Raphtalia’s Eight Trigrams Blade of Destiny attack.

“Wha—Ugh! Gahhh! No! Not yet! I will not be defeated!”

“Damn, he’s tough!” I said.

Was he really going to refuse to fall, even after a string of such fierce attacks?!

“You’re finished, false empress!” he roared.

He swung his spear down at Raphtalia.

“Not happening!” I shouted.

I leapt forward and blocked the spear. The attack wasn’t as heavy as before. I could withstand this! I was certain of it! And then a beam of light shot out of my shield.

“Gah!”

That must have been blossom blaze, one of the special equip effects of the Sakura Stone of Destiny Shield. All of a sudden, I felt more energized than before.

“What is this? I suddenly feel like I have another attack in me, Mr. Naofumi!”

Raphtalia exclaimed.

“Go for it!” I replied.

She sheathed her katana and moved into her quick-draw stance.

“Amazing. Thanks to that magic circle of yours and that light just now, I can use another finishing move immediately,” she said.

“Argh! How long do you plan on resisting?!” the bear growled.

“Hmph. It looks like these effects have managed to increase our own power while weakening yours,” I said.

I’d finally been able to subdue that immense power of his.

“You better not forget about me and Gaelion or the rest of our soldiers!” Sadeena exclaimed.

Determined not to be outdone, she and Gaelion began casting their own cooperative magic.

“Little Gaelion, you’re borrowing power from the water dragon, right? Use it well!” she said.

“Hmph. I don’t like having to work, but I suppose this *is* the final push. In that case, let’s do this!” he exclaimed.

“*Like pure flowing waters, let our intentions wash away hatred, resentment, and the curse upon this land. Let our desire to save the world manifest as strength! Dragon Vein! Grant us a miracle!*”

“*I, Gaelion, command the heavens and earth! Transect the way of the universe and rejoin it again to expel the pus from within! Power of mine! Awaken the strength to terminate the foolish adherents before me!*”

Sadeena and Gaelion each completed their respective incantations and the cooperative magic activated.

“Blossomlight Maelstrom of the Water Dragon!”

Gaelion transformed into what looked like a small tornado made out of water and started spitting out highly concentrated streams of water in all directions. Sadeena jumped onto the tornado and the two of them took on the form of the

water dragon as they went charging toward the bear. Of course that meant they were charging at me too, but Sadeena snatched me out of the way at the moment of impact.

“Gahhhh!”

The tornado of water swallowed up the bear and began crushing him within. Even he couldn’t withstand a powerful tornado made of such highly concentrated water.

“Here I go. This skill combines the Hengen Muso style and the style that Sadeena taught me,” Raphtalia said.

She leapt at the bear and sliced into the tornado with a powerful thrust.

“Supreme Ultimate . . . Slash of Destiny!”

Her blade slid cleanly through the tornado and into the bear. The swirling water of the tornado burst outward with a splash and dissolved into the air.

“Huh?”

The bear landed on the ground, unharmed. He let out a sigh of relief and smirked at Raphtalia.

“Such an impressive skill. To think that it would end in failure! You’ve forfeited any right to call yourself the Heavenly Empress,” he growled.

“You’re wrong,” Raphtalia replied.

She was standing still, facing away from the bear. He took aim at her back and brandished his spear.

“I cut the flow of magic that was supplying your power. Trying to muster up any more . . . would be suicide,” she continued.

“Don’t make me laugh! Take thi—”

And then, just as the bear stomped his foot down, it happened. A yin-yang symbol appeared on his chest and extended outward, wrapping around his entire body!

“Gaaaahhhh!”

“That’s the outside power clashing with your own power. They will discharge

shortly,” Raphtalia said.

The effect lasted around ten seconds. When it wore off, the yin-yang symbol enveloping the bear dissolved, and the bear dropped his spear to the ground heavily before catching himself and leaning on it like a cane.

“Impossible! Astral Enchant and the sakura stone of destiny blessing are gone?!” he exclaimed.

“Yes. I could see their power flowing to you, so I wound the flows together and severed them both. The blessing you were given is no more,” Raphtalia replied.

“A-amazing. She is indeed the true Heavenly Empress,” whispered Raluva as he watched on.

“I will never accept such a thing!” the bear roared.

He was determined not to give up. He brandished his spear, but his movements completely lacked the sharpness they’d shown before.

“We’ve won this battle. The result is clear,” Raphtalia said.

“Ugh . . . It’s not over yet! Even if you do defeat me, the government will never forgive you! You’re as good as finished!” the bear roared.

“Sorry, but putting an end to a rotten lot like you and your government is kind of our thing. And since your government asked for it, crushing it is exactly what I’ll do!” I declared loudly.

With an angry look on his face, the bear therianthrope crumpled forward onto the ground. Immediately after, cheers filled the air. They were the shouts of victory from the men who’d joined us to help overthrow their government.

“We won!”

“This may be one small step for the resistance, but it’s one giant leap for us resisters!”

“We’ve finally delivered a blow to the rotten government and their foolish laws!” they cried out, filling the air with their triumphant cheers.

We’d managed to win somehow. But the enemies had been some of the most

unconventional and difficult to deal with yet. They concentrated all of their power into a single fighter to boost that person's stats, and they had the ability to seal off the power of the heroes. Talk about overpowered! I was going to cry if that bear therianthrope wasn't some elite race, like the ones they had in Siltvelt's leadership. It was looking like we might be in for a rough ride.

Epilogue: The Old Guy's Master "Congratulations on your victory, little miss."

The skirt chaser came running over toward Raphtalia, so I activated Shooting Star Shield to obstruct his path.

"You tactless bastard! Do you have any idea what would've happened to you if I hadn't loaned you those weapons?!" he shouted.

His attitude did a complete 360 depending on who he was talking to. He glared at me with an annoyed look on his face, but I couldn't have cared less.

"If you really like women that much, I'll loan you that fat killer whale over there. You can have all the fun you want with her," I said.

"Mr. Naofumi, please don't treat Sadeena like she's a complete slut," Raphtalia interjected.

"Oh my," said Sadeena.

After hearing my offer, the skirt chaser gulped and glanced over at Sadeena excitedly. That bastard really would settle for anything as long as it was female, I guess.

"Hmm? I'm afraid having a bit of fun with little Naofumi is first on the list of priorities. Let's start by enjoying a nice stiff drink!" she continued.

"Suit yourself," I replied.

"Yay! A party to celebrate our victory! I want the best alcohol all for myself! Of course, I'll see if I can get some rucolu fruit for you, little Naofumi," she said.

"You like that cheap liquor? Who knew a god of a foreign land would have such bad taste," said one of Raluva's men playfully.

"That's right! Believe it or not, little Naofumi can eat the rucolu fruit straight! Incredible, right?!" Sadeena exclaimed.

All the surrounding warriors began laughing at how worked up she got, bragging about such a thing, as if it were her own achievement.

"Hahaha! Surely you can't handle that! Even if you're a god of a foreign land!" one of the warriors shouted at me.

"Did you say he eats the actual fruit that cheap booze is made from? Now

that's something I'd like to see! That stuff would send even Dionysus running for the hills!" another warrior chimed in.

Raphtalia had a vexed look on her face.

"I can all too easily imagine what kind of shenanigans Sadeena and Mr. Naofumi might get up to at a victory celebration party," she muttered while shaking her head.

"I'm with you 100 percent," Gaelion agreed.

He was hovering beside Raphtalia with his arms crossed.

I didn't know what the big deal was. Was rucolu fruit really so scary? I mean, most of the time people went pale and ran away when there was any talk of eating it straight. Being able to do that was the only reason Sadeena even liked me.

"But before any of that, we need to go meet up with the others from the ship," Gaelion continued.

"Yeah, you're right. That's the whole reason we came here, isn't it?" I replied.

"Let us raise the banner of revolution and send word to our people that the true Heavenly Empress has arrived! Then we shall welcome this ship to Q'ten Lo!" one of the men shouted.

The other men all cheered.

"Come, ladies. Let us enjoy the festivities, shall we?" said the skirt chaser.

He was still pestering Raphtalia and Sadeena and I was really getting tired of him. I figured it was time to shut him up.

"Shield Prison!"

"Wh-what are you doing?! This is—"

I trapped him inside of a prison of shields. Even Raphtalia must have been getting annoyed, because she didn't try to stop me. Sadeena came skipping over in her killer whale form and leapt at me. Damn it!

"Little Na-o-fu-mi! I totally got hit on! Are you jealous? You're jealous, aren't you?" she said.

“Oh yeah. Super jealous. I was really hoping he’d hit on me instead,” I replied.

I couldn’t be bothered with coming up with a wittier answer.

“Aww, you’re cute, even when you’re being sarcastic, little Naofumi,” Sadeena said.

“Who are you calling cute?” I replied.

“Anyway, my heart belongs to you, little Naofumi. Try not to be too mean or I’ll get depressed.”

“You sure don’t sound depressed. As far as I can tell, you’re far more concerned with finding some alcohol.”

She was just itching to get drunk. I could see it written all over her face.

“Oh? Is it that obvious? Come on, then. Let’s go get the others off the ship so that they can join us! Party, party, victory party!” Sadeena exclaimed.

Raphtalia sighed.

“I’m really starting to wonder why we came all this away,” she said.

“Stop complaining, Raphtalia. You’re going to unravel the shroud of mystery surrounding your birth and seize control of your very own country,” I told her.

“I wouldn’t mind knowing what kind of place my parents grew up in, but I’m also perfectly content with just living a quiet life back at the village,” she replied.

Raphtalia sure didn’t need much to be happy. That was one of the things I liked about her, actually.

“Well, you may end up eventually serving as governor of the territory on my behalf, so proactively making some political connections now would be a smart move,” I said.

I would be going back to Japan after the threat of the waves had passed. Rebuilding the village was really something I was doing for Raphtalia’s sake, after all.

“. . .”

Raphtalia just sat there quietly for some reason, without saying anything.

“Alright, let’s get going then. We’ve captured the port town. Now all that’s left is to set up base here, gather the troops, and then seize control of the country,” I said.

I laughed diabolically and Raphtalia rolled her eyes at me.

“I won’t deny that this country has some issues that need to be sorted out. So let’s stop wasting time talking and get going,” she said.

“Alright then!” I replied.

We left the skirt chaser behind and marched triumphantly back toward the port.

Back at the port town, the signs posted by the government had been taken down by order of Raluva. We paraded down the main street behind Raphtalia, who was wearing the miko outfit. Seeing her in the miko outfit must have been reassuring for the citizens of Q’ten Lo. They all bowed their heads deeply when she passed.

Of course, there were those who opposed her influence too. But we’d just defeated the government officials that had forcefully taken over the town. Speaking out against her openly would’ve been suicide. Anyone who didn’t want to get involved in a messy conflict would leave the town. On the contrary, those who opposed the government’s authority would begin to gather there. That was just the nature of things.

But enough talk of the future. We went to meet up with the others who’d been on the ship from Siltvelt. It had finally arrived at the port.

“Ohhh! It’s Masteeerrrr!” cried Filo.

“Rafuuu!”

Raph-chan was sitting on Filo’s head. Filo waved at us from the deck of the ship before jumping off and heading our way.

It was Raph-chan! I hadn’t seen her for a while and it was starting to make me sad. I wanted the people of Q’ten Lo to see just how great Raph-chan was. They completely worshipped Raphtalia when she wore the miko outfit, so I was sure they would love it if Raph-chan wore a miko outfit too. It would’ve been nice to

have others who understood how I felt.

“Umm, Mr. Naofumi? What are you thinking about?” Raphtalia asked.

“Mr. Naofumi!” Atla exclaimed.

She practically ran down the side of the ship and then leapt at me. It made her look like a stuntwoman or something.

“Atla!” Fohl shouted.

Determined not to be outdone, he tried to leap down onto the dock from the ship but just fell into the ocean instead. Poor guy.

“Fehhh! We were worried about you, Naofumi!” Rishia exclaimed.

“I suppose we were,” Itsuki agreed.

The two of them filed down off the ship in an orderly fashion and then rushed over to us. Itsuki sure didn’t look worried at all.

“I thought Raph-chan explained what had happened,” I said.

“Yes, Filo told us that you had already made it to Q’ten Lo safely,” Rishia replied.

“Was everything okay on the ship?” I asked.

“More attackers showed up every now and then. They seemed to be trying to figure out where Raphtalia had gone,” she said.

I guess they never would have imagined she’d already made it into the country.

“Itsuki, stay on your guard. We can’t use our portal skills in this country, it seems,” I said.

“I will. How are we going to bring Ren here?” he asked.

“It’ll be a real hassle, but I guess our only choice is to take a boat back and go pick him up,” I replied.

“Someone needs to guard the village. We could always do this with just the two of us,” Itsuki suggested.

That was true. But I had a feeling S’yne would be getting worried right about

now too. She had probably assumed she'd be able to rush to my side immediately, so I wasn't sure how she would deal with finding out we couldn't use teleportation.

Still, it would be difficult for me to leave the battlefront. And getting into the country by boat was still pretty dangerous. It would probably be better to search for a dragon hourglass before going that route. Besides, now that Atla, Itsuki, and the others had joined us, we'd be able to put up a pretty good fight, even if we did end up facing more enemies like that bear.

"Hey, kid! I'm glad to see you're still alive," said the old weapon shop guy as he got off the ship. "So this is Q'ten Lo, huh?"

"They have all kinds of strange culture and traditions here. You might be able to learn a thing or two," I replied.

Some of it might have been outside the realm of his expertise, but there were a lot of items and equipment in this country that I'd never seen before. I figured it would be nice if he could take a look and try to figure them out.

We were discussing that when the skirt chaser came running up. He was really upset.

"You can't just cage people all of a sudden, you little prick!" he screamed.

"That's what you get for trying to hit on Raphtalia. I can't have someone like you putting their dirty hands on her and tainting her," I replied.

"What did you say?! Are you trying to forbid me from approaching a beautiful young girl?! Who the hell do you think you are?!"

"I'm her surrogate father. I'll say this as many times as you need to hear it. It'll be a cold day in hell before I let someone like you get their hands on my cute little girl!"

"Try saying that again!"

The skirt chaser and I glared at each other. The old guy was standing next to me with a look of surprise on his face. He pointed at the skirt chaser.

"Master!" he shouted.

"Huh?"

What? I looked back and forth between the old guy and the skirt chaser, confused.

“I knew right away that you’d made the weapons those assassins who attacked the kid’s territory were using. But as soon as I get to Q’ten Lo, you’re here with the kid! Why?” the old guy exclaimed.

“Umm . . . Oh! Now I remember! You’re Erhard! Long time no see! How have you been?” replied the skirt chaser.

He squinted and really looked the old guy over for several moments before suddenly clapping his hands like he’d just remembered who he was. Then he started acting really chummy.

“I’ve been fine, but . . . you haven’t answered my question yet, Master!”

The old guy seemed slightly annoyed as he demanded an answer.

“Hold on. You’re saying this skirt chaser is your master?” I asked.

I tried to recall what the old guy had said about his blacksmith master. What was it again?

“You mentioned him being a skilled craftsman and a frivolous, womanizing moron who ran away to escape his debts, right?”

“Come on, kid. I may have said something like that, but just don’t lay it out there like that,” the old guy replied.

“What was that?! Well, I’ll admit that I *do* like my women,” said the skirt chaser.

When I recalled the characteristics that the old guy had mentioned, I suddenly realized that they all applied to this bastard. He was definitely the kind of guy that I didn’t want to run across, if it could be avoided.

“This bastard started hitting on Raphtalia and Sadeena when we were trying to sneak in undetected, and then he showed up during our battle and backstabbed the country’s government,” I said.

“Yeah, that sounds like Master, alright,” the old guy replied.

The skirt chaser flashed a smug grin. Why was he suddenly acting so self-

satisfied? That wasn't something to be proud of!

"Is he really your master?" Raphtalia asked.

She sounded disappointed. Of course she would. This was not a guy either of us wanted to get involved with. Nothing good ever came from associating with philanderers.

"So? How did you end up making weapons for a bunch of assassins who attacked my village?" I asked.

"Well, I was born here, but I wanted to experience the world, so I left. I wandered around from country to country, enjoying myself and doing my blacksmith work on the side. But then my pop died and they forced me to come back. Back then, the father of that snotty little brat of an emperor was still Heavenly Emperor. He ordered me to make equipment for the country. But when daddy died, the little brat got the throne and he's been there ever since," complained the skirt chaser, a.k.a. the old guy's master.

So to make a long story short, he was from a prestigious family of master blacksmiths in Q'ten Lo. And whether it was because of his own natural talent or just a characteristic of his race, it was rare to encounter a craftsman of his level. But he was a philanderer, so he ran away from home to get intimate with women around the world. And he got away with doing whatever he wanted for a while. But then his father died and he took over the family business. That's when the country ordered him to make weapons for them.

Being chosen as the country's blacksmith sure made him sound important.

"Oh! Little girls!" the old guy's master squealed.

This time he was looking at Atla and Filo. This guy really had no principles. Even so, "little girls" was just going too far.

"What is it? Do you need something from me?" Atla asked.

"Hm?" said Filo, confused as always.

"How about you two come and enjoy a cup of tea with me?" the master replied.

"Sorry, but I'm not interested. I *would* like to enjoy a cup of tea with Mr.

Naofumi, though. And then, while we were at it . . .” Atla’s voice trailed off.

“Hm? Maaasterrr, this person reminds me of the spear guy,” Filo said.

“You sure are sharp, Filo. What are you going to do?” I asked her.

“Umm, Mel-chan said to stay away from people that say things like he says,” she replied.

Melty was actually teaching Filo some pretty good stuff. But the nonsense coming out of Atla’s mouth was only making a bad situation worse.

“Umm, sorry, mister, but I already have Mel-chan and Master, so I can’t play with you. That’s what Mel-chan told meeee,” Filo said while pointing at me.

“Damn! Don’t tell me you’re building a harem!” the old guy’s master exclaimed while pointing at me with a regretful look on his face.

What the hell was he saying? Building a harem? *Me?* Ridiculous!

“Don’t make me vomit!” I shouted.

Did he really think I would be building a harem? He couldn’t have chosen a worse way to misunderstand. I was just taking care of Raphtalia as something of a father figure. It was a similar thing with the rest of the villagers too. Filo was basically my pet. Melty was a business associate. And Sadeena just treated me like we were in a relationship against my will. As for Atla, she’d just latched on to me against my will, kind of like Sadeena. She was just my slave. And a battle slave, at that.

“Umm . . . Please try not to mention that kind of thing around Mr. Naofumi,” said Raphtalia.

I was getting pissed off now.

“She’s right. It’s best to avoid topics like that around the kid. Otherwise, it’s just going to put him in an even worse mood,” the old guy agreed.

“Well, if you’re not building a harem, that means I can hit on your women, right?” the old guy’s master replied.

“You’ve upset Mr. Naofumi. Now pay the price,” said Atla.

She gave the old guy’s master a quick jab in the stomach.

“Gahhh! Y-you sure are violent, little miss,” he said.

Wow, he was pretty tough.

“What are you trying to do to Atla?!” Fohl shouted.

“What are you trying to do to me?!” the master retorted as he dodged Fohl’s fist by a hair’s breadth and then backed away.

If he could dodge that then why didn’t he dodge Atla’s jab?!

“I adore cute girls! Of course I’d want to enjoy their company!” he exclaimed.

“Go make some weapons, blacksmith,” I said.

“Oh, shut up! I’ll do that when I feel like it!” he replied.

What a selfish bastard.

“Hey, Master, I know how we could cheer the kid up,” the old man said.

“Huh? Why the hell would you want to cheer him up?” the master replied.

“Well, if it’s a choice between that and inflating your ego any more than it already is, then cheering the kid up is the far better option.”

“Erhard, you bastard! And you call yourself my apprentice?!”

“It’s exactly because I am your apprentice that I’m obligated to keep you under control. It won’t be any good for my business if word gets out that my master is the one making weapons for the assassins attacking a hero’s territory. This is the perfect chance. I’ll take care of all the arrangements, so why don’t you come back with us?”

That meant this bastard would be coming to Melromarc, right? I didn’t want a troublemaker like him anywhere near me. The old guy’s master crossed his arms and stood there deep in thought for a few moments. Seriously, what was with this guy?

“Well, I’ve already decided to align myself with this new Heavenly Empress. If it means being able to wander the world freely again once all the commotion dies down, then . . . it might not be a bad idea after all!” the master said.

“That’s the spirit! There were still a lot of things I was hoping to learn from you. Now you can teach me!” old guy exclaimed.

“Well, I get the feeling that being around this prick will give me the chance to meet lots of beautiful women. So sure, why not?!” the old guy’s master retorted.

The old man and his master shook on it. But as soon as they did, I noticed an almost imperceptible twinkle in the old guy’s eye that only lasted for an instant. He’d successfully managed to trick his master, in other words. I didn’t know the old guy had a side like that. Then again, with a master like this, such a thing would be inevitable.

“Oh, and Master . . . It goes without saying that you’ll pay me back for the massive debts you left me with, not to mention all of the other suffering you caused me, right?”

The old guy’s master squealed. He looked back and forth several times between the old guy’s face and their hands, which were still clasped in a handshake. It was clear he was about to try to run, so the old guy grabbed him and put him in a full nelson before eventually tying him up.

“Thanks, kid. I’ve finally managed to capture my master,” the old guy said.

“Damnit! Let me go, Erhard! I just want to be free to enjoy life and romance!”

“You can do that once you’ve worked enough to make up for causing the kid all this trouble! With your level of skill, we should be able to solve any problem, be it a financial crisis or imminent world destruction! I have faith in you!”

“Who the hell would choose saving the world from destruction over women?! Let me go! I just want to have fun!”

The old guy asked some townspeople where the local forge was and then dragged the skirt chaser off in that direction. The skirt chaser showed no signs of stopping his obnoxious belly aching. I couldn’t help but be a bit worried, but things would probably be fine if the old guy was watching him.

“What a strange guy. I guess we’ll be seeing a lot more of him now,” said Raphtalia.

“I’d really rather not. The old guy and Imiya’s uncle are more than adequate to take care of our blacksmith needs,” I replied.

I didn’t want to keep a weirdo like that around.

“That said, it is true that he saved us,” Raphtalia continued.

“Yeah, I can’t deny that,” I said.

The old guy’s master had given us the Sakura Stone of Destiny Shield and matching katana. He knew about equipment that could be used to counteract the enemy’s ability to weaken the heroes. I had a feeling we wouldn’t be able to topple the Q’ten Lo government without his help. Even just considering it made my head hurt, but I guess there was no choice but to accept working with him.

“Alright, now then . . . Today we successfully took the first step in capturing Q’ten Lo, and we were reunited with everyone on the ship. I guess we should be happy with that,” I said.

“Agreed. It looks like we’re going to be facing some rough times in the days to come, but we just have to keep forging ahead,” Raphtalia replied.

“Yeah. But we also get to uncover the mysteries surrounding your birth, Raphtalia. I’m actually kind of excited,” I said.

I cherished Raphtalia like she was my own daughter. There was something strangely satisfying about the thought of discovering her roots. But I always felt bad for her when the topic of her deceased parents came up.

Raphtalia sighed.

“In that case, how about *you tell me* more about your family and lineage, Mr. Naofumi?” she said.

“Me? I come from a painfully ordinary Japanese household,” I replied.

But then it occurred to me. When I really thought about it, Japan was an alien world in their eyes. I’m sure they would’ve had no idea what I was talking about if I mentioned things like computers or manga.

“I’m interested! I would love nothing more than to know about your family, lineage, and everything else about you, Mr. Naofumi! I want to know about your childhood, who your first love was, what you ate growing up, what kind of friends you had, and everything else too!” Atla exclaimed.

There was no way I was going to tell Atla anything. That response just made

her sound like a stalker. Filo had Motoyasu as a stalker. I guess Atla was mine. Atla kind of had a stalker too, since Fohl's sister complex was so severe. Maybe if I gave him some attention, Atla would shift her focus to him instead of me for a while.

I gazed over at Fohl. He perked up really straight and started looking around.

"Wh-what is this? I've got goosebumps. Why is my heart beating so fast?" he muttered.

Hmm . . .

"Such a complicated web of romance, don't you think, Mr. Itsuki?" said Rishia.

"I suppose so. Do you like that kind of thing, Rishia?" Itsuki replied.

"Y-yes. I've enjoyed books ever since I was a child, so I've read a lot of romance novels," she said.

What in the world were the two of them talking about?

"Rafuuu!"

"Hm?"

Raph-chan was sitting on top of the head of a confused Filo. I petted her while looking around at the town.

"Anyway, we'll be doing a lot of fighting in the coming days. Everyone rest up and prepare yourselves. It may seem like a completely foreign land, but this is where Raphtalia and Sadeena were born," I said.

"It sure is. Once we're free to explore a bit more, I'd like to show you the place where I grew up, little Naofumi," Sadeena replied.

"That makes it sound like capturing the country is a prerequisite," I said.

"Oh? I'm completely serious about all of this, you know," she replied.

I sighed. I could never tell whether she was being serious or not.

Suddenly, a cherry blossom petal came floating down and landed on the ground nearby. I guess, technically, it was a sakura lumina blossom petal. I looked over at the sakura lumina in full bloom and noticed how beautiful it was.

“Those flowers are really pretty,” said Raphtalia.

“Yeah, they are. It makes me want to take some of the trees back and plant them near the village, if they would actually survive,” I replied.

Q’ten Lo was a mysterious country. Being here felt like I had slipped back in time to the Edo period. And looking at the blossoming flowers on the sakura lumina trees made me think of spring in Japan. If I ever made it back to Japan and got to see the cherry blossoms again, they would probably remind me of all this.

The remainder of the day was like a brief moment of calm in the middle of a storm. But we were almost to the goal. It wouldn’t be long before we’d finally disposed of those annoying assassins. Even if we ended up facing some unexpectedly difficult issues ahead, things would work out. I would make it work out. Just like when I’d broken free of the web of conspiracy in Melromarc.

I was more determined than ever.

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