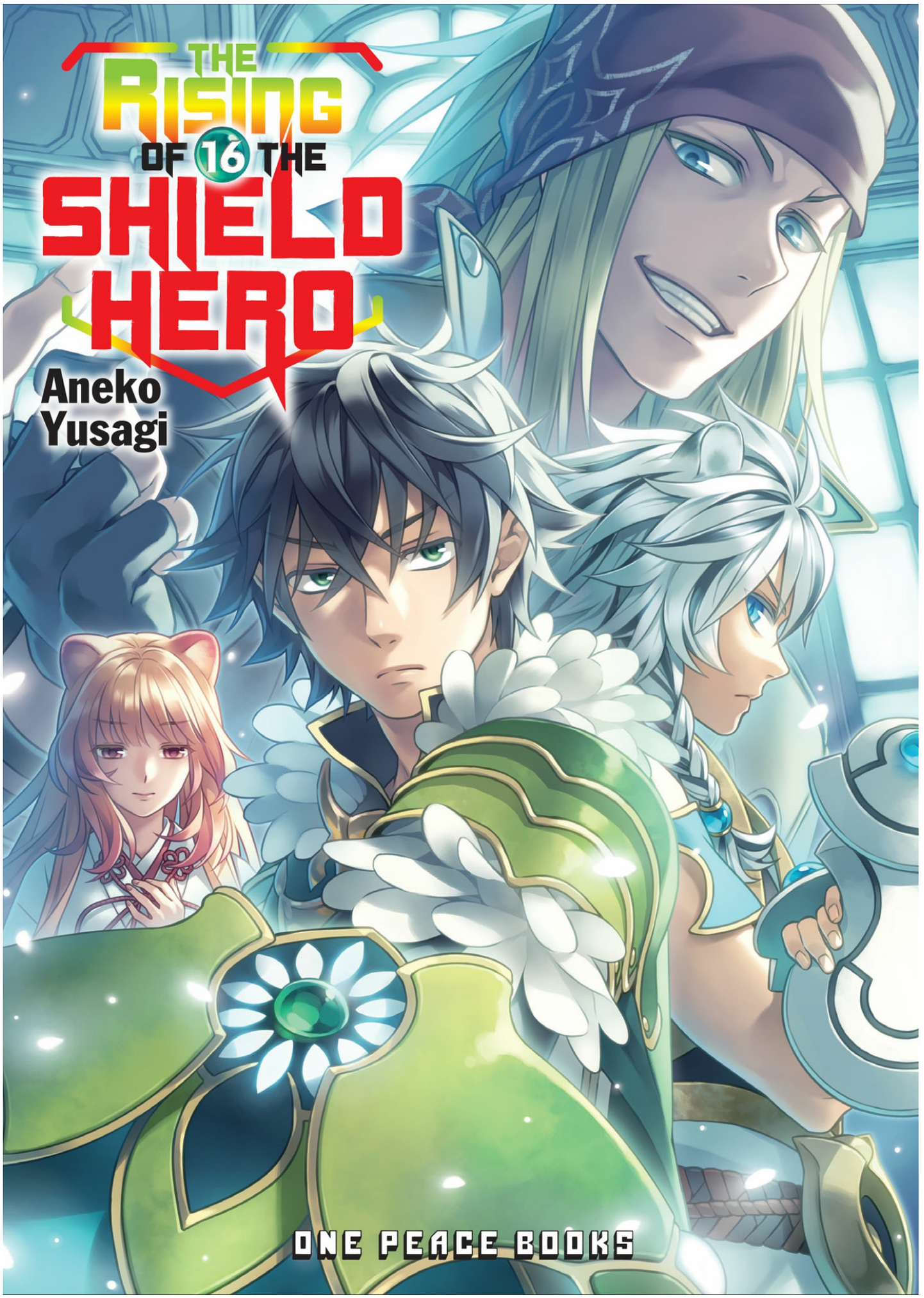

THE RISING OF 16 THE SHIELD HERO
Aneko Yusagi
ONE PEACE BOOKS


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The Rising of the Shield Hero 16

Aneko Yusagi




Fohl
Naofumi Iwatani
THE RISING OF THE SHIELD HERO
Queen
Trash (King)
Raphtalia
Filo
Takt
Raph-chan


I looked toward the throne.
It was occupied by a youth
I'd never seen before.

Prologue: The Funeral

“To all those brave souls who gave their lives in the great battle . . . we salute you.”

In front of the castle in the land where the Phoenix had been sealed, a grand state funeral was being held. The deceased from the fighting were being interred with great pomp and circumstance. A number of those from my village had also been killed. I’d started out believing I was simply raising them as pawns for use in battle . . . but now I so wanted them all to have made it through alive.

I was even reconsidering sending more of them into battle against the waves at all. If the alternative was going through this, however many more times, I wouldn’t be able to send anyone into battle ever again.

I stood quietly in front of Atla’s coffin. It was empty, of course. Raphtalia joined me, gently laying some flowers inside it. Fohl also did the same, wordlessly. For some reason, Trash was also placing some flowers. His expression was grim, and he said nothing to either me or Fohl.

I understood though.

When I had fallen back from the front line with Atla in my arms, I’d seen Trash standing in front of the treatment tent. He hadn’t been able to do anything then, so what was he doing here now?!

Lashing out at Trash wouldn’t achieve anything, just more pointless rage. It wasn’t like I’d been able to do anything for Atla either.

It had also been confirmed that Trash wasn’t the one responsible for her death. Numerous testimonials placed him with the queen in the moment that terrible flicker punched through the Phoenix. Not to mention that Trash had no

reason to kill her in the first place, and in that position he would have been caught up in the ensuing explosion without Atla's protection.

"I'm going to keep on fighting. Fighting the waves." Fohl looked at me and made this declaration. "If I run away now, it could lead to more deaths among the village slaves." Pretty much what I'd expected from Fohl.

"Good. Good for you," I replied. If I was in his position, I'd likely have made the same decision—to continue fighting the waves, for everyone, and for Atla.

"You guys . . ." Keel also placed some flowers inside Atla's coffin while crying her eyes out. "I'm going to fight too!"

"I'm not sure—" I started.

"You've told us all along!" With Raph-chan up on her shoulders, Keel's eyes burned with decisiveness as she quickly cut me off. "That we might die in this fighting, that this isn't playtime for kids, and we've chosen to fight all the same! Even if you tell us it's too dangerous now, none of us are going to listen!"

"Raph!" Raph-chan added for emphasis.

"It sounds like they've made up their minds," Fohl continued. "Everyone from the village has decided to follow you . . . brother, and fight. You can't stop them now. Accept that responsibility."

"Very well," I managed to reply. Yet I still didn't want anyone else to have to die. Each time I recalled Atla, my heart screamed out in pain. What could I do for them all to make this easier? I'd never had such a thought before, never once.

Raphtalia was still wordlessly standing in front of Atla's coffin.

Atla had said that Raphtalia was in love with me. I had to admit, at times, I'd wondered if that was the case. But I'd simply chosen not to think about it,

simply forcing myself to consider her a girl who put duty above everything else. That had been part of it, surely . . . to avoid feeling that fear that came from my distrust of women.

Atla had also talked before about how any one of us could be dead tomorrow.

In that case, for the sake of avoiding future regrets, shouldn't I at least respond to one who says that they care for me? What had I done for Atla, after all? Saved her from her sickness, perhaps, but anything else other than that? Surely I could have made her far happier than I did . . .

Regrets filled my mind and wouldn't leave me alone.

After the funeral, I talked with the queen.

"While suffering such great losses, Hero Iwatani, you have my deepest gratitude for bringing down the Phoenix," she solemnly proclaimed.

"Enough preamble. Have you found the one who interfered yet?" My focus was clear.

"Regrettably not. We still have no real leads on the culprit," the queen admitted.

"What about the seven star heroes?" I pressed her. "They seem the most suspicious to me."

"I really am very sorry," the queen replied. Trying to shake off the sadness was only feeding my fury at whoever had done this. That felt like the only way I could stop the sorrow from driving me insane.

"You're no help at all!" I raged. I was getting really angry now! I knew the queen wasn't at fault, but I just couldn't maintain a happy mood.

"That is clearly an important issue, but I was wondering what your thoughts

are on the issue concerning the next of the four benevolent animals?" the queen asked.

"Sorry, my thoughts on what?" I replied distractedly. The queen dropped a concerned "oh my" at my question.

"You haven't heard about it from the other heroes?" she inquired. I proceeded to check the remaining time on the blue-sand hourglass in the corner of my vision.

It looked like it had changed to a red one.

"Wasn't the Kirin meant to be next?" I checked with her.

"We have been informed that, just a few hours after you and your allies defeated the Phoenix, the Kirin appeared in the vicinity of Faubrey. It was then immediately eradicated by a number of the seven star heroes who were on the scene," the queen reported.

"What?" That was a lot to take in. I was almost impressed they had been able to handle such a sudden turn of events. At the same time, I also faced down some fresh suspicions. There had been a long preparatory period—three whole months—between the Spirit Tortoise and the Phoenix. But now, it was just a few hours between the Phoenix and the Kirin? And wasn't the Dragon meant to unseal after the Kirin?

If the red-sand hourglass was moving, that meant either the Dragon was still sealed or it had already been defeated.

"I'd better call over Ren and the other heroes," I decided. I shouted for Ren to come over to me. Hearing that I was calling for him, a short while later Ren arrived.

"What's up?" he asked.

“What do you know about the Kirin?” I inquired.

“Same as the Phoenix—a pair of monsters,” he replied. Kirin . . . an auspicious beast formed from a pair of monsters called “Ki” and “Rin.” The Kirin I knew about was said to be a beast that showed itself before benevolent rulers—perhaps that was why it was sealed in the vicinity of Faubrey. However, it sounded as though it had already been defeated . . .

“Strategies for fighting it?” I asked.

“I do have some information, but from past examples we’ve seen, I’m not sure it would be much use . . . not to mention it sounds like the Kirin has already been defeated.” Two good points from Ren.

“Hmmm . . .” I pondered.

“I like to think I have some knowledge of legends, but I don’t think I’ve heard of any kind of story from Faubrey like that. It sounds like the heroes who were there just happened to resolve the issue,” the queen suggested.

“You’ve got no more information on this?” I said, a little surprised. I got the impression that the queen’s hobby was basically investigating legends. So how couldn’t she know anything about this?

There was also the chance that Faubrey was intentionally hiding the information. That was more than possible, considering that it was a nation built on the blood of heroes such as ourselves. Not even that. Maybe people like Makina, thinking only of themselves, had hidden away the lore to suit themselves.

“Faubrey has been through its own period of lengthy turmoil. There’s certainly the possibility that the information was lost during that time. They are definitely looking into the four benevolent animals over there, so the large

National Library may provide some information," the queen suggested. The National Library? I vaguely seemed to recall Melty saying she had learned about the beasts from books. Maybe she had been talking about the books there?

There were apparently quite a number of seven star heroes in Faubrey, although many of them were also said to be quite hard to contact. A mysterious monster had impersonated a Siltveltian seven star hero, which should have put the world on alert. If there were seven star heroes in action out there though, there was a good chance they were the ones who caused this.

I looked at Ren and the others.

"What about the seal on the Dragon?" I asked.

"Reports say that only the Kirin was defeated. There's no talk of the Dragon having appeared yet," the queen replied. What was going on? I couldn't see a pattern here.

In either case, all we had to do was punish the one who cut in on the action during our fight with the Phoenix.

"Do we have a portal to Faubrey?" I asked, pretty sure of the answer, but I had to make sure.

"Sorry. No reason for me to have one," Ren said.

"Me neither," Itsuki confirmed.

"Or me, I say!" Motoyasu said. So no dice from the three other heroes, and no point in asking Raphtalia either. Even with S'yne's vassal weapon, I wasn't going to push her too hard.

"In any case, we have to bring judgment to whoever shot down the Phoenix. And bring these seven star heroes in line, as they don't seem inclined to ever show up!" I declared.

“All shall be as you say . . . eventually, Hero Iwatani, but first I think you should get some rest in our Melromarc base,” the queen suggested.

“Her royal highness is right, Naofumi! One of us, the other heroes, will go and get a portal,” Motoyasu chimed in.

“I can’t just sit around on my hands while the one who did this is out there!” I retorted. Someone had got in the way during the Phoenix battle. I was going to kill that someone.

Ren gripped my shoulder, and Raphtalia spoke with a sad look in her eyes.

“Mr. Naofumi, please calm down.”

“Naofumi, I’m asking you too. Go get some rest in the village,” Ren said.

“Come on!” I pleaded.

“Please. If you don’t, Naofumi . . . it’s too hard on everyone else, seeing you slipping away from us,” Ren begged. At that comment, I looked around. It felt like everyone was looking at me with such concern in their eyes. My feelings for Atla . . . stayed my hand.

“Okay,” I managed. “You win.”

We returned to the village.

“Right, Naofumi. You get some rest. Leave everything to us, for now. We’ll call for you if we make any progress on the Phoenix cleanup or if any enemies show themselves in the vicinity,” Ren assured me.

“No need to keep repeating it,” I bit back.

“About who we should send to Faubrey, I’m told representatives from each nation are going to be meeting in Melromarc. We should probably go and meet

their representative," Ren continued, smoothly ignoring me and moving on to the selection of who to send to Faubrey.

"Should I go?" Itsuki offered.

"No. You're still under the effects of the curse. You can't leave Rishia behind, and the long road to Faubrey will require stamina to complete," Ren reasoned.

"I'll go, I say!" Motoyasu quickly piped up. "With the speed of my filolials!"

Told by everyone to rest, I was heading back toward my house when Ruft, Raphtalia's cousin, came over to me.

"Hey, Shield Hero . . ." Falteringly, he tested the waters. "Ah . . . I was wondering . . ." He must have wanted to know what had happened and how things had turned out.

"Sorry, kid . . . Shildina can probably fill you in on the details," I said, putting him off.

"Okay . . . sorry for asking," Ruft said.

"No need to apologize. You didn't do anything wrong, Ruft," I told him.

"I know . . . but I saw you looking sad, and I wanted to cheer you up. I guess I can't . . . do anything for you . . ." Ruft sounded dejected.

"Don't worry about that. Doing things for me only leads to pain, in my experience," I replied bitterly. Hearing him saying such things was hard for me to bear. Had I really been pushing everyone into such danger for so long?

"Mr. Naofumi . . ." Raphtalia said, clearly concerned.

"Raph . . ." The same from Raph-chan.

“I’m fine. My house is right there. Raphtalia, can you let everyone in the village know what happened?” I asked her.

“I’m not sure . . .” she started.

“Tell everyone not to take any risks, but to just stay safe,” I told her.

“O-okay,” she replied.

I returned to my house and collapsed onto the bed. This felt like such a waste of time, only serving to piss me off more. Alongside that, I felt another emotion taking hold of me, and alone, I sank into depression.

Coexisting together there was the me who burned for revenge against whoever did this and the me weeping for my loss.

After I lay spaced-out on the bed for a while, there came a tapping at my door.

Filo had arrived, along with Melty.

Someone had taken the queen back to the castle and then brought Melty back with them.

“I’m back, Master!” Filo chirped.

“What’re you doing here?” It was rare for them to show up like this.

“Welcome back, Naofumi . . . I’ve heard what happened from Raphtalia and Filo,” Melty said.

“And? You’ve come to laugh at my failure?” They weren’t that twisted, of course, but in my own twisted mood, those were the only words I could find. I knew that it was a poor reply.

“Of course not! Can’t you tell the difference between things that are okay to say and things—” Melty started.

“You’re right,” I interrupted her. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Naofumi, tell me you’re okay, would you?” Melty asked.

“Mel-chan. Master looks so tired,” Filo commented.

“Oh, I’m ready to go. Everyone just keeps telling me to rest, that’s all,” I grumbled. Filo didn’t seem to understand either.

The only way I was going to keep my sanity was to quickly find the identity of whoever caused this mess and put them in the ground! That was the emotion that filled me.

“Let us come in and sit with you for a while, until Raphtalia gets here,” Melty suggested.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“We’re worried you might do something rash,” Melty explained.

“If whoever decided to get involved in the Phoenix battle was right here in front of me, I might show you something rash. Otherwise, I’m fine,” I told them.

“So you admit it. You’ve got rash plans! Seriously!” Melty chided. “But still, you seem to have more energy than I was expecting.” I decided to take the moment to ask Melty a question.

“Tell me, Melty, have you ever lost someone important to you, a subordinate or someone you were close with, to something big, like a war?” At my question, Melty shook her head, a serious look on her face.

“No, I haven’t. But I’m still going to bring my resolve as a member of the royal family, and as a representative of my country, into everything I do. If Filo died in

battle, well, I wouldn't know if I could accept it until it happened," Melty said bravely.

"Hey . . . I'm not going to die," Filo said.

"I know. I won't allow that to happen. I'll do whatever I can to save you, even putting my life on the line," Melty declared. Putting her life on the line?

"If you lose your life like that . . . it will only be the one left behind—Filo—who will suffer," I explained.

"I know." Melty nodded at my words. "That's why I aim every day for the best possible method to keep us both alive. Naofumi, I'm not going to hit you with conventional attempts to cheer you up. They'll have the opposite effect on you. Keep your head up and carry on. That's all you can do."

"Yeah. I know. I have to keep my final promise to Atla," I replied with a catch in my voice. Then I looked straight into Melty's eyes. "Melty, tell me . . . do you love me?"

"What?! Hold on! What's brought this on?!" Melty pushed her eyebrows together, tilting her head.

"Master?" Filo quizzed.

"Filo, how about you?" I asked.

"Me? I love you lots and lots, Master!" Filo exclaimed.

"I see. And exactly how much is that?" I pressed her.

"Well . . . so much I'd almost like to pair up with you!" Filo revealed.

"Filo! You can't say that! That'll make Naofumi mad!" Melty stepped in.

"Okay then. Filo, come over here," I told her. I was never going to get to sleep alone, what with all the regrets and murderous intent packed in the bed with

me. Having Filo sleep alongside me would take my mind off things.

“Huh?!” Melty was suitably blindsided.

“Here I come! Yahoo!” Filo seized on the opportunity, happily leaping forward to get into the bed.



“Hold on, Filo! Hold it!” Melty pulled her back.

“Huh?” Now Filo was puzzled.

“What’s wrong, Melty? Ah, you don’t want Filo to sleep alongside me alone? Then how about you join us too?” I asked.

“W-w-why do I have to spend the night in your bed?! No way, buster!” Melty exclaimed.

“I see. If you don’t want to, fair enough,” I said. I wasn’t going to force her to do anything.

“Eh? Ah, hold on,” Melty stuttered.

“Sorry for asking,” I replied.

“Ah, that’s fine . . . Hey, and that’s not what I meant!” Melty exclaimed. She was acting really weird. What the hell had gotten into her?

“What? You don’t want to snuggle, Mel-chan?” Filo asked.

“You stay quiet and get over here, Filo!” Melty ordered. “There’s something wrong with Naofumi! We can’t wait any longer. Let’s go fetch Raphtalia!”

“Do we have to?” Filo protested as Melty basically dragged her from the room.

Something wrong with me, she’d said.

Like Atla had told me . . . I was just trying to make sure I had no regrets.

Not long after that . . .

“H-hello, may I come in?” I opened the door to see Imiya bringing me some food. “I have a meal for you,” she said. “I thought . . . maybe you were getting

hungry.”

“I see.” I took the tray from her and placed it on the desk in my room.

“I-I’ll be going,” she said and moved to leave.

“Imiya,” I said, stopping her.

“Y-yes! Whatever can I do for you?” she replied, a little startled.

“Do you have someone who you love, Imiya?” I asked.

“Ah . . . well . . .” she stuttered, her cheeks blushing red as she looked at the ground and wrung her hands. That reaction—

It couldn’t be! Imiya was in love with me?

I mean, she’d ended up with me in almost exactly the same manner as Raphtalia, so maybe it was only natural.

“I mean . . . that is to say . . . I . . .” she stammered.

“Don’t worry. I understand, Imiya.” It was all clear to me now.

“You understand what, exactly?” she pondered.

“I’m going to respond to your desires,” I proclaimed. A few seconds passed.

“Whaaaat?!” she suddenly responded, practically fainting to the floor.

“Hey. What’s so surprising?” I asked.

“I-I’m not ready for this . . . and I’m so dirty right now too.” What was she talking about? I took a moment to examine her thoroughly with my eyes. She didn’t have that unhygienic look about her that, say, Raphtalia had been blessed with when I first purchased her. With just a glance I could see that she was washed and clean. Sure, Raphtalia hadn’t been able to wash herself for days, so it might not be a fair comparison, but Imiya was still definitely very

clean.

“That doesn’t bother me,” I told her.

“Ah . . . well . . . okay.” Imiya was trembling. She also didn’t turn me down. She immediately moved over and lay down, a little hesitantly, on the bed.

Cutting right to the chase just like with Filo, I thought we might be skipping a few steps. This usually started with some light conversation, maybe a date or two.

In that case . . . I’d stroke her a little, then caution her. Warn her that we were skipping a few too many steps. I sat down on the bed and Imiya let out a strained sound, her body still trembling.

She was far too tense. I gently stroked her cheek.

Huh? Imiya’s body temperature seemed pretty high.

As soon as I touched her, Imiya jerked back up into a sitting position.

“Ah?! I . . . Look . . . I can’t do this! I’m sorry!” With that, she leapt off the bed and ran from the room. The same kind of reaction as Melty.

Having left the room, Imiya bumped into Keel. They talked for a moment and then Imiya continued her escape.

“Bubba Shield! Imiya said that you’re acting strangely! What’s up?” Keel asked, coming right in.

“I asked if she was interested in anyone, and her reaction seemed to suggest it was me. So I attempted to respond to her feelings,” I explained.

“Bubba Shield is acting strangely! Woof-woof!” Keel immediately started to shout and make a fuss.

“Stop that! Stop making that noise! There’s nothing strange about me at all!” I

retorted. It sounded like she needed a good talking to. As Keel tried to escape, I pinned her arms behind her back.

“Bubba! What are you doing? You’re not interested in women! Right?” she shouted.

“I’ve had a change of heart. Keel, how do you feel about me?” I asked her.

“I like you, Bubba, but I don’t think I like this version of you! Hey, what are you planning on doing with me?” For some reason, Keel turned herself into her puppy form and started yapping. I tried to explain it to her.

“Look. It was Imiya who suddenly said she wanted to get with me and climbed onto the bed, okay? I just stroked her a little and she ran out like the room was on fire.”

“So you’re not going to attack me?” Keel asked.

“Of course not.” What did she think I was? Sexual desire personified?

“Bubba. You sure know how to give someone the wrong impression. Shocking Imiya like that too,” Keel despaired.

“Huh? What are you talking about? I was just going to warn her that we were skipping a few too many steps, that’s all!” I protested.

“Bubba, you need to calm down. She clearly thought you ordered her into your room and told her to lie down on the bed,” Keel explained.

“I see . . . Sounds like maybe I’ve messed with her head. I’ll apologize to her later,” I said.

“Nah, I don’t think you need to worry about it,” Keel said.

I wondered if I really didn’t.

“What’s happening, brother? I just passed the Melromarc princess, and she

said you've been acting strangely?" Fohl asked, having shown up from somewhere.

"Hey, Fohl. Where's Raphtalia?" I asked.

"She's not here right now. She's also acting . . . a little strangely. Or maybe we're the ones with the problem . . ." he pondered. Whatever the issue was, he seemed aware of it.

"Fohl, Bubba is definitely acting weird," Keel chimed in.

"A lot had happened. We need to just give him some time to calm down," Fohl replied.

"But—" Keel pressed the issue. I watched the two of them talking. Fohl was Atla's brother.

"Fohl," I said.

"What?" he responded, still distracted by Keel.

"How do you feel about me?" I asked.

"Huh? What's brought this on?" he replied, furrowing his brow.

"I'd like to know," I said.

"You're the man Atla loved. Even remembering everything that's happened between us, I can't bring myself to hate you. I'm going to support you, as a replacement for Atla," he explained.

So he'd try to be like a replacement for Atla.

I gingerly moved around to stand behind Fohl, then touched his body. He smelled a bit like Atla . . . maybe just a bit.

"Woah there!" Fohl gave a yelp and immediately put some distance between

us. “W-where did that come from?!”

“Where did what?” I asked innocently. I could see traces of Atla in Fohl’s visage. This felt like my chance to achieve that which I had never achieved with her.

“Seriously! You just wait there a moment!” Fohl shouted.

“Wah, Fohl, what are you doing—” Keel protested as Fohl hauled her up onto his back and then scuttled out of the room, his face visibly pale.

A short while later, Sadeena came into my room, a bottle of wine in one hand.

“Little Naofumi?” she called.

“What now?” I asked.

“I’ve heard all about your antics from little Fohl. Have a drink with me and cheer yourself up a bit,” she said.

“Sorry. Wine won’t work on me. You know that,” I replied.

“Now that you mention it, maybe I had heard that,” she replied glibly with a gentle smile. She was just trying to cheer me up, in her own way. Using drink to cheer someone up seemed like a common tactic, no matter the world.

It was true. If I could get drunk, I’d probably really have felt like drinking right then.

“How about we find another way to have some fun together?” she suggested.

“Yeah, why not? Filo would surely just sleep, and Imiya got the wrong end of the stick . . . but you, Sadeena, have always been open about your advances. I guess we can skip a few steps,” I replied. Atla had told me that she wanted me to respond to the feelings of those who liked me. Sadeena had been direct

about those feelings for almost as long as I knew her, so I thought I should finally respond to her.

“Little Naofumi?” she asked, playing coy now!

“Sadeena, do you love me?” I asked.

“Oh my. That’s quite a direct question. But yes, I do love you, little Naofumi. Ah! I’ve gone and said it now!” she replied embarrassedly, wriggling and writhing about.

“I see. Strip off and lie down on the bed then,” I commanded.

“Little Naofumi?” she asked, tilting her head. But she did sit down on the bed. I took off my pants, removed Sadeena’s loincloth-like wrap thing, and prepared to—

“Hold it right there, little Naofumi! Stop!” She lightly pushed me away. “Little Naofumi. Can you tell me, just what were you about to do?”

“Exactly what you wanted, I thought,” I replied.

“Please, little Naofumi. Just sit down right there,” she told me.

“We can’t do it if I’m sitting on the floor,” I protested.

“Just sit down!” she ordered. What was going on? It was exceptionally rare for Sadeena to get in such a bad mood. “Just to confirm the situation, you were trying to skip things like atmosphere, and the preamble, and everything like that? You aren’t aware of the normal sequence to these kinds of events?”

“Yes, I’m aware,” I retorted, a little standoffishly. I’d played my fair share of hentai games, after all. Of course I knew the “sequence,” as she called it. Damn, I probably knew all sorts of crazy sex stuff that even Sadeena had never dreamed about.

Not that I'd boast about something like that.

"And yet you still tried to bump bodies with me like we're part of a production line. That would really upset Raphtalia, don't you think?" Sadeena continued.

"You might be right. But Atla told me to respond to what people want from me," I replied. At that, Sadeena placed her fingers on her forehead, looking most distressed.

"Just you listen to me, little Naofumi. Everyone loves you. But there's something really messed up about how you're going about all this," she continued.

"All this?" I asked, maybe playing it a bit too dumb. It was rare for Sadeena to bring me to task quite this briskly. Finally cooling off a little, I realized that I'd reached the point at which even Sadeena needed to caution me about my actions.

"Little Naofumi. As two consenting adults, if you wanted to enjoy the physical act of love with me, or if you needed some solace in your sadness, then as a woman I would happily respond," Sadeena explained. I certainly didn't need consoling like that though. That kind of solace would just hurt even more. "But what you're doing right now, little Naofumi, is nothing more than the mechanical process of trying to make a baby. You even tried it on with poor little Fohl, a man! Do you see what I'm saying?"

"I think that came from Fohl saying he would try and be a replacement for Atla. So I wanted to do something I'd never been able to do with her—" I started to explain.

"Little Naofumi, get a grip on yourself! And Shildina and you others, stop

listening outside the room!” Sadeena shouted. I turned to look out the window and saw Shildina, S’yne, and Ruft outside. The three of them all nervously scratched at their heads, avoiding my gaze with an embarrassed flush in their cheeks.

“Now is our chance,” Shildina said. “If you won’t seize it, Sadeena, then I’ll be the one to fill the hole in sweet Naofumi’s heart.”

“I’ll never allow that. Little Raphtalia would kill you, aside from anything else. Ruft is far too young for all this—and he might not even choose that path. The fact he looks so much like Raphtalia puts him in even more danger,” Sadeena lectured.

“Oh, dang it . . .” Shildina seemed disappointed.

“What path?” Ruft inquired.

What was with everyone? Wanting it one minute, shooting me down the next. I asked Sadeena directly about that, and she replied with her own question.

“Little Naofumi. Right now, all you want to do is make me feel good. Don’t you see a problem with that?”

“What kind of problem? I mean, Fohl, okay . . .” This wasn’t what Atla had wanted. I think I was starting to understand.

“Look, little Naofumi,” Sadeena began, taking both of my shoulders in her hands, smiling gently while she advised me. She was a lot like Raphtalia, in that respect. The two weren’t related by blood, but there was a reason Raphtalia treated her like a sister. “It’s the process that matters. I’d love to hop into bed with you and have some fun, little Naofumi, but right now, even if you aren’t personally into it, you’d be willing to go through with it if I wanted to, wouldn’t

you?”

“That’s right,” I agreed.

“And if we ended up making a baby, you’re the one who’d regret it later,” she continued.

“I’d take . . . responsibility, if I had to. It would be better than regretting doing nothing . . . like with Atla,” I managed.

“An honest answer . . . but I don’t think that’s quite what Atla meant when she said that to you. Just calm down and think.” At Sadeena’s words, I did become a little calmer.

Unable to find the enemy we should be fighting, I’d just rushed ahead in my sadness and lost myself as I tried to avoid any more regrets. *If this is what Sadeena wants* . . . That had been my thinking.

Of course, Sadeena was her own woman, or at least . . . her own entity. Just as I hadn’t always liked the advances of others, she surely had to prepare herself for intimacy. And above all else, I couldn’t do anything that she didn’t want to do.

I wasn’t a rapist. No way.

So I’d tried to get her consent, but because I was acting so strangely, she’d rejected me. In that case . . . what should I be doing?

“I understand you saying you’ll take responsibility, but if I let you do this now, I just know in the future you will regret it. That’s why I’m turning you down and why I’ll make sure none of the others, Shildina or anyone else, will take you up on your offer either,” Sadeena stated.

“Oh, come on!” Shildina exclaimed. She didn’t sound happy about that. But Sadeena gave her a rare and piercing glare. Even more rarely, it caused Shildina

to back down.

“I understand,” I finally said.

“I’ll let Raphtalia and the others know, so you just think about things a little more. I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong idea, showing up like this,” Sadeena said.

I couldn’t find the words to reply. Being cautioned by her scattered my thoughts even more than before. I wasn’t what she wanted right now . . . That much was plain to see. Sadeena had cautioned me, thinking about my own future. I had to keep away from those with an interest in me, in order to avoid future regrets.

Having regrets in the future . . . would Atla have chided me like this? They were pretty hard words for me to bear, being someone suffering so much regret recently for not having done something, when I could surely have made Atla so much happier than I did.

I’d thought it was better to do something and regret it than regret not doing it at all. Had I been wrong?

“Little Naofumi, even if I tell you to cheer up, I know you probably can’t. Not right now. But at least recover yourself first.” Sadeena stood up smoothly, giving me a smile. “Once you’ve done that, and if you still feel like living in respect to Atla’s final words, then I’m sure not only me, but also Raphtalia, the others in the village . . . even Fohl, will respond to your feelings.” Sadeena’s angry expression was gone, and she gave me a really gentle smile.

I’d always considered her to be just a sharp-eyed, sexy vixen of a whale-lady, but today she felt really appealing in another way.

“It’s because I feel so strongly about you, little Naofumi, that I won’t allow

this to happen with me or anyone else," she reiterated. Then she gently stroked my cheek and left the room.

I was confused as to just where the hell I was. Taking responsibility . . . determination . . . such thoughts all swirled around in my head. I didn't know what I wanted to do next.

After taking vengeance on the subject of my rage, defeating the waves, and bringing peace to this world, I didn't know what I was going to do. I had no plans to be buried here. My thinking on that point was unchanged. That was probably what Sadeena had been warning me about too. Just enjoying myself with half-hearted determination, not thinking about the future, and then getting someone knocked up . . . Yeah, that would be a problem.

Not to mention I wasn't interested in having any children.

Sadeena had been trying to tell me that she and the others in the village weren't the type to just be happy carrying the child of a hero—that they didn't want to use me like some breeding stud. It filled my heart with how deeply she was thinking of me, and that proceeded to make me sad.

I'd been out of my head earlier. Fohl had no such intentions toward me, clearly, and there was no way I could replace Atla.

"Yeah, you're right," I said.

They all believed in me, but I couldn't respond to that, yet I needed the determination to carry the burden of their lives. So I wondered what would happen when it came time for me to go home. I couldn't know for sure . . . but that could mean goodbye. A mixture of feelings swirled within me—wanting to return home and wanting to be with everyone and respond to their feelings for me.

“I’m back, Mr. Naofumi . . .” Raphtalia came in.

“Hey, Raphtalia,” I said.

“Hello. I’ve heard about what happened while I was gone,” she said without judgment.

“Okay . . . it was a bit of a thing. Sorry,” I managed.

“No, Mr. Naofumi. For now . . . let’s just not think about it,” Raphtalia suggested.

“If you say so,” I responded.

I found no answers to my questions, and the night passed in quiet agony.

Chapter One: The Ocean Floor

The next day, after completing my daily routine of feeding the monsters stabled in the village and making breakfast for everyone, I proceeded to make a declaration: “It’s time to get serious about raising my level.”

Having given it some more thought, I’d come to the realization that my own weakness was why I hadn’t been able to withstand the self-destruct attack of the Phoenix. Of course, I hadn’t been slacking off in terms of leveling up. But I’d definitely been spending more time on the environment surrounding me.

That arrogance had led to the loss of Atla.

Not just her either. A considerable number had been killed by the reverberations of the self-destruct attack and the further attacks of the revived Phoenixes.

“Oh, Mr. Naofumi,” Raphtalia muttered quietly to herself as she looked over at me. I needed them to at least allow me this.

“Ren, Itsuki, do you know a good hunting spot for grinding out some levels? Somewhere suited to me right now?” I asked the two of them. We couldn’t rely too much on their game knowledge, but it would at least provide a starting point. Motoyasu was apparently on the move, heading for Faubrey. There was always the possibility he would use a teleport skill to come back, so I’d left some food for him.

“Good question,” Ren replied.

“As far as I see it, your choices are to fight some violent monsters deep in the mountains or slowly push yourself upward with the experience-efficient monsters in Q’ten Lo,” Itsuki summarized. Both of them had slightly troubled

expressions on their faces as they answered.

“Oh, little Naofumi?” Sadeena took that moment to raise her hand. “Experience is great in the ocean. How’s about we start with a little hunting together?” She placed undue emphasis on the “start” part.

“Hunting with sweet Naofumi? I want to go too.” Shildina was quick to ask to participate. Sadeena quickly told her it was fine, giving a nod.

“Sadeena?” Raphtalia said.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to pull anything on little Naofumi at the moment. If you’re still worried, you come along too. That would actually be a big help,” Sadeena said.

“Very well. That’s what I’ll do,” Raphtalia replied. It looked like my participation was being taken for granted. Well, no matter. I’d decided that I’d better get our underwater gear out from storage. In terms of shields, I had the Bubble Shield too.

“I’d also like to—” S’yne started.

“Master . . . would rather not get wet,” her familiar finished. I looked over to see S’yne and her familiar involved in a discussion. S’yne seemed to want to come along, but underwater battles also weren’t really her thing.

“Very well—I’ll make something.” With that, S’yne started sewing at once, making an underwater doll. She already had a Sadeena doll, so I wondered what else she needed.

“She needs more materials,” the familiar relayed. “Can you provide some aid?”

“Yeah, sure. Use my name to collect whatever you need,” I told them.

“Thank you,” the familiar returned. Hey, if S’yne wanted to come along, then I wasn’t going to stop her.

“What about me?” Ruft asked.

“Hmmm. You’ll be staying here, Ruft. It’s going to be far too dangerous for you,” I told him.

“Ruft. Please sit this one out,” Shildina told him, quick to back me up.

“Sure . . . but I do want to get stronger. I haven’t been here long, but I really do want that,” Ruft explained.

“You’re getting stronger every day,” Shildina assured him, stroking his cheek with a smile. He seemed a little embarrassed at the contact.

“Are you coming, Raph-chan?” I asked—no pressure.

“Raph, raph, raph,” replied Raph-chan, crossing her arms in a pose of denial. Then she pointed at something . . . and then made a motion of swinging a pickax.

“So you’ve got something else to do?” I asked.

“Raph!” she replied. Looked like I was right. I guess it couldn’t be helped.

“Sounds like that settles it!” Sadeena said excitedly.

During these discussions, Melty arrived, riding Filo in her filolial form.

“Naofumi, how are you feeling?” Melty asked.

“Not sure how to reply to that,” I responded.

“You seem more like your old self,” she bit back. She seemed to be acting cautiously. Did she really have so little trust in me?

I guess that was the case.

“Do you need something?” I asked.

“Actually, I do. I thought it better to get your approval first,” Melty said. Then she gave a little cough. “I want to hold a festival to celebrate having defeated the Phoenix—a combined event between your village and the surrounding towns,” Melty explained.

“Yay!” Filo gave an excited sound at Melty’s proposal.

“I know great sacrifices were made. But even greater is the fact that the Phoenix that so threatened the people has been defeated by combining our strength with that of the heroes. I think that should be celebrated. A festival will help raise everyone’s morale too,” Melty continued.

“A celebration, after everything we lost?” I asked. It sounded a bit improper to me. Melty replied with no signs of backing down, however.

“Exactly because of what we’ve lost. We’ll also pray for the souls of the departed and thank them for giving their lives in battle to allow us to continue living,” Melty said. A celebration because of the hardships we’ve overcome. They had thrown a party in the castle before, after defeating one of the waves. This was the same principle as that. Considering the kind of world this was, maybe it was better to enjoy things while you could.

“Why don’t we just let people do their own thing?” I asked.

“You sure? I think we could turn quite the profit. Here’s an estimate. Might be useful for keeping the home fires burning, no?” The amount Melty presented me with was actually pretty insane.

“Where’s that all coming from?” I asked, still a little incredulous.

“We’ll be running all sorts of events and also running the books on all the gambling,” Melty explained. Gambling—I could certainly get behind that.

That wasn't the problem though.

"Couldn't that be dangerous?" I asked.

"That won't be a problem. Alongside the coliseum, we're also planning some filolial races. And you've got some fast ones in your stable," Melty responded. Filolials, huh? Motoyasu would probably be coming back by portal every now and then, so I thought maybe I'd ask him about it. "We've received challenges from likely associations too. We're going to make a killing," Melty assured me.

"Hmmm. Okay. You go ahead," I told her. She continued to look at me, wordlessly, with a thoughtful look on her face. Then, as though making up her mind, she changed the topic.

"I'm also planning a singing performance by Filo," Melty revealed.

"Singing?" I asked.

"That's right. Before you went off to Siltvelt, I went traveling with Filo to raise her levels, remember? We did the rounds of various taverns, putting on a show. She even became known as the Bird God Diva," she explained.

"Heh!" Filo said proudly, puffing up her chest. She'd liked singing back when Motoyasu was around the first time, I recalled. She was good at it too. She could sing as well as the wandering bard, loved to dance, and was beautiful when in human form.

She was like . . . a pop singer, basically.

I'd thought the trauma of being put on display had made her dislike standing out, but it seemed she'd overcome that.

"She has a lot of fans. When she sang in the tavern in town recently, the place was packed—standing room only," Melty informed me.

“She really is a pop idol,” I said.

“Some people have even started visiting the town just to see her. We’ve also had loads of requests from artists for her to model for them. What do you think? I bet we could charge a good price,” Melty continued.

“This is all a lot, coming from you, Melty. I thought you’d dislike the idea of using Filo to make money,” I said.

“I mean . . .” she started but then trailed off.

“Mr. Naofumi,” Raphtalia said.

“Yeah, I know.” It was painfully obvious that everyone was still handling me with kid gloves. I just couldn’t take much more of it.

“If Filo is okay with all this, go ahead,” I told Melty. That was the only answer I was capable of right now. Filo extended a single feather from one of her wings like an index finger and placed it against her mouth.

“Very well then. If you’re going to watch me in action, Master, I’ll do my very best!” she enthused.

“Hmmm. You’ve got a deal.” If Filo wanted me to watch her, then that was the least I could do.

“Great! You’ll see what I can do!” she exclaimed.

“Do your very best,” I replied.

“I will!” she chirped.

“Sounds good,” Melty confirmed. “The Merchant’s Union is already underway with preparations, so we’ll hold the event in three days’ time.”

“That’s pretty soon,” I commented.

“Everyone is excited for it. I’ve got people from all over helping out. We’ll even have folks from Q’ten Lo taking part,” Melty explained.

“That’s right,” Raphtalia recalled. “Some of them volunteered for the Phoenix battle, didn’t they?”

“Anyone from Q’ten Lo loves a good festival!” Sadeena commented.

“You can say that again!” Shildina added, both sisters smiling broadly. Were they just happy to have a chance to drink, or were they really happy about all of this?

“Very well. Everyone just do your own part to prepare for the festivities,” I told them. Everyone in the village seemed quite excited for the task, and there were general shouts of enthusiasm.

“Bubba! I’ll do my best too!” Keel shouted.

“Good, good. I’ll be counting on you,” I replied. And so everyone in the village started to prepare for the festival.

“Should I be doing anything?” I asked. If we were going to be celebrating together, then as representative of the village I would clearly need to do something.

“No need for you to worry yourself, Naofumi,” Melty replied. “Your job is just to enjoy yourself on the day.”

“That’s right, little Naofumi. We’ve already put our oceanic hunting party together, so let’s go and do that,” Sadeena proposed.

“I’m not sure this is the best time . . .” I replied.

“Mr. Naofumi, how about we just let Melty and the others do their thing and go and see about raising your level, like we originally planned?” Raphtalia also

gently suggested.

“Okay,” I finally agreed, after a pause. It looked like I’d be taking Sadeena and the others along for a little fishing expedition.

“The other issue is searching for ways to get stronger . . .” I muttered, turning my gaze to Fohl. He realized I was looking, and his back straightened as though he’d been zapped with lightning.

He was really on his guard around me now.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Fohl, those gauntlets you obtained, they are definitely a seven star weapon, correct?” I confirmed with him.

“Yes. I have SP displayed in my field of vision now. There’s no mistaking it,” he asserted.

“Hmmm. Will you take a look and see if there’s a unique power-up method under help? Raphtalia’s weapon, a vassal weapon from another world, has something like that. I’m sure we can share the power-up methods between the four holy weapons and seven star weapons,” I told him.

“I remember that from the argument with the fake seven star hero in Siltvelt,” Fohl recalled. In accordance with my request, his eyes started to dart around.

“Is there such a thing?” he asked. “I can’t find it.” I wondered why he couldn’t find it. The only thing I could think of was that, just like my shield, we didn’t know the power-up method.

“Naofumi, calm down! Fohl hasn’t done anything wrong!” Ren stepped in to stop me. I’d normally have something nasty to say in this situation, so he’d probably mistakenly thought I was angry.

“I’m not angry. You’re the one who needs to calm down,” I said. Seriously, sure, in the past I might have bit back about how useless Fohl was, but I didn’t have the energy for that.

Yet it was true that I wanted to become stronger.

“There is a high probability that the situation is the same as when we didn’t understand the shield’s power-up method,” Itsuki intoned in his normal monotone way.

“What should I do?” Fohl asked the three gathered heroes, putting his gauntlets together.

“Maybe search around, like Naofumi did, to see if the power-up method is written down somewhere,” Ren suggested.

“Good idea. Let’s search Q’ten Lo and the country where the Phoenix was sealed,” Itsuki suggested.

“Sounds like a plan,” Ren replied. Thus, it was decided that Fohl would go with Ren and Itsuki to look for the power-up method. After Raphtalia sent Fohl and the others to Q’ten Lo using Scroll of Return, I got the underwater gear ready and we headed to the ocean.

Sadeena and Shildina then turned into their killer whale therianthrope forms, and riding one each, Raphtalia and I headed into the water.

“All set? Here we go!” Sadeena said.

“I’m ready. I’m really looking forward to this hunting trip with sweet Naofumi. If I see my chance, I’m going to grab it with both hands,” Shildina replied.

“You’d better hold on tight to Shildina, little Raphtalia,” Sadeena warned.

“I-I will. It feels like I’d better keep an eye on you too though, Sadeena,”

Raphtalia replied. That made Sadeena turn to look at Raphtalia.

“Hold on there, little Raphtalia. I have a sense of time and place. Little Naofumi is in no place to enjoy adult pleasures, so I won’t be making any moves on him,” Sadeena replied.

I didn’t have much experience with fighting underwater. In fact, fighting the wave at the Cal Mira islands was pretty much it. Considering the future battles we would be facing, I definitely needed to earn some more experience.

“Little Naofumi,” Sadeena called.

“Huh? What’s up? Sorry, I wasn’t listening to you at all,” I replied.

“See? We can’t take our eyes off little Naofumi right now, so there’s no time for the hot stuff,” Sadeena pointed out.

“Yes, I see what you mean. Very well,” Raphtalia acknowledged.

“Let’s go then,” Sadeena said. With me on her back, we raced through the ocean. Being an aquatic therianthrope clearly gave her the advantage in terms of movement underwater. I’d felt it in Q’ten Lo, but she was definitely going even faster now.

“Would it have been better to come by boat?” I wondered.

“You’ll teleport us back when we’re finished, correct? A boat would just get in the way,” Sadeena replied.

“Yeah . . . I guess you’re right,” I responded. Heading into the offing, we made good progress with the small island that included Sadeena’s secret base in the distance.

“Shildina, can you please keep your eyes to the front?” Raphtalia asked.

“It’s okay. I can follow Sadeena underwater even without seeing her. She

sends me sounds and weak lightning pulses with almost annoying persistence," Shildina explained.

"I'm sure you can . . . but it still makes me uneasy," Raphtalia replied. I turned around to see Shildina sticking close to us at Raphtalia's request. Of course, Shildina could get lost on her own doorstep.

After a while, Sadeena stopped.

"This looks like a decent place to start. Little Naofumi, I'm going to start diving. Let me know if it gets too much for you," she told me.

"No problem," I replied.

"You too, little Raphtalia," Sadeena continued. "Little Shildina, don't forget to maintain some air using wind magic."

Of course. Sadeena's use of lightning had seemed convenient for fishy things, and then Shildina could use wind magic to maintain a supply of air. The two of them together really could make underwater activities a breeze.

Led on by Sadeena, we started down into the depths.

Being underwater was almost like being out in space. It was so beautiful, as though the sunlight was being drawn down to the seabed.

I was also aware that the range I needed to protect was far wider than on land, with no ground beneath us and the possibility of being attacked from any direction. I had fought underwater before, but all I'd needed to do back then was concentrate on the boss of the wave.

"Let's find some monsters to fight!" Sadeena said cheerfully. First a blue shark noticed us and closed in. I deployed Shooting Star Shield and created a barrier. I was prepared for its attack, but Sadeena thrust forward with her harpoon and ran it through.

“That’s the only kind of monster that shows up at this depth,” Sadeena explained. I almost felt sorry for the blue shark, which was skewered in a single attack. The ocean turned red with its blood, and I expected the smell to start bringing in all sorts of other monsters . . . but nothing of the sort happened.

“All the monsters around here know how scary Sadeena is. None of them will come,” Shildina revealed.

“Ah, I see,” I replied.

“Things might be different this time. Bringing you along, little Naofumi, seems to have attracted more attention than normal,” Sadeena commented.

“Now you mention it . . .” Raphtalia muttered, looking around from Shildina’s back.

“Even so, hunting monsters at this depth isn’t going to earn you the kind of experience you want, little Naofumi. Just give me a moment.” Sadeena gave off some crackles of static electricity and the gathered monsters scattered.

“We can breathe for a long time, but that’s no reason to fight them all. Let’s go deeper,” Sadeena suggested.

“Count me in. Heavenly Emperor, hold on tightly please,” Shildina said.

“O-okay,” Raphtalia replied. Sadeena and her sister dove down with us, deeper, deeper . . . so deep that we could hardly see any sunlight at all.

“Little Raphtalia, my sister and I don’t need light, but maybe you could use magic to make some for yourself and little Naofumi?” Sadeena asked.

“S-sure,” Raphtalia replied. She used some magic to create a ball of light to provide illumination. Just that considerably increased the range we could see.

Eventually the continental shelf ended, and an even deeper place came into

view. The view underwater was quite wonderful, very much like flying through the sky on Gaelion's back.

"Ah, there's something there," I indicated.

"Yes, I see it. It's a sunken ship. My sister has already checked it out, I'm afraid. Nothing there," Shildina responded. Sadeena offered an apology.

"I see," I said.

"There might be another one in the place we're actually going to, so look forward to that," Sadeena consoled me.

"Okay," I said. Deeper, deeper . . . We eventually reached the ocean floor. Even with the underwater gear equipped, I was aware of the limitations on my movement. Sadeena and her sister didn't seem affected, of course, moving as smoothly as ever with the propulsion from their mighty tails.

"Here we go," Sadeena said. At her words, I readied myself for battle. First there was a chartreuse green mask fish, a monster a bit like an anglerfish with three lights dangling in front of its head. There was also an eel-like olive-green angola and a sahara lobster crab. I couldn't tell if that one was meant to be a lobster or a crab.

The chartreuse green mask fish fired an arrow of light toward us from its three balls of light.

"Here it comes! You handle it, little Naofumi," Sadeena prompted me.

"I've got it," I replied. I held my shield up in front of me. We'd be fine behind the Shooting Star Shield's barrier. The arrow of light failed to pierce the barrier and was repelled.

It looked like I could handle this one.

“Yay! So convenient to have you along, little Naofumi. Those light arrows come out so quickly. Avoiding them is a pain,” Sadeena said.

“They have some homing properties too,” Shildina added. “You have to be careful of the olive-green angola. They gradually use a mucus membrane to block our actions. The sahara lobster crab, meanwhile, is really hard.”

“That’s about the sum of it. Let’s take the fight to them!” Sadeena moved at high speed up to the chartreuse green mask fish and thrust at it with her harpoon. It wriggled around much more powerfully when compared to the blue shark.

“Zweite Chain Lightning!” While gripping her harpoon, Sadeena intoned some magic. The resulting lightning electrified the chartreuse green mask fish and then carried on toward the olive-green angola. While it wasn’t enough to finish it off, getting hit did make it fall back.

Not missing the chance to attack, the sahara lobster crab kicked up some grit from the seabed and closed in, launching a smashing attack with its massive claws. I blocked it on the Shooting Star Shield.

“Oh my! This is so much easier than normal!” Sadeena enthused.

“Let me have a turn. Please join me, Heavenly Emperor,” Shildina said.

“S-sure,” Raphtalia agreed. From inside the barrier, Shildina swept her katana down with incredible force and sliced off its claw. Raphtalia then tried a single slice across its body.

“Easy win! Keep an eye on your remaining air,” Sadeena cautioned.

“Worse comes to worst, I’ll use Bubble Shield to make some,” I replied. The shield skill had the ability to create oxygen underwater, just once. I could hopefully use that to extend our dive time.

“How’s the experience looking, little Naofumi?” Sadeena asked. I checked it at her comment. Yes, it was good. I was getting bigger numbers than from Q’ten Lo. And even more from that trip deep into the mountains. For sure it was better than the strong monsters Ren and Itsuki had been talking about. These weren’t even that tough, and yet the experience was around the same as from a karma-type boss in the Cal Mira islands. That placed them over level 80.

“If we go deeper, then we’ll encounter monsters worth even more experience. They get stronger too, of course,” Sadeena said. I gave her an unsettling smile. That’s right. If I got stronger, then maybe I wouldn’t have to lose anything ever again.

“It’s going well so far. No reason to stop yet,” Raphtalia said.

“I agree. Carry on, Sadeena,” I responded.

“You can count on me,” she replied. We dove deeper, for as long as our air would last.

Along the way, I put defeated monsters into my shield. Doing so rewarded me with some pretty convenient skills, such as an increase in diving time and underwater combat skills, making it progressively easier for me to fight.

But I was still a step behind Sadeena, who was naturally suited to this environment.

“Wow. We’ve got a big boy here,” Sadeena said. Having dived even deeper, a shark of comparable size to father Gaelion, called a slate-gray megalo shark, appeared. “I think even we four might have trouble fighting this,” she said.

“I’ve got an idea about that,” I said, then proposed using magic. “You want to join in too?”

“I think so. Once you mention magic, that means the two of us together,

right?” she replied.

“That’s right,” I told her. We synchronized our breathing and started to prepare Descent of the Thunder God. We could now use up to Liberation class.

Using this magic would allow for a more efficient increase in our abilities. That was what I was hoping for, anyway, but with a fizzling sound, the cooperative magic failed.

“Oh?” Sadeena questioned. The slate-gray megalo shark started charging toward us. I managed to block the attack itself, meaning we took no damage. But the impact sent us swirling away through the water.

“M-Mr. Naofumi! Sadeena!” Raphtalia shouted.

“What went wrong?” Shildina asked.

“Little Naofumi, try again,” Sadeena prompted.

“I’m with you,” I replied . . . but every subsequent attempt at cooperative magic also failed partway through.

I didn’t know what was going on.

“No choice then. I’ll use Liberation!” I concentrated and cast some magic on my own. “Liberation Aura!” I applied it to Sadeena, who could move the most efficiently.

“I’m going in again!” she shouted. With me still on her back, Sadeena charged in once more, wreathed in the currents, and struck at the slate-gray megalo shark. Her piercing thrust successfully shaved a lot of the meat from her target . . . but she failed to finish it in a single attack.

“Next . . . Drifa Thunderbolt!” Sadeena sent out a blast of lightning, shocking the slate-gray megalo shark. It reared backward and thrashed about.

“Oh my!” Sadeena exclaimed.

“Gah!” I grunted. Even Sadeena was knocked back hard as it continued to resist.

“A real tough boy,” she commented.

“Yeah. Scarily strong. I never thought there were monsters like this in the outside world. Maybe no match for the Water Dragon, but still incredible,” Shildina added.

“W-what should we do?” Raphtalia asked.

“We can take it,” Shildina replied. “Pile on. I’m not going to lose to Sadeena.” She proceeded to create a magic water tornado, slicing into the entire body of the slate-gray megalo shark. The attack wasn’t big enough to consume it all, however.

“Haaah! Eight Trigrams Blade of Destiny Formation Two!” Raphtalia had used that time to close the gap and unleashed a slicing attack into the fish. That was finally enough to slice the slate-gray megalo shark in two and finish it off.

“Not up to the strength of the Phoenix,” Raphtalia commented.

“Can’t compare to one of the four benevolent animals, surely,” I replied. I didn’t even want to go there. Regular enemies worse than the Spirit Tortoise or Phoenix? Of course, in a video game, later mobs generally ended up stronger than early bosses.

“Things are going well. I wouldn’t have made it this far alone,” Sadeena said.

“Really?” I asked.

“Yes. Having you protect us has made all the difference. How was that, anyway? The experience,” she asked.

“A decent amount, for sure. Sadeena, what about you? All of you?” I asked.

“Oh, I’m maxed out,” she replied. Of course. Those like Sadeena, non-heroes, generally had a maximum level of 100. Crossing that threshold apparently required a second class-up, but we didn’t know how to do that yet.

We had heard that the dragon king . . . Dragon Emperor fragments could provide a way to break the level cap. We just didn’t have any more information on that yet.

Which led to the question of how to handle raising levels from this point on.

It was a different story for the heroes and vassal weapon holders . . . For now Raphtalia would just have to keep doing her best as an attacker.

“Our purpose at the moment is to increase your level, little Naofumi, and little Raphtalia too. So let’s just keep doing that,” Sadeena said.

“Okay. Without taking too many risks . . . let’s do that,” I agreed.

We continued our hunting in the sea. Along the way S’yne joined up with us too.

It was the evening of the second day after we started hunting in the ocean.

The old guy from the weapon shop, Imiya’s uncle . . . and Motoyasu II all showed up at the village. Ren had gone out to meet them as representative from the village, so he was with them when they arrived. He was kind of like the old guy’s apprentice.

“Hey, kid. I heard what happened. That must have been tough,” the old guy sympathized.

“You have my deepest condolences,” Imiya’s uncle also offered. Both had

such empathy in their eyes. After the Phoenix battle, they had asked Raphtalia to bring them to Melromarc when she visited Q'ten Lo. As for Motoyasu II . . .

"Yahoo! I'll say one thing for this punk's village: it's always filled with pretty girls!" he crowed, seemingly as energetic as ever.

"You sure it's safe to bring him out of Q'ten Lo?" I asked.

"I've got that in the bag, kid. No worries," the old guy assured me.

"I feel a bit sorry for him, almost, but it seems like the right move," Imiya's uncle added with a dry chuckle.

"Damn you! Don't remind me of that, Erhard! You jerk—" Motoyasu II was cut off by a painful grunt, putting his hand to his chest. I recognized that reaction. He had a slave seal.

"I've set it so he can't move too far away from me. For our trip here I added another condition too. It activates when he says something that might rile you up, kid," the old guy explained.

"Why do I have to suffer like this at the hands of my own student?!" Motoyasu II raged.

"Because you're a terrible philanderer and owe a whole bunch in debts you tried to cut out on," the old guy curtly replied.

"We have permission not only from Raphtalia, the Heavenly Emperor herself, but also the queen of Melromarc," Imiya's uncle added. I understood. I looked over at Raphtalia and she nodded.

"Just keep off the kid's back, you hear?" the old guy said.

"Bah! If he was a real man that little cutie wouldn't have had to—gah, dammit!" From his reaction, I could pretty much guess what he was going to

say. He was right too. All I could do was defend, and yet I'd failed to defend so many people, Atla included.

"Hey? Punk? Bah, this isn't easy!" After looking at my face, Motoyasu II clicked his tongue and crossed his arms. "I can't stand being around this loser. Hurry up with our business here and let's go drinking in the next town over!" he grouched.

"What business?" I asked.

"You found that sword in Q'ten Lo, remember? He finished cleansing it," Ren said. He showed me the cursed blade that we had obtained in Q'ten Lo, where it had formed the core of the Sealed Orochi.

"Yeah, I managed to purify it. But I can't see you chumps making use of it. The required stats are super high. You'd need to take all sorts of steps just to make use of it." At Motoyasu II's veiled taunts, I checked it out. As I feared, my appraisal wasn't high enough to see anything. I really needed to find better skills in that arena to be ready for any possible circumstances. "On top of that, I reckon you'll only be able to use it once. Swing it a second time and the purified curse will just well up again. After all that hard work!" Motoyasu II moaned. We could only use it once, he said. That wasn't exactly efficient. The cutting edge did look pretty sharp though . . .

"So? You copied this, Ren?" I asked.

"I did . . . but the weapon that showed up was the Sealed Ama-no-Murakumo Sword. Check out the blade though." With that, Ren changed his sword. The exterior did look the same, but it was also covered with a see-through coating, like a scabbard. He had to quickly change it to another sword too. "Just keeping it active causes all sorts of status effects, really piling on the pressure. It doesn't have all that high an attack value either," he explained.

“So that’s what copying got you . . . a sealed weapon,” I pondered. So was it a cursed weapon that had the curse lowered to a point where it was usable, or had the curse just not been broken? My Shield of Rage had been blessed and turned into the Shield of Compassion thanks to Atla, after all. There was a chance that meeting certain conditions might break the curse.

Thinking about shields reminded me of something.

“In a game I played once, there was a shield that had only negative effects when it was equipped. But if you wore it for long enough the curse was broken and it became the ultimate shield,” I recalled.

“I can’t deny that possibility. When I use it, a special item does appear as a number,” Ren described.

“Sounds like either the curse will intensify or it will become blessed and useable,” I reasoned.

“Yeah. I’d like to try it, but I’m worried it might mess with my head. If I do cause any problems, I want you to stop me. If that weapon starts to corrupt me, you can use the sakura stone of destiny series to contain me, right?” Ren asked both Raphtalia and me.

“Right. For now, let’s do whatever we can do to get even a tiny bit stronger,” Raphtalia offered the both of us, nodding with her hand on her chest.

“What about the remaining weapon?” Ren asked.

“We can’t use that kind of single-use disposable weapon in actual combat. Apparently they are Dragon Emperor cores, so how about we feed them to Gaelion?” I suggested.

“Some thanks for all that hard work I put into re-forging them!” Motoyasu II complained. In this case, his rage did seem justified. But making use of such

finicky gear in battle seemed more trouble than it was worth.

If someone other than a hero had used one of them—when the Phoenix had been about to explode—could they have defeated it? I wasn't sure, but it sounded unlikely. No matter how strong they were, I couldn't imagine they'd act as such a powerful trump card. Even when maxed-out using the heroes' shared power-up method, we hadn't managed to wipe the Phoenix out instantly, after all.

"In any case. I'm going to be in the Melromarc weapon shop for a while, kid, researching the materials from the new monsters you've defeated. If anything else comes up, just come find me," the old guy said.

"I'm also about ready to finish my training and return to the village," Imiya's uncle reported.

"Wouldn't the three of you make the best gear if you all work together?" I posited.

"I mean, you're probably right!" the old man said with a wry grin. It looked like I'd hit the nail on the head. Taking this into account, we decided that Imiya's uncle would only make periodic return visits to the village, and he would continue to work with the old man.

With that, I requested new gear from the three of them.

After that, I gave the purified core from the Cursed Ama-no-Murakumo Sword to Gaelion. It looked like it would still take a while to get some information from it though.

Chapter Two: The Festival

It was three days later.

“I announce the start of the Phoenix Victory Festival!” Melty shouted. With a grand opening ceremony in the town square, the “festival” got underway.

Our neighboring town had been expanding nicely, becoming the second-most vital settlement in Melromarc behind only the castle town itself. It was pretty impressive how much had changed in just three short months.

That said, the majority of the houses had been built using camping plants, so the place did have a bit of a “temporary housing” feel to it.

With applause from the townsfolk, the opening ceremony started.

“Filo! Take it away!” Nodding at this call from Melty, Filo dashed up onto a special stage that had been erected in the town square. She was also wearing an outfit created especially for this event. A cry of appreciation went up from the crowd, with even louder applause ringing out.

I took a look around and saw a substantial number of a type of person I knew all too well: “idol chasers.” I was almost impressed—I wondered how many fans she had.

Was that the wandering bard behind her? He was holding his instrument and playing in time with Filo’s singing. His normally gentle harp-playing was now creating the atmosphere of a live concert.

“L! O! V! E! Love me! Filo-tan!” Toward the back of the crowd of fans, meanwhile, Motoyasu was waving a flag. He’d taken a break from his travels toward Faubrey, excited to come back and take part in the festival. He still

made me feel sick.

He also had Crimmy, Marine, and Green with him. All three of the primary-colored filolials looked incredibly bored—totally different from Motoyasu.

“Ah! I’m so glad to be alive!” said a random citizen nearby.

“Since we first heard Filo-tan sing, we just can’t seem to find the energy to carry on unless we hear her music!” his friend agreed.

“Tell me about it. Human, demi-human, it doesn’t matter. Everyone has come to hear her sing,” the first man said. That was news to me. I wondered if they felt this way despite knowing the truth about Filo.

“Now we just have to pray that the curse that turns her into the bird god will soon be broken!” the second man enthused. Ah, so she was a filolial because she was cursed, they assumed. That was a convenient concoction.

I asked Melty for details later, and it turned out Filo’s backstory had taken on a life of its own. Apparently she’d been forced to become an idol in order to break the terrible curse placed on her. Stuff like that. Sounded like the main character from an idol-based otherworld transition story.

In reality, of course, she was actually a filolial transforming into a human.

“Come on, everyone! Show our support with everything we’ve got!” a crazed fan shouted. His suggestion was met with a roar of approval. The town square had been completely converted into the concert venue for an idol.

“Filo is incredibly popular, isn’t she?” Raphtalia said from behind me. I could only nod in agreement.

“Tell me about it. Melty is responsible for it all, and it looks like the merchandise is selling well too,” I commented. Saying she was sure they would sell like hotcakes, Melty had worked with the accessory dealer to create a line

of official merchandise featuring images of Filo. The prices were set pretty high, but with this many fans in attendance, they looked sure to sell out.

If she was this popular, we could make a killing with a one-gold-coin-per-handshake event—not a bad idea.

“Master!” Filo was looking in my direction and waving her hand. She was singing to cheer me up. I could see that much. She’d promised that much.

I waved back.

Melty was also playing an instrument behind Filo. For all her complaining, Melty was capable in multiple arenas. She picked things up so quickly.

“Hold it right there!” Suddenly the three filolials who had just been with Motoyasu burst onto the stage dressed in their own idol costumes.

“This event,” Crimmy started.

“Now belongs,” Marine continued.

“To us!” Green concluded. It was like some crazy idol anime, playing out right in front of my eyes.

“Motty! Just you watch! We’re not going to let this bitch make us look bad!” Crimmy shouted while the others spewed similar garbage. Then they started to belt out their own love song for Motoyasu at full power.

“Hey! I’m only singing to make my master happy again!” Filo raged.

“Filo! Don’t back down now!” Melty encouraged.

“I won’t! I won’t let them show me up. I’ll sing a song I learnt while traveling with my master!” she replied. Then she took a deep breath in order to sing even more loudly than before.

“Charming Voice!” The spectators in the crowd gave a sigh, their eyes glazing

over as they listened to her song.

“Ah! Filo-tan’s sweet voice is melting my brainstem!” one of them close to me said. Even Motoyasu looked a bit sick, swaying unsteadily on his feet.

“This could be really nasty!” Raphtalia warned me.

“Filo, stop! That song is dangerous! Don’t sing it!” I shouted.



“Oh bother!” Filo retorted.

“Raph!” Raph-chan proceeded to give a sharp whistle, calling in a horde of the Raph species to bring aid to the audience. “Raph!” Then she started to admonish Filo on stage. “Raph, raph, raph!”

“Oh . . . okay . . .” Filo backed down. Motoyasu’s three filolials were standing dejectedly at the side of the stage.

“Gah! You might have won this round, but we’ll get you next time!” Crimmy warned.

“That’s right! Next time!” Marine added.

“Girls, it looks like we need to practice singing as well as running!” said Green. They were a noisy bunch, completely caught up in their rivalry with Filo. At least they were keeping themselves busy.

In any case, Filo’s first major concert was a big hit.

Once the performance was over, Melty suggested I take a look around the rest of the festival. Filo was exhausted from her singing and taking a rest.

I took Raphtalia with me and walked through the town.

“Hey there, little Naofumi! Fancy a drink with two lovely ladies?” Sadeena called over to me from a venue that looked like little more than a pile of wine barrels. Sadeena and her sister Shildina were shacked up there and drinking—or more like bathing in—wine while waving me over.

“Why not drink and forget everything?” Shildina propositioned in her calm and collected mode, due to already being completely sloshed.

“Little Shildina, you drunken ninny, you can’t say things like that,” Sadeena

chided, throwing in an elbow attack for good measure.

“Gah. I won’t let you show me up. Time to act!” Shildina only started waving harder. I still couldn’t tell if they got along or not.

“Please, ladies . . . just don’t drink too much,” Raphtalia managed, almost at a loss for words.

The villagers were also taking part, it seemed . . . and then I noticed a load of people gathered at the stall being run by Keel. I wondered what it was for a moment. Peering between the crowd, I saw a crepe stand.

Fohl was even helping out.

As soon as he saw my face, he went on guard.

“Hey, Bubba!” Keel said happily.

“You can make crepes now?” I asked.

“You bet I can!” she replied, so excited that she turned into her dog form for a moment. She was skillfully cooking crepes and then selling them alongside slaves who normally handled the cooking.

Hmmm. I thought I’d raised her into a combat-loving glutton, but she was turning into a glutton who loved cooking. She was developing her feminine side too.

“My own original recipes! I’ve added my ideas to your crepes, Bubba!” Keel exclaimed, taking out a grilled fish. Then she stripped off the flesh, making it into something like canned tuna, sliced up some other bioplant fruit, and wrapped it all in a crepe. “Crepes are more than just a dessert!”

“Looks like it,” I replied. They were also eaten this way in my world, so it wasn’t that surprising. It was certainly cooking suited to Keel though.

I felt someone looking at me and turned around. Close to Keel's store, S'yne was selling things at the bazaar venue.

"Oh? S'yne?" Raphtalia said.

"Welcome. Ah, Mr. Iwatani," S'yne said. The inside of the store was lined with clothing that she had likely prepared especially for today. I used appraisal and saw they were all high quality. At the same time, they were very reasonably priced and were flying off the racks.

S'yne was sharing her store with someone else. Imiya, it looked like. She was selling accessories to be worn along with the clothes.

With a combination of S'yne's fashion sense and Imiya's abilities, they had put together a pretty stylish little store. Even Raphtalia was looking closely at some items, tempted by the cheap prices. However, the thing she was looking at . . . was underwear.

I knew what this was. The feeling a man got when he walks into a lingerie shop.

"Is there something you want?" I asked her.

"Maybe. Something using slightly better materials, to help maintain my defense," she pondered.

"I'm sorry, but . . . do you need underwear to offer defense? I think this would be more suited to you, Raphtalia," Imiya said, bringing out some bright red . . . serious, serious undergarments. They had holes in places that made me feel uncomfortable.

"Why the hell are you selling that?" I asked.

"This little number? S'yne said there would probably be a demand for it," Imiya explained. S'yne heard us talking and threw up a peace sign.

“I wouldn’t be too proud of that decision,” I responded. Surely Sadeena had been angry about this.

“I’ll put it on hold for you, shall I?” Imiya asked.

“I guess . . .” It looked like Raphtalia wasn’t in the mood.

As we talked, I started to hear a commotion from outside the town. It sounded like it was coming from where Wyndia had hastily erected her racing circuit. Rat was also helping out, if I remembered correctly, giving consideration to the health of the filolials and other factors.

The noise sounded like a mixture of elation and anger—a spicy blend of the joy of victory and chagrin of defeat.

“Let’s go to the races,” I quipped.

“Ah, Mr. Naofumi, wait for me,” Raphtalia said.

We arrived at the filolial racetrack to see unfamiliar filolials and their trainers slumped in defeat, while filolials from my own village were giving squawks of victory. All of them were transformed into queens and kings. I also spotted Ren and Itsuki providing security for the event.

With additional squawks, the filolials spotted me and came rushing over. Their frenzied chattering and nuzzling seemed to be intended to tell me they had won, and they were asking for praise as a result.

“Yes, good, good for you,” I said. My past trauma of being trampled by these birds was now far below my depression at losing Atla and the others, so I could even bring myself to pet them. It looked like they were racing under the command of Filo’s Underling Filolial #1, Chick, so I gave her some special attention.

Among the audience, I could see some crying over losses.

“Impossible!” one exclaimed. “First Honor and White Swan can’t possibly have lost!” What were those names? Racehorses?

“Not to mention the legendary Shield Lion!” another opined. “What’s going on here?!” I guess in every world racing creatures ended up with similar-sounding names.

“Are you the trainer of these filolials?!” The trainers of the defeated filolials turned toward me now, seeing my own birds flock toward me.

“You are the Shield Hero, correct? The governor of this place?” one of the trainers asked me.

“That’s right. What of it?” I asked, a little prickly.

“All of your filolials are quite remarkable, Shield Hero. I would very much like to breed them with my own birds. Is that something you might be interested in?” My own filolials immediately gave some surprised squawks. Then they turned to look at the filolials belonging to the man who made the suggestion.

It felt like the defeated filolials were giving my birds some pretty steamy looks.

More squawking. My birds all vigorously shook their heads and then attempted to hide behind me. Of course, there were far too many to pull that off.

That said, being able to speak and yet not choosing to do so meant there was still some leeway here.

“I will pay you well for your troubles. Will you at least consider it?” The trainer used an abacus-like tool to show me how much he was willing to pay.

It was quite a lot.

The audience seemed excited by this development too. “Ah! Pairings with legendary filolials? A new legend will surely be born!” one of them enthused.

Then I took a glance behind me.

My filolials had their wings together, praying I would turn down the offer. Their eyes were round and moist like calves about to be sold for slaughter.

I looked at Rat, then Wyndia, and then Ruft.

Rat said, “I’ll leave that with you, Count,” with a shrug of her shoulders and little overall interest.

Wyndia seemed in agreement too and said, “If it leads to something good in the end, then it could be worthwhile?”

Ruft, suffering from his fear of filolials, stared off into the distance while sitting on the back of one of the Raph species.

“I mean . . . I am in charge, overall, but someone else actually raised them. I want to respect their own freedom too. This kind of thing should happen . . . naturally . . .” I faltered. I couldn’t just marry them off. They had been raised by Motoyasu, meaning I had no rights over them.

With more squawking, the birds clutched close to me. Melty had told me we were dealing with a pretty large organization though, so I needed to tread carefully.

“They don’t seem very keen on the idea,” I ventured. “How about we observe them together for a time, my filolials and yours, and see if they’re compatible? If it looks like it isn’t going to work out, will you then give up?” I proposed the compromise.

“Very well.” The man finally accepted. Applause rang out over the racetrack again. If this went well, it would likely mean some great races in the future.

The filolials continued to shake their heads, however, whimpering to themselves. I formed up a huddle and talked to them in a whisper, making sure the trainer couldn’t hear what I said.

“Don’t worry. You just need to reject their advances. If they needlessly pressure you, kick them away—without hurting them,” I told them. A few squawked at that comment. “It also seems some of you aren’t so opposed to the idea. Respect their feelings too, please.” There was a group that wanted to reject the offer and a group that wasn’t so concerned either way. “I’m not saying you should all reject them. I’m leaving the decision with you. Understand?” In respect to Atla’s final words, I wanted them to live without any regrets.

With energetic squawking, the filolials seemed to give their understanding. Motoyasu might cause some filolial-related commotion later . . . so for now I’d take this proposal under advisement.

It was a few hours later.

As though indicating the end of the festival, an evening campfire had taken over the town square. If there had been some popular music playing, or perhaps traditional festival music, then it would have been a familiar sight for me. However, this festival featured songs from Filo and the wandering bard.

“Hey, hold on. I do hear some festival music,” I realized, finishing my own thought verbally.

“This music . . . sounds like it’s being played by people from Q’ten Lo,”

Raphtalia said. Waves of nostalgia flowed over me, making me feel the sadness for the end of these festivities.

The end was almost here.

After the campfire and the music, we returned to our village. Upon doing so, Raph-chan and the other Raph species all started raph-raphing.

“Huh? What’s going on?” I asked.

“Good question,” Raphtalia responded. We both looked toward the voices to see Raph-chan leading the other Raph species in slowly dancing in front of the largest of the sakura lumina trees in the village. Bringing this many of them together really gave off some whimsical tanuki-vibes. It was like a horde of them looking up at the moon while beating on their tummy drums.

“Raaph! Am I doing it right?” For some reason, Ruft was also in the circle.

“Raph!” Raph-chan told him.

“Whatever are they doing?” Raphtalia asked.

“Don’t ask me,” I answered. Raphtalia continued to watch, furrowing her brow. Sometimes Raph-chan and her little troupe just started doing weird stuff. What was this? Some kind of ritual? With those thoughts, I saw Raph-chan leading them . . . It looked like they were performing some kind of harvest dance for the village’s sakura lumina.

With further assorted cries of “Raph!” and its numerous variants, including Ruft’s own attempt, the dance seemed to be finally completed. Raph-chan struck a pose and pointed both palms at the sakura lumina . . . and a gentle light was emitted by Raph-chan and all the Raph species to be absorbed by the tree.

Then all the sakura lumina seemed to glow more brightly.

“I have such a bad feeling about this,” Raphtalia said.

“Hmmm.” I activated my Territory Reform skill to check things out. I had a feeling that the points required to make reforms had increased. Maybe all the activity from the festival had increased them. There were still lots of mysteries surrounding Raph-chan and the Raph species, after all.

However, the next day we had discovered that a single, large fruit had grown on the largest of the sakura lumina. Rat had performed an analysis but was unsure what it was. And when we had tried to actually pick the fruit, all the Raph species, including Raph-chan herself, prevented the harvesting. There was nothing else we could do.

As we watched Raph-chan and the others dancing, Filo turned up. She had Melty with her and looked very happy.

“Master, how was it?” she asked.

“Pretty good,” I admitted.

“Did my singing help cheer you up?” she continued.

“Oh yes, I’m totally cheered up now,” I replied. It was pretty rough having even Filo tiptoeing around me.

“Hmmm. Mel-chan, I don’t think it worked?” Filo said, quite crestfallen.

“Don’t worry too much about it now. With a little more time, I’m sure this will all become a fun memory for him,” Melty explained.

“You think?” Filo wasn’t convinced.

“Yes. Naofumi, you get some rest. Filo! We’ve still got some tidying up to do!” Melty said, full of energy.

“Okay!” Filo looked at me again. “See you later, Master!”

“Sure, sure,” I managed. Filo headed off at a brisk pace toward the town, Melty on her back. A bit much for me right then, but that was still how I wanted the two of them to be—full of life.

With that, the festival Melty organized came to a successful conclusion.

Chapter Three: The Genius

It was one week and five days after the defeat of the Phoenix. Motoyasu had reached the vicinity of Faubrey, and now Naofumi and the others were getting ready to go and join him.

It was the morning of their departure.

With various calls of "Raph" in various styles, Raph-chan and all of the Raph species were praying in front of the biggest sakura lumina in the village. The fruit on the branch of the sakura lumina finally came free and dropped down to the ground, giving off a pale glow as it fell. After the fruit landed in front of the Raph species, it turned into pure light and changed shape.

"Dafu?" said a new voice.

I was headed outside with Raphtalia to prepare breakfast when she stopped and suddenly said, "Hold on?"

"What's up?" I asked, but then I quickly noticed myself. "It's gone." The large fruit that had appeared on the sakura lumina after the festival had vanished.

"Indeed. I hope everything is okay," Raphtalia said.

"Raph-chan and the others were practically worshipping that thing. It might have been stolen. Should we enhance security?" I wondered.

"Raph," said Raph-chan as we reached her and the others. Behind her . . . there was a type of Raph species I'd never seen before?

"Dafu." That was an odd call for it to make.

“What’s that thing? That’s not a Raph species from the village,” I said.

“You can tell them apart?!” Raphtalia exclaimed.

“Yeah, pretty much—by touch and by their voices. This one has got thicker eyebrows than the others too,” I explained.

“When did you learn that trick?” she asked, a strange look on her face. *Not like I’m hurting anyone! They’re cute, so sue me!* They were like a litter of kittens born from the same parents—they all looked alike. But after living together long enough, you started to be able to tell them apart.

“Even Ruft can do it,” I told her.

“I think I need to have a serious discussion with both you and Ruft at some point soon,” Raphtalia said.

“You do?” I asked.

“Dafu!” said the newcomer.

“This one isn’t registered to my monster seal . . . Just where did it show up from?” I wondered.

“It isn’t a monster the Sword or Bow Hero are looking after that they turned into a Raph species . . . right?” Raphtalia suggested.

“Don’t ask me,” I replied. It wasn’t as though the Raph species was a virus. As we stood there, perplexed, the new Raph species popped off a spell toward me. That triggered the monster seal and completed its registration, regardless of my intent. I wanted to comment on that, I really did, but first I checked its status.

Pretty high, all across the board. The highest among the Raph species I had. It was almost as high as Raph-chan—level 95! Just what was this little cutie?!

“In any case . . . I don’t know what this Raph species is, so let’s take it under

our wing and give it a temporary name," I suggested.

"Take it under our wing?" Raphtalia raised an eyebrow.

"Dafu!" The mysterious Raph species was waving its hand at Raphtalia.

"For now, how about we go with Raph-chan II?" I said.

"I've been meaning to bring this up for a while now . . . When you encounter a person similar to someone you already know, you have a tendency to just add 'II' to the first person's name, don't you?" she questioned me. Ulp, I was reminded again just how perceptive Raphtalia could be.

"Dafu!" said the newcomer.

During the subsequent breakfast, I showed Raph-chan II to Ren and Itsuki and asked them about her. As we had suspected, it wasn't either of their monster. It also wasn't one of the filolials that Motoyasu was taking care of.

With no idea where she came from, or how she ended up under my care, a mysterious Raph species joined the party.

"So are we going to have a meeting in Faubrey today?" Ren asked.

"Most likely," I said.

We finished breakfast, met up with the queen, and set out. Motoyasu had reached a point just outside the capital of Faubrey, so we had decided to all gather at that point together. Then we would join him on his carriage journey from there and discuss what we were going to do next. Due to how widely known she was, we'd also decided to take the old Hengen Muso lady along with us. Including her, the party comprised me, Raphtalia, Raph-chan, Filo, Fohl, Ren, Itsuki, Rishia, Motoyasu, his three colored filolials, Gaelion, Wyndia, and

Sadeena. Then there was the queen, Trash, and Eclair acting as an escort. S'yne was also quietly tagging along.

Far too many of them, all things told. Apparently it was to look after me in my emotionally unstable state. Ruft and Shildina had remained behind to watch over the village.

"Raph," Raph-chan gave a call, summoning a ball of light . . . and Raph-chan II appeared.

"Dafu!" she said triumphantly. I was at a loss for words. So Raph-chan had also learned C'mon Raph?

I didn't have the heart to send her back anyway, so based on the condition of her not causing any trouble, I agreed to let her come along.

"They've sent a message that they are ready to receive us, so it shouldn't be a problem," the queen informed us.

We had also heard the details about the Kirin battle. It had been one of the seven star heroes and his party who had been in Faubrey and confronted the beast.

"The report informed us that all of the seven star heroes have finally been gathered together. Achieving this gathering has apparently been quite the task," she went on.

"I see. So the heroes have gathered. I very much suspect one of them of the deed. We'll find out which one was in Faubrey and capture them at once," I declared.

The wagon continued to rumble and jolt onward. Along the way, the path had changed to stone cobbles, but who had the time to care about that?

"Ren, what do you think heroes from other worlds, people like us, might be

thinking?” I chose Ren to ask because Itsuki was totally spaced out for the wagon ride, and Motoyasu was only interested in Filo and his three own filolials, so he was never going to listen to me.

“There are multiple possibilities,” Ren pondered.

“Sure. Go on,” I prompted.

“One pattern would be not to care about the waves at all, completely disregarding their duty,” Ren started.

“That one I can understand right away,” I quipped. It wasn’t a bad move to think about yourself first. I wouldn’t be surprised if there were one or two who simply chose to drop out of this shitty world and live in seclusion. I’d even wanted it to get wiped out myself, although that was a while back now.

Thinking about Raphtalia and Atla helped make me more optimistic.

“Or maybe the seven star hero who defeated the Kirin said that he’d handle everything and so the others decided not to join in?” Ren continued.

“Leaving other people to handle the problem would rub me the wrong way. There are already warrants out for them under the orders of the four holy heroes. If they don’t gather together at least once, they’ll be treated as criminals,” I replied. I couldn’t imagine anyone who was enjoying being summoned to another world skipping out on an event like this.

“I guess there could also be the type getting lost in simply raising their level, becoming a monster out in the wilderness,” Ren posited.

“Ah. Maybe that was the most suspicious type of all. There was that guy in Siltvelt pretending to be the Claw Hero,” I recalled. The type of player who didn’t take part in events but loved to just raise their level, living away from civilization the whole time. That could be a big problem for this world too, to be

honest. Looking at Ren and the others, I could kind of understand why there had been that imposter pretending to be a hero in Siltvelt. That move wouldn't work on us again.

"In any case, whoever it was who interfered during the Phoenix battle must be punished. Even if they are a hero. That's one crime I'm never going to forgive," I stated.

"I'm with you," Ren agreed. "There was evil intent behind that attack, no doubt. It isn't worthy of mercy."

"That's right! They have to be punished!" Fohl, who had been listening quietly, chose that moment to speak up and give a vigorous nod.

"Under the authority of the four holy heroes, I shall see them punished! Even if they are one of the seven star heroes!" I affirmed. That might be contrary to the image of an ideal hero held by Raphtalia and the others, but this was one point on which I simply couldn't back down. Even if I lost myself in anger, I could never forgive the act that had killed Atla. There could be no reasoning, no peace reached with the one who would do such a thing.

I was aware that I was taking things very personally and acting simply to fulfill my own desire for revenge. Yet I still couldn't forgive the coward who had killed so many of us as we fought for the sake of this world. The one who had killed Atla.

"Master! It's pretty incredible out here!" Filo shouted from outside.

"What's up?" I took a look. The town itself looked like a pretty affluent place . . . and I could see cars that looked pretty steampunk-like, running on some kind of steam-engine technology. Cars from a level of technology featured in a series of mystery novels featuring a famous detective, perhaps?

Then I saw a weapon shop. It appeared to be selling . . . guns?

Faubrey looked like a pretty modern place.

“Looks like they also sell guns here,” I commented.

“Are you interested in guns, Hero Iwatani?” The queen looked at the weapon shop and then back at me.

“I was just thinking about how different this place is from Melromarc. All these advancements, they look pretty powerful,” I responded.

“Faubrey is a powerful nation, and we would certainly want to avoid conflict with them. That said . . .” She trailed off.

“Right. Weapons rely on the status of the user here, don’t they?” I said.

“Correct. You surely learned during the Cal Mira islands battle how things work differently in this world from your own, Hero Iwatani,” the queen said. I recalled being unable to rely on Itsuki’s attacks and having Raphtalia using the ballista on the ship. “The majority of the summoned heroes propose making use of them, but it never really works out.” Trying to get ahead by making use of modern knowledge from home? It sounded like lots of heroes had similar ideas.

“They have all sorts of operational problems, too, and cost a lot to keep running.”

“The costs when compared to a bow mean that only a few cities such as Faubrey handle them.”

“That’s what I’ve heard too.”

“They also run the risk of blowing up if they get hit by fire magic. If you want to make ranged attacks, magic, a bow, or a thrown weapon is a far better bet.”

“In games, they can be strong once mastered. But not the strongest.” Itsuki

also got involved in the conversation. Now that he mentioned it, I'd also played games in which guns were difficult to handle—games in which guns were clearly inferior to swords and other weapons. While this world was unquestionably real, this was also a sobering reminder that it was a place that mimicked a fantasy world.

Seeing as the user's status was reflected, maybe they would be strong if Itsuki tried them now—if he was able to, I mean. Itsuki's weapon was a bow . . . so maybe he couldn't use guns. He could use crossbows. Seemed worth getting him to try it.

"Should I take a quite detour and copy some weapons?" Itsuki asked.

"Yeah. If it goes well, this may make you stronger," I told him.

"I'll do my best to meet your expectations, Naofumi," he replied.

"We'd better go, Itsuki," Rishia said. Itsuki gave a nod, perhaps detecting my intent, and headed with Rishia into a weapon shop.

Right now, we wanted all the fighting strength we could find.

Itsuki quickly finished his copying and came back. He'd been able to copy the guns. Whether he could use them in battle or not was another matter, and they would likely need upgrading.

The wagon rolled on, gradually moving closer to a castle larger than the one in Melromarc. It had white dove-like monsters flying through the air around it, giving off a really intense "fantasy" vibe.

If I'd come here right after being summoned, I probably would have broken down into tears. It was far more extravagant than Melromarc and looked like a pretty nice place to live.

As I reflected on it now, the Middle Ages setting for this world was really just

a façade. I'd heard that most of the big cities during the Middle Ages in my world had truly terrible hygiene, with excrement and urine discarded from the windows and onto the street.

I'd even heard that high heels had been created to avoid that slop. Was that a thing?

In any case, this world certainly didn't feel as unhygienic as that. Many places seemed to have water and sewer services—although probably not villages out in the sticks. Still, I wondered if it could have been information learned from people coming from other worlds.

The capital of Zeltoble had seemed pretty unsafe, but this place just looked like a normal city.

"Now that I think of it . . . there seems to be less discrepancy in the handling of demi-humans and humans here than in Melromarc," I commented. Thanks to our own efforts, Melromarc was currently trying to put an end to demi-human discrimination. That said, it wasn't going smoothly. Most of the demi-humans found in the castle town were adventurers or merchants with no real intention of actually settling down there.

The town in my own territory had quite a few demi-humans, of course, but here in Faubrey it was like there was no discrimination at all. In Melromarc, I almost never witnessed scenes of human and demi-human children playing together, apart from in my village or the nearby town. That made this place feel quite refreshing.

"You're right. We could learn a lot from them," the queen muttered, seeing the same sights as me. Melromarc was improving its treatment of demi-humans, but now the demi-human side was starting to cause problems. It was wrong to back either of them, of course.

We passed a large church. A church of the Four Heroes, with a characteristic emblem evoking the four weapons. There was the same emblem on the church in my territory.

The queen pointed in a different direction and said, “That’s the Church of the Seven Star Heroes.” I looked in the direction she indicated and saw another large church there. It also looked familiar. The queen proceeded to explain about both churches.

“The altars in there have holy items that prove the existence of the heroes,” she said.

“The ones taken from the Church of the Three Heroes?” I asked.

“Yes. The ones the Church of the Three Heroes secretly swapped out,” she explained.

“Wow, okay.” After we were done with our business here, maybe I’d go and take a look.

“Look. You can see it even from a distance,” she indicated.

“Huh?” The queen was pointing at the large stained glass window located above the emblem on the church. Both examples of circular stained glass had a design divided by lines from the center, with each section of divided glass individually sparkling.

The stained glass on the Church of the Four Heroes was divided into four, with all four pieces of glass sparkling. Meanwhile, the Church of the Seven Star Heroes showed seven sparkling pieces of glass. However . . . there was something strange about the stained glass on the Seven Star church.

Like there was a piece unnaturally missing.

It looked like a certain pill-munching yellow character or like a pizza with a

slice missing. Everything other than the missing piece was shining.

“Until recently only six of them were shining. When the Gauntlets Hero was selected, apparently the seventh started to shine,” the queen explained.

I saw some monks praying in front of the church. Then I glanced at the other heroes inside the wagon, and they looked pretty embarrassed. If the people outside found out we had heroes in here, we’d likely get mobbed by the faithful. Best to keep that one quiet.

“It’s still all pretty suspicious to me,” I said. “The imposter in Siltvelt came into the castle as though he owned the place.”

“The Seven Star church took that incident very seriously and has been investigating the seven star heroes as a result. They intend to question the heroes during this meeting,” the queen told me.

“When we were in the village, someone did come to confirm that I’d become the Gauntlets Hero,” Fohl said, looking at the gauntlets.

“We’ve let Faubrey know that all of the four holy heroes will be coming. After meeting with the king of Faubrey, you’ll return here to the church to officially register as the heroes,” the queen explained.

“I see,” Ren said.

“Anything else? Trash is the Staff Hero, right?” I turned to look at him sitting quietly in a corner of the wagon. We couldn’t leave him behind for something so important and so had brought him along.

He was still a worthless old goat though.

“Correct.” The queen gave Trash a poke. Trash returned it with a silent nod, just looking at Fohl and me. There was nothing regal about this guy, not a thing. “He did have an incredible battle with the Claw Hero, back in the day.”

“I don’t need to hear about that,” I quickly stopped her. However incredible he had been in the past, now he was just an old husk.

“Thanks to you, Hero Iwatani, I did have a fruitful discussion about legends with members of the coalition army from Siltvelt,” the queen continued, changing tack slightly.

“Go on,” I prompted.

“You know that Siltvelt worships the Shield Hero, of course,” she said.

“I have some idea,” I replied, understating things a little. I’d had guys groveling on their knees in front of me. The Shield Hero definitely got preferential treatment over there.

“I asked them about all sorts of legends and realized something big that doesn’t match up,” the queen explained.

“What?” I asked. I’d known for a while now that the queen had a thing about investigating legends. Melty had mentioned it too. The legend of the filolials was apparently something she had dug up herself. From the Lost Woods, if I recalled correctly.

“It seems that from among the four holy heroes, the Shield and Bow have been most active over there. Based on their level of activity, there’s also a bias in the legends about the seven star heroes. They mainly talk about the Hammer, Claws, and Whip.” A bias. The Shield and Bow did complement each other well, that was true.

“Putting that together with what we learned in Kizuna’s world, it sounds like the effects of the fusing of worlds,” I pondered. There was a wave that had combined the Shield world with the Bow world, and then the Shield and Bow world had been fused with the Sword and Spear world to create the current

one. It was only natural that a bias in the legends would arise.

“Indeed. It could very well be said that we are living within a time of legends,” the queen posited.

“The end of that time, too, if things don’t go well,” I reminded her. If the next wave caused another fusing, the world would apparently be torn apart. We’d heard all about that in Kizuna’s world, over and over.

“It looks like we’ve reached the castle.” The queen pointed, and indeed, the castle was right in front of us. There was no more time for long discussions now. “Let’s get ourselves inside, shall we?” With a nod to herself, the queen then addressed the guard on the castle gate.

“The queen of Melromarc and the heroes, is it? I have been told to expect you. Go ahead!” The guard had been expecting us and proceeded to open the gate without any further ado.

Fohl, his head tilted at a suspicious angle, watched the guard as we passed.

“What’s up?” I asked him.

“No, it’s just . . .” Fohl trailed off. I looked at the guard myself. He was smiling broadly. What was so odd about that? “Maybe I’m imagining things. I felt something strange there, for just a moment,” he said.

“You did? About him?” The man was still smiling and waving. Sure, it was a little creepy, but I could speak from experience when I said being too suspicious could leave you crippled in place.

Once the cart was inside the castle grounds, the gates rumbled closed behind us.

“Should we send Filo to park the wagon and go on ahead?” I asked.

“I was informed we can just park it in the garden,” the queen replied.

“Fair enough,” I said. We did so and then headed into the castle itself. Now this was a castle. The sheer size, the profundity of the place was far more than that of Melromarc. So this was the way things were in the largest country in the world.

A red carpet was laid out in front of us, leading to some stairs. We were led up those stairs and toward a waiting room for our audience with the king.

“Can you tell me more about the seven star heroes? I want to whittle down the suspicious candidates,” I asked. I probably should have sought this information sooner but hadn’t really had the chance to do so. Now one presented itself, so I took it.

“Due to his role in taking down the Kirin, shall I start with the Whip Hero?” the queen asked.

“Is he from this world?” I replied.

“Yes,” she told me, explaining things as we walked along. “He’s said to be a great genius, of a kind rarely born in this world.”

“A kind rarely born? I have a really bad feeling about that,” I said. Kyo, the one who had controlled the Spirit Tortoise, had been called a genius. There had been lots of that kind of person in Kizuna’s world too.

“Such a genius is said to be born once every few generations in this world. An individual capable of revolutionary technology, skilled in commerce and a variety of other fields, enough to completely change the world,” she went on. I just listened in silence. “He’s a distant relation of the Faubrey royal family. He acquired and mastered magic at just the age of three.” I guess every world had its geniuses. So one of them had been selected as the hero. I’d heard Trash was

a genius at strategy too, if I recalled correctly.

Putting it like that, I'd had plenty of trouble with geniuses already.

"At age five he brought about a revolution in paper-making, greatly advancing bookmaking technology around the world." Age five? That was quite something. Itsuki had also moved closer, his ears picking up. He came from a different Japan to my own, a world where people had special abilities. But as his own abilities had only been average, he probably had some feelings about geniuses himself. The queen continued. "Everyone around him was amazed by his unparalleled abilities. At age seven he absorbed all sorts of further fields of learning, including alchemy and mechanical magic studies. He graduated top of the Faubrey school for nobles that same year. Eventually he settled in the Adventurers' Guild, making a name for himself as an adventurer. He won the martial arts tournament hosted by Shieldfreeden and was selected as the Whip Hero prior to the arrival of the waves."

"A textbook genius. Incredibly suspicious. We may need to set a trap for him," I said.

"If in doubt, seek punishment. I do understand how you feel," Ren chimed in.

"But what if he isn't the one?" the queen asked.

"He fought one of the four benevolent animals around Faubrey but didn't come to the Phoenix battle? That alone puts him on the wrong side of this. Worthy of punishment," I said.

"We'll put it to the king of Faubrey like that. I really don't want to trust him myself," the queen said.

"Something happened?" I asked.

"Yes. When Witch was studying in Faubrey, I heard she was friendly with

him,” the queen said, looking away from me as she answered. That sounded completely suspicious. Either that or she had been taking advantage of him.

Even Witch’s parents didn’t trust her. Getting involved with that bitch was nothing but trouble.

“He also has a considerable connection to Melty,” the queen continued.

“What? Melty too?” I responded. Melty had some connection to the Whip Hero?

“When she was in Faubrey, the sister of the Whip Hero took a liking to picking on her,” the queen said.

“Teasing her and stuff?” I asked.

“Having such a capable brother has grown his sister into a bit of an entitled brat. A level supremacist, believing that those with high levels are innately better than those with low levels, she took a liking to messing with Melty, who was learning technology,” the queen explained. I imagined a hero with a muscle-headed sister. She went on. “I’m sure Melty tried to avoid her, but his sister was probably pretty pushy about it.”

Sounded like a real nuisance. I felt sorry for Melty being surrounded by people her own age like that. It was good she found a friend like Filo.

“I bet Melty could handle her easily now,” I said. Maybe not to the extent of Filo, but Fitoria had still drawn out Melty’s latent abilities. Any level supremacists who gave her trouble now would get a beating.

“Back on topic, anyway. Apparently the Whip Hero is currently investigating new means of travel,” the queen said. She pointed outside the window of the room. Huh? Something was flying through the air. For a moment, I thought it was a flying monster, like a dragon, but no . . . it was an aircraft.

“That’s what you’re talking about?” I asked.

“Yes. A past hero provided information about a machine that allows flight without using a dragon, griffon, or magic. The Whip Hero has advanced that idea to practical implementation,” the queen confirmed. So this guy really was a genius. The doubts swirled and thickened inside me.

“A genius? I can’t say I like smart folks.” The old lady ostentatiously cut into the conversation. First Itsuki, now the old lady. I wished they’d stop listening in on other people’s conversations.

She’d also caught my interest though. Why did the old Hengen Muso lady hate geniuses?

“I’ll bite. Why?” I asked.

“Hengen Muso Style was torn apart from the inside and destroyed by one of these rare geniuses,” she explained.

“It was?” Now she really had my interest.

“That’s right. A genius who believed he was the one to rule the world and sought to wipe out all other styles in order to achieve that goal,” she said.

“Wow, okay.” Something else that every world seemed to struggle with.

“Geniuses are said to be in command of both growth and decline. At every major turning point in history, such an individual is always there in the shadows. The Whip Hero has all those expectations, and those worries, pinned on him,” the queen continued. Turning points, she said. So things like big wars. It did feel like the big incidents for which many materials were lost had geniuses involved. Thinking back to everything that had happened in Q’ten Lo, there were also often bitches like Witch involved too.

“I’ve actually never met the king of Faubrey. What’s he like?” I asked. The

queen covered her mouth with her fan, narrowing her eyes and looking away. What? It was that bad?

“The king of Faubrey is one completely given over to his base desires. When he sees a woman . . . to put it bluntly, he sees nothing but a toy for his pleasure,” the queen explained. I managed an exasperated sigh. She went on. “He is truly an ugly man, in not just appearance but all things. When I was younger, I was so scared that my parents would send me to marry him,” she confided in me.

“Hold on, what?” I blurted out. I wondered what she was talking about. Weren’t we just talking about the king of Faubrey?

“If we could capture Witch alive, I was thinking a fitting punishment might be to give her to King Faubrey. I’m sure she’d beg for forgiveness right away and bow and scrape before you, Hero Iwatani,” the queen said.

“If Witch would hate it that much, I’d very much like to capture her alive and do just that,” I said. If it would make that horrible bitch grovel like that, I’d love to see it. I wouldn’t back down on that point.

“M-Mirellia?! You wouldn’t really do that—” Trash asked the queen with a terrified look on his face. He was pale.

“Fehhh . . .” Rishia said, clearly frightened herself.

“Rishia, are you okay?” Raphtalia asked. Even Rishia, on the fringes of the conversation, was turning pale. I pondered whether it would really be that vicious of a punishment or not.

“Would it really be so unjust?” the queen replied to her husband. “You’ve heard the stories of what she’s done, correct?” Trash could only grunt in reply.

“How old is this king anyway?” I asked.

“He’s Trash’s older brother by about thirteen years,” the queen said. Trash was the youngest of the Faubrey princes, if I recalled correctly. So it would be like sending Witch to be married to a relative. “He’s stupid and ugly, but he has enough intellect to protect his own authority. He’s been honed by being king of a tumultuous nation for many years, after all,” the queen continued.

“I still don’t understand why she would hate it so much?” I said. Witch was pretty fixated on appearances, true, so maybe an ugly husband would be hellish for her.

“Let me explain a little more about that. The Faubrey royal line has a long history of taking husbands and wives from among the four holy and seven star heroes. As a result, they are known throughout the world as the bloodline of heroes,” the queen explained. This was a world in which gods basically existed, after all. I’d come close to being deified in Siltvelt myself. Those summoned as heroes likely enjoyed the special treatment. Even if those on the royal side had their own schemes, it was probably still a pretty decent place to end up. Children from the royal side could probably go and serve in large nations too, receiving preferential treatment and get married there. That very bloodline was also why there was so much conflict over authority, however.

“Are there more male heroes than female ones?” I asked.

“There are women, but the bloodline never spread as far as the men,” the queen said. That was simply the difference between the stud and the mare, to put it . . . graphically. I wondered if the heroes were generally scum. Was that it? I’d heard about more than one of them making a harem.

If I’d obeyed Atla’s final words, maybe I’d have ended up the same.

Maybe this was just limited to those four holy heroes summoned from another world. So I guess it made the royal bloodline the grandchildren of

people like us—just those who decided to set up their own harem here.

“The current king is more skilled at power plays than even Witch. There’s definitely a reason he’s been king for so long,” the queen explained.

“I see . . .” Even worse than Witch. And there was no way to avoid this meeting.

“I once heard the king of Faubrey say something disgusting about how the closer one of his playthings is to death, the tighter they are,” the queen said, her lip curling. Oh God. So he was a real sadist. A true enemy of women.

“The first place well-born ladies who cause any problems are married off to is Faubrey. When they learn of their intended, many of them choose to kill themselves instead,” the queen said.

“Suicide? I guess it’s better than being beaten to death,” I replied.

“It’s a famous method of execution in this world. They say he once kept a favorite girl of his alive for more than three months, using magic and medicines such as Elixir of Yggdrasil,” the queen continued. So marrying someone off to him was the same as an execution. Quite the punishment. Faubrey clearly had its own fair share of darkness.

They also apparently had the right to summon the four holy heroes first. I couldn’t imagine getting summoned here. According to Rat and some of the others, they also had a number of the seven star heroes under their wing.

It was a country with vast lands, power, and military force—a long history too, enough to be called the “nation of heroes.” With such a twisted ruler in power, I wondered why the people weren’t rioting in the streets.

“His engagement with Witch had already been set up. She avoided it by becoming a companion to a hero,” the queen said. Who knew where she was

then? She'd discarded Motoyasu, set up with Ren, and then horribly betrayed him before cleaning him out and fleeing. After she tricked Itsuki, she'd gone on a rampage in Zeltoble and ran up massive debts before vanishing. No word of her since then.

"The last thing I heard was that he was prepared to receive Witch as his ten-thousandth toy," the queen unwillingly admitted.

"Ten-thousandth?!" I exclaimed. Hold on a moment. Math wasn't my strong point, but that meant he'd already used 9,999 women as "toys?" That was just going too far. The most extreme humiliation porn game would never go that far.

But hold on. This guy was older than Trash, right? I didn't know how many days there were in a year in this world, but at one a day, that would be 365 for one of my home years. Considering his age, then, even 9,999 might not be enough.

In either case, it was still a terrifying number.

First Melromarc, then Siltvelt, Q'ten Lo, Zeltoble, and now Faubrey—were there no reasonable, measured countries in this world? I wanted to know if there was only suffering to be found anywhere you went in the world.

Rather than the next of the waves, I was starting to become more concerned for this world itself.

"As one who continued to allure and use men, you could consider it fitting if she died by the hand of a man. She escaped that fate through service to the heroes, including her slights to you," the queen said. The king certainly did sound like pure scum, but the fact he was male still nagged at me. I wondered what would happen if Witch managed to get him under her thumb. She was a

genius at deceiving people. Making use of her attractive exterior, she might have taken control of even the king of Faubrey. In that case, we'd have been looking at a worse situation than the current one.

"Is there a chance Witch would have been able to survive?" I asked.

"I can't say there's zero chance she would win him over, but I'm sure other countries have already attempted such a ploy. Considering the size and power of his nation, making an ally of him would bring the world to your feet. Yet there are no examples of his ever having listened to anything a woman has said," the queen replied. He was like Motoyasu had been when we started out, but in the worst possible way. However, Motoyasu had been a feminist.

"Enough of this. I'm more focused on punishing the one who interfered with the Phoenix battle." That individual wasn't going to die easily. They were going to pay dearly!

As we talked, some soldiers came to the waiting room.

"The king is ready for his audience with you. Heroes, please come this way," one of the men announced. Finally! They had kept us waiting long enough.

"King Faubrey has the habit of sleeping past noon. He keeps anyone waiting for at least this long," the queen mentioned. I wondered if this country could really function.

Huh? Right then, I felt something . . . tremble in my pocket. I took it out to see the anchor accessory that Ethnobalt had given me. I checked the accessory a couple more times, just to make sure, but there was no response. It was like I had just imagined it.

I didn't give it any more thought, and we followed along behind the soldiers as one of them shouted, "Announcing the queen of Melromarc, the four holy

heroes, and their entourage!”

Chapter Four: Stolen Power

Was the pig-king in here?

With that thought, I looked toward the throne. It was occupied by a youth I'd never seen before. He didn't fit the description, but he was wearing a crown.

He had a handsome face. Everything in the right place, at least by my estimation. He had blond hair, blue eyes, a textbook Westerner. His eyes, though, were super suspicious. There was . . . something about them that just made me feel really uneasy. Not for the first time that day I recalled Motoyasu from when we first met, that breezy feeling with impure intent mixed in. Combined with that, he was clearly looking down on us. That got my hackles up, and I instantly decided he was an enemy.

He reminded me of Kyo.

He was wearing a rough jacket and jeans. It suited the modern city, perhaps, but something still looked out of place. He was wearing a bandanna below the crown, and it really didn't suit him.

"Thanks for bringing them in," the youth said.

"Sir!" the guards who showed us in gave a salute and then closed the doors to the audience chamber behind them. That was all he said, and yet it was the look in the soldiers' eyes that made me think of Itsuki now.

"Kwaa?" Gaelion looked up from where he was being held in Wyndia's arms and looked around.

"Huh?" In the same moment, Filo also tilted her head.

"If it isn't Takt, the Whip Hero. Do you know where we might find the king?"

the queen asked. So this guy was called Takt and he was the Whip Hero.

“The king? Ah, that pig. I killed him,” the youth said flippantly, as though it were the most natural thing in the world. In the face of that admission, even the face of the normally composed queen showed a twitch of suspicion.

“Did I hear you correctly? Please say that again,” the queen asked.

“That trash didn’t deserve to live, so I removed him from this world. He was a cunning one though, I’ll give him that. It wasn’t easy to get rid of him,” Takt stated, as blithely as before. Those words put everyone, including me, immediately on guard.

I’d already been considering him as an enemy almost since coming into the chamber. Even if he wasn’t the one, just being one of the seven star heroes was crime enough.

“Is this some kind of civil war? I haven’t heard anything about such troubles,” the queen carefully probed.

“Of course not. I ordered everyone in the castle to keep their mouth shut. Now, onto more pressing matters, vixen of Melromarc. This world doesn’t require you either!” Takt’s hand started to give a suspicious glow even as he talked. He was planning to unleash something!

I immediately leapt in front of the queen and changed to the Sakura Stone of Destiny Shield, a weapon specifically for use against heroes.

“Wahnsinn Claw!” he shouted. He said “claw” even though he was supposed to be the Whip Hero. But around Takt’s hand there was a nasty-looking black claw. He proceeded to fire that same flicker I remembered so well. It crashed onto my shield . . . and bounced off.

In that next moment, I understood everything.

Raphtalia, Fohl, S'yne, and Eclair all moved at once, unleashing their life energy toward our enemy as they rushed forward. Next went Filo and Gaelion. The old lady went in after Fohl, hunched low. The two Raph-chans, Sadeena, and Wyndia finally got moving too, immediately ready for battle.

Ren, Motoyasu, Itsuki, and Rishia seemed to completely miss the boat. No, that wasn't it. They readied for battle at the same time as the old lady . . . but after seeing the weapon in Takt's hand, they had frozen in place.

"You—! You're the one who killed Atla!" Fohl roared as he attacked, but Takt easily avoided the strike . . . and in the same moment a blue shadow appeared in front of Fohl. It was a demi-human woman who looked like a classical eastern dragon. She had long blue hair and yellow eyes, a woman like a full moon.

"Hold it. What are you trying to do to Master Takt?" she asked.

"Good question. What do you want with our dear Takt?" said another voice. It belonged to a young-looking girl standing in front of Raphtalia. She had two foxlike tails and was gathering magic in both of her hands. She also had lustrous black hair and clothing like some kind of miko priestess. I recognized that one!

"You . . . from Siltvelt?!" I exclaimed.

"I haven't forgotten the disgrace you brought upon me! Now I'll show you what I can really do!" she screeched.

"We've done nothing but fight for this world! You dare turn on us like this? Pure cowardice! With me, Raphtalia! This evil must not go unchecked!" Eclair shouted. The pair of them proceeded to slash out like lightning with katana and sword. In the same moment, Fohl and the eastern dragon-like woman were glaring at each other.

"Hakuko brat!" she snarled.

“Aotatsu! Move aside!” he roared. At that same moment, a woman carrying a harpoon appeared to block Sadeena. The newcomer had slanted eyes, sharp teeth, and aquatic ears like fish fins on the side of her head.

“Orca! You must be keen to die up on land like this!” the newcomer sniped.

“Oh my,” Sadeena said. I heard her, but right then, I was focused on the enemy in front of me.

“Huh? You deflected that attack? I guess there’s something to this ‘shield’ business after all!” Takt joked.

“Why you—” I started.

“What was that for?” Ren raged, drawing his sword, while Motoyasu started to incant a skill and Itsuki drew his bow.

Finally coming face-to-face with my hated foe, I was brimming with murderous anger. This was the guy who had killed Atla! Killed so many of our allies! I was going to kill him, this guy. I was going to end his life!

Shield of Wrath IV grow up!

Became Shield of Wrath V!

Shield of Wrath V grow up!

Now Shield of Wrath VI!

The protection of the Shield of Compassion prevented me from switching to it . . . but I was going to anyway! Even if it cost me my own life, I was going to finish this guy off! Let the rage consume me. I had to achieve this!

“Mr. Naofumi! Are you okay?!” Raphtalia asked.

“Don’t worry about me! Our foes are right in front of us! Kill them! Avenge Atla!” I ordered, my voice brimming with pure rage.

His attack, without a doubt, had been the same flicker that had killed the first of the Phoenixes. It had also been pretty powerful, and when I looked at the spot where it had bounced from my shield, there was a hole.

“You’re all trash, so I was hoping to wipe you all out with that Phoenix explosion. Yet here you are. I guess showing your faces here and handing your powers over to me is a better result anyway!” he jibed.

“Enough!” Fohl smashed the aotatsu woman away with a life force impact attack and leapt toward Takt.

“You think that’s enough to defeat me? You really don’t know who I am, do you?” Takt chuckled.

“Hi-yah!” The old lady also punched the ground and sent her life force flying toward Takt. He avoided the attacks with ease and then raised his hand.

Shield of Wrath—but then the system froze for some reason? Like the shield icon was getting . . . further away?

With a high-pitched splitting sound, a crack appeared in my shield, and then the entire shield attached to my arm shattered into flecks of dust.

“What?!” I shouted. I thought surely it was impossible to destroy the legendary shield! Not to mention, I’d been using the sakura stone of destiny one!

Just what was this guy?!

“Huh. The shield? Honestly, I don’t need this, but I guess it’s better than

nothing. It did repel my attack," Takt said.

"What's going on?" I looked in surprise from where the shield had been and then over at Takt. All of my allies were looking at me in pure shock.

"Fehhh!?" Rishia gave a cry of surprise in that same moment, as new enemies poked their faces out from behind a curtain she had just cut down. The hidden women all pointed long tubes—which looked a lot like assault rifles—in our direction. Hold on! Guns still relied on status, I thought.

"Shooting Star Shield!" I immediately incanted the super-convenient Shooting Star Shield . . . but it didn't appear. Gah. My damaged shield didn't respond at all.

"Hundred Swords!" Ren shouted.

"Brionac!" Motoyasu joined him.

"Piercing Shot!" Itsuki was quick behind.

"Air Strike Throw!" Rishia followed up on the attacks from the other three heroes.

"What's this? Shield . . . Prison?" With another loud sound, a massive shield cage appeared in front of Takt, completely shutting down the attacks from Ren and the others.

"What—"

"Haikuikku!" Filo shouted.

"Haikuikku!" said a large shadow, appearing in that same moment and attacking Filo. The two of them clashed together repeatedly at high speed, metallic sounds ringing out.

"Fire Breath!" Wyndia commanded.

“Kwaa!” Gaelion responded, breathing fire to wipe out the enemies before them. It was like opening up with a literal flamethrower inside the chamber.

“Freeze Breath!” Gaelion’s fire was enveloped in ice, however, and just like Filo’s attack, it was canceled by a new shadow.

“You keep your hands off Takt,” said a griffon, speaking human language as it tussled with Filo. Meanwhile a woman with a dragon tail and wings—not to mention a bosom that rivaled Rat’s—was holding a smoking pipe as she faced off with Gaelion and Wyndia. It looked like she was the one who just breathed that Freeze Breath.

“You said it. I still hate you, but you said it,” the woman agreed with the griffon.

“Kwaa!” Gaelion squawked. The lizard woman who had breathed the ice breath was glaring him down with murderous intent.

“So you’re a Dragon Emperor? Then I really can’t let you escape,” she rasped. Then my hated foe Takt gave further orders to his women.

“Everyone! Don’t harm the women and children. Remember that they’re only being used,” he stated.

“You underestimate us. We know that much. Now to make them see the truth—to make them see who’s right,” stated one of his underlings. I couldn’t focus on which.

“That’s right. Once they know Takt, they’ll understand,” said another. Raphtalia pointed at Takt with a trembling hand.

“M-Mr. Naofumi! Look!” she said, her voice also trembling. I was at a loss for words. There was a shield on Takt’s arm . . . a shield I knew all too well.

“It would suck for you to die with all these mysteries in the air. So I’ll

enlighten you before killing you. I have the power to steal legendary weapons," he revealed.

"What?!" I exclaimed. He said he had the power to steal legendary weapons. I wondered what kind of insane power that could be. This was a world in which the heroes were basically worshipped like gods. So that power was like dragging down a god!

Hold on. The Whip Hero was using a claw. He must have stolen that power too.

"Yeah, the guy calling himself the Claw Hero was a real dipshit. I killed him too," Takt revealed smoothly, almost as though answering my thoughts. So the Claw Hero was dead. And not only him. The same could likely be said of all the seven star heroes we'd been unable to contact.

In that moment, I finally saw everything that had been going on.

I'd been wondering why the seven star heroes seemed so uncooperative. This guy had been running around stealing their weapons. If he was killing them to hide the evidence, then that explained why none of them had ever shown up.

"You hero types all have such twisted personalities, seriously. All I want is you to praise me and lend me your strength, but none of you pay attention!" Takt bemoaned. No one would ever listen to this dick. For God's sake! It felt like I was about to go crazy with anger. "So I'm going to save the world," the psycho continued. "You guys can just die and give me your weapons."

"Enough bullshit!" I raged.

"Bullshit? That's your department! Prancing about and pretending to be heroes! I'm the only true hero in this world. Don't you see that?" he said. Takt took up his claw again and swiped swiftly toward us. It looked like a wide-range

attack coming horizontally at us . . . and was almost too fast for any of us to respond.

I moved in front of everyone to protect them. But nothing happened, no pain or anything.

“Huh? Having this shield out removes my attack power? Seems like a pain to use,” Takt said. He vanished the shield and brought out a claw and small dagger.

“Let’s try this again! Wahnsinn Claw!” This attack came faster than any I had ever experienced before. I couldn’t even avoid it.

“Agh—” The bright light passed through my left shoulder and went on to pass through the queen, who was also along its extended arc. Pain immediately raced through my punctured body, accompanied by a spray of blood.

I gave a grunt. It felt like everything was in slow motion as I turned to look at the queen. It appeared as though his attack had only hit the two of us. Given a moment more to think, I realized that had been his intention.

The light had bent to hit just us.

“M-Mr. Naofumi!” Raphtalia shouted.

“Raph!” said Raph-chan. They dashed over to where I’d been knocked onto the ground.

“What are you doing? Don’t worry about me . . . Take care of him, quickly!” I managed to order through gritted teeth, but Raphtalia—her face pale—didn’t seem able to hear my commands. Trash was holding the collapsed queen, out of his mind.

“Ah . . .” he gasped, looking at the blood on his shaking hands. “Someone! Someone heal my wife!” he shouted. At that call, one of Motoyasu’s three—Green—dashed over and started incanting healing magic toward the queen and

me.

“Gah! Let me at him!” Motoyasu shouted.

“Wait!” Raphtalia called him to a stop.

“Why, I say?” he replied.

“If you just rush in, he’ll kill us all! It’s too dangerous to charge in!” she said.

“I don’t care what you think!” he retorted.

“Enough, Motoyasu!” I managed, with some authority. In that same moment, the women in the back all raised their rifles at us.

“Looks like they’re still planning on putting up a fight,” Takt mocked. “Whittle them down a little, ladies!”

“Yes, sir!” the vixens responded. Takt lifted his hand and then dropped it.

“Fire!”

The women pulled their triggers. The sounds of gunfire rang out, mixed with grunts of pain from the recipients of the resulting bullets.

That included me. Pain shafted through my entire body. I couldn’t understand why we were taking so much damage!

“Well? How do you like the taste of lead from my ladies? The lowest level among them is 250!” Takt crowed. *What the hell? Did he just say 250?!* So he knew how to break the level limit. No wonder he’d defeated the Kirin so easily. Even his goons were double our level . . . No, he’d said “lowest!” Some of them could be triple or even higher.

The queen and Trash hadn’t taken any damage, shielded by Motoyasu’s three filolials. But Ren, Motoyasu himself, and Itsuki had all taken serious damage. Meanwhile, Raphtalia, Rishia, Eclair, S’yne, and Wyndia hadn’t taken a single

hit.

This hypocrite! He was clearly planning on playing the main character, killing off the guys and keeping the women for himself. Fohl, Filo, Gaelion, Sadeena, the three filolials, and the old lady had all been shot at.

I'd seen this kind of tactic before from Motoyasu, back before he went insane, when his sex-fueled urges were on full display. He was just trying to make himself look good.

He also reminded me of Kyo.

He had mainly targeted the heroes, but maybe that was for the best. Anyone other than a hero hit by that barrage head-on would be dead. Not to say we could survive them for long either.

Ren, Itsuki, and Motoyasu were quadruple powered-up. They should be able to shrug off even some pretty hardy attacks!

"Your levels are too low. Just give up and accept defeat at my hands. I'm level 350 after all!" Takt laughed. I could only grunt as he looked down on us, pain wracking all of our bodies.

I'd gone with Sadeena and the others to level up after we defeated the Phoenix, raising myself to level 120, and yet it wasn't close to enough. I was always on the back foot.

"You talk about saving the world? Don't make me laugh. You've not got the levels," Takt said, really putting the boot in.

"Most impressive, my lord Takt. Rescue these legendary weapons from these inferior heroes," said a new voice.

"No!" I exclaimed. My allies made similar noises, stunned. Even Trash was stunned. "Impossible . . . Why are you here?!" The timing just seemed too

perfect. With an unsettling smile on her face, Witch appeared from behind a pillar and moved over to Takt, looking down on us as she glided across the chamber.

Witch! The one monster I could not permit to live!

Even after the loss of my shield, anger enough to burn me to ash rose up from inside. This was nothing to do with the curse of rage. I just hated her so much that I wanted to kill her with my bare hands.

“These are the scum who planned to hand you over to that wretched pig, Malty. They’ve caused the deaths of so many, meaning they have to pay with their lives. But I’ll make them suffer first!” Takt enthused.

“Do you see now, mother? You tried to sell me off to the king of pigs. You’ll pay for that with your life! You too, father!”

“M-Malty . . .” Trash was still stunned, holding the queen in his arms. His mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water, as though he was unable to process what he was seeing.

I pushed down the pain and looked at the dagger in Takt’s hand. It looked a lot like the one Rishia used.

Another puzzle piece fell into place.

Rishia’s mysterious weapon—no, the seven star projectile—was semitransparent because its owner had been killed and the weapon stolen. The legendary weapon itself hadn’t accepted Takt as its owner. Maybe it had even chosen Rishia as an act of resistance.

“Air Strike Throw!” With a slashing sound, the dagger thrown by Takt flew past Ren’s shoulder. Ren had acted quickly to prevent his sword from being taken. If the attack had hit, it would have been stolen. Ren grunted.

“No more moving around. Nothing says ‘hero’ more than a sword. Hurry up and hand it over, pretty boy,” Takt said. We were at a serious disadvantage with all the damage we had already taken. We couldn’t afford to lose Ren and the other heroes’ weapons.

I gathered my life force, the intent to kill rising within me. We weren’t going to lose anything else!

“Enough of this nonsense!” Raphtalia shouted.

“No forgiveness for you—” S’yne joined in, the two of them rushing forward and slashing at Takt.

“Wait! He has the power to steal weapons! Both of you—” Ren tried to stop them both, but a clash of swords had already started.

“Huh? Ah?” Sparks grated out as Takt took a moment to look at Raphtalia and S’yne’s weapons. “A katana and . . . scissors? Are these also seven star weapons? No, you two look different.” Taking it easy against the two girls, Takt repelled their attacks with a relaxed look on his face. With two more shouts, Raphtalia and S’yne both slashed down again with their sakura stone of destiny weapons, but due to the level gap with Takt, their attacks didn’t even hit.

No matter how effective the weapons were against heroes, it was meaningless without the stats to back that up.

“You two are really pretty. I hope you come to see the truth quickly—that all the heroes you believe in are trash!” Takt crowed.

“Enough! You get away from Takt! Ugly raccoon women need to know their place!” said the fox woman. She and the one dressed liked a maid gave a shout and leapt at Raphtalia and S’yne, but I could barely focus on the events in front of me. This attempt to pick up my friends was nothing compared to working

with Witch, messing up our fight with the Phoenix, and now ambushing us like this! He had to pay!

“Shut your mouth!” I desperately focused all my magic and life force into my body, focusing my strength and kicking off the ground to leap at Takt. I just needed to distract him for a few moments. Just long enough for everyone else to get away!

“What?” Surprised by this unexpected counterattack, Takt raised the shield he had stolen from me and tightened his defenses. With a thud, my fist hammered into Takt.

“You think this attack—guwah?!” My life force and magic exploded inside Takt’s body. Spewing blood, he was thrown behind the throne.

“Takt!?” All the gun-toting women shouted his name, watching him out of worry for him and creating a massive opening.

An opening that Ren, Itsuki, and Motoyasu were not going to miss.

“Now! Flashing Sword!” Ren shouted.

“Flash Arrow!” Itsuki joined in.

“Shining Lance!” Motoyasu finished. All three had used skills with a blinding effect, stunning the women as they attempted to open fire again.

Raphtalia and S’yne looked at each other, grabbed me as I collapsed, and ran for it. The two of them, seeing our disadvantage, made the choice to retreat.

“What are you doing? Shoot them all dead!” Witch shouted, but Ren and the others were already kicking down the doors in order to escape.

“Transport Sword . . . It’s no good. It won’t work,” Ren said.

“All Drifa Heal!” I’d been put up on Filo’s back, and in my dazed state . . . I

managed to cast healing magic across all of my injured allies, and then my voice gave out.

These wounds—I couldn't use healing magic on them.

We dashed through the castle, trying to find a way out. Ren and Motoyasu were in the lead, with the old lady and Raphtalia watching the rear. Everyone was injured to some extent. The queen and I had been hit the hardest. Our clothing was dark with blood. Neither of us could last much longer without treatment. The pain made my head swim. It was a miracle I'd been able to stand up back there.

"Mirellia! Just hold on!" Trash called to the queen, carrying her on his back as he ran behind me.

"Mr. Naofumi!" Raphtalia said. I was leaning so heavily on Filo's back I could barely move my body at all . . .

"Naofumi, you understand the situation? I appreciate your anger, but we have to retreat," Itsuki confirmed with me. He was right. If we stood our ground and fought here, where an ambush could be lying in wait in any corner, any number of the other heroes might lose their weapons.

"Itsuki?" Rishia asked.

"I know. Let's get out of here as quickly as we can. Ren, is there any chance at all you can at least teleport the queen and Naofumi to a safe place?" he asked.

"No chance at all. Transport Sword won't work. It's being blocked somehow," he replied.

"Kwaa!" Gaelion confidently cast some magic. It was Dragon Sanctuary. It was apparently effective against interference with teleportation. The likely cause of that interference was these new enemies using a barrier of similar magic. When

Filo and Gaelion had been fighting over territory a while back, their spells had clashed and nullified each other.

“Kwaa!” Gaelion gave a cry as something flashed past.

“You aren’t getting away!” The voice came from down the corridor behind us. “Dragon Sanctuary!” Gah. That lizard woman was a dragon after all. Considering the conversation I’d heard between Gaelion and her, there was a high probability she was a Dragon Emperor herself.

“Raph . . . talia, use . . . Scroll of Return,” I said.

“O-okay!” she replied. Raphtalia had a teleportation skill from another world. Even with the interference, there was still a good chance she could use it.

And yet . . .

“I can’t use it?! The dragon hourglass is locked!” I thought it was impossible to block skills from other worlds!

“Sakura Destiny Sphere?” I asked.

“It takes all sorts of time and hassle to activate. It also weakens the power of the holy weapons, and seven star weapons—the vassal weapons—and would totally rule out teleportation skills. If they are using your shield, Mr. Naofumi, it will only have the opposite of the desired effect,” she explained.

Gah! It seemed like this was a complete dead-end.

S’yne clicked her tongue. She was touching my hand, and I could tell she was trying to activate a skill. But her weapon did not respond.

“I’m sorry . . . The weapon has degraded too severely,” her doll explained. I shook my head, telling her not to worry about it. Then I looked at Filo.

I desperately managed to speak, giving orders to Filo.

“You can count on me!” she said as she ran along and started to incant magic. “Sanctuary!”

“I won’t allow that. Griffon Sanctuary!” That had to be the griffon-like enemy. Every nullification we tried was in turn nullified—one step forward, one step back.

After we got the portal open, we’d have to choose whom to send through. That alone would cause a minor time lag, and having the magic reversed in that moment made this so difficult. Concerning sounds rang out from both in front and behind. There were soldiers waiting for us up ahead.

“Moto . . . yasu,” I rasped.

“What do you need?” he replied.

“This is an emergency. I give you permission to unleash . . . your love and your jealousy,” I told him. Takt was surrounded by women. This definitely sounded like an applicable situation.

“But Filo forbid me from using that,” Motoyasu replied.

“Fi . . . lo,” I told her.

“Yes, okay,” she said to me. “Spear guy, please do it,” she said to Motoyasu.

“Raph!” said Raph-chan, and “Dafu!” said Raph-chan II, moving to place their paws on those most susceptible to status effects. Motoyasu heard Filo’s request and gave a shout.

“Very well, I say! Temptation and Ressentiment it is!” The curse skills Motoyasu unleashed caused me a jolt of physical pain as he fired them off. I felt the barrier break with a crack . . . but then a similar feeling came right back at us, as though it was mocking our every attempt.

“No mistaking it. More nullification using the same skill!” he informed me.

“Shit . . .” I muttered.

“I can’t try again right away, father-in-law. My apologies for not being of greater aid,” Motoyasu said. Goddammit! I wondered just how many skills Takt was armed up with.

“Gravity Sword!” Ren shouted.

“Brionac!” Motoyasu got back into the fray.

“Piercing Shot!” Itsuki yelled. The efforts of the three other heroes were keeping things under control, for now. The soldiers up ahead also weren’t that strong. Takt probably only had a limited number of underlings who had broken the level cap. It would be dangerous to dismiss the soldiers completely, however. They were still soldiers from a major nation. Likely a similar level to Ren, and good at their job—but still maybe level 100 at best. It had to only be those women in the chamber who had been blessed with breaking the cap. Based on that fact, the bullets flying at us from behind were far more dangerous.

“Hi-yah!” shouted the old lady. Raphtalia and Fohl joined her with similar martial-artist kinds of shouts, smashing our female foes with compressed life force using the Point of Focus technique. It was working but would also be difficult to maintain.

“Again.” Wyndia was up on Gaelion and started to support their incanting.

“I’ll help too,” said Sadeena, lending a hand. They’d need all the backup they could get if Takt unleashed everything he had. The reason he didn’t . . . was either because he was on cooldown or he didn’t want to do any further damage to this castle of his.

“Has the teleportation nullification been removed yet?!” Ren asked.

“I’m still working on it!” Filo said, flustered.

“Ren, don’t worry about us!” Eclair said. “If you can stop these villains from getting their hands on any more of the legendary weapons, just run for it!”

“I can’t do that!” Ren angrily replied. Shit! I’d gotten so used to being able to teleport that it was stifling to have it taken away. In my incapacitated state, I could barely hold onto even that thought.

“If we could only get outside, we could escape on Gaelion,” Wyndia said.

“And probably get shot down,” Ren replied. Even as we fled, soldiers blocked our every turn, pushing us into a dead end.

“Shooting Star Sword!” Ren smashed down the wall in our way, and we proceeded into the corridor beyond. Ren’s quick thinking was worthy of praise.

“We’ll follow up the rear. You heroes hurry and get out of here!” the old lady shouted.

“Mr. Naofumi, you can count on us!” Raphtalia added. Joined by Fohl and Eclair, the four of them moved to stop the enemies closing in from behind. That should have been my role.

However, the aotatsu woman was already one step ahead of us.

“Just like Master Takt said, here you are,” she jibed. We turned to see the whole crowd from the throne room in attendance. We were surrounded.

“Kwaa!” Gaelion deployed a second sanctuary.

“That won’t work.” The enemy dragon blocked it again. We were going to be running in circles forever—and yet the only way out of here was teleportation. The entirety of Faubrey castle was filled with enemies. Even if we got outside

the castle gates, we had the army of this nation—and maybe even civilians—waiting to fight us. That's what I'd do in this situation. I wasn't sure how they'd frame it, but they would definitely come after us somehow. We were at a major disadvantage due to our injuries.

"Sanctuary!" Filo tried.

"Griffin Sanctuary!" came the response. Filo blew a raspberry and stamped her feet at how nothing was going according to plan.

"As the source . . . of your power . . ." I tried to incant some magic myself, but I was unable to concentrate due to the wounds from Takt. That attack . . . The weapon itself had to be cursed. Magic couldn't cure the wounds. It was like I was suffering under a status effect, unable to hold my awareness in my body.

"Master!" Filo called to me as my magic failed. Then I heard Takt calling from behind us, where the old lady and the others were fighting.

"Can't you see it's time for you to give up? You trash!" he asked.

"No! Give up? Never! Not to you. Buying into Witch's lies, messing up the battle with the Phoenix, and killing all the seven star heroes!" Ren turned and made this bold declaration.

"Whatever you say, justice will never be on your side. Just give up and die!" Takt prepared his claw to attack again. In that same moment—

"Dafu—!" With a snap, I felt the sanctuary that was preventing us from teleporting get stripped away. Cherry blossoms danced in the air. Maybe they were sakura lumina petals. The Raph-chans had been quiet, but now their tails fluffed up. In the same moment the magic activated, something else passed by; it wasn't the Sakura Destiny Sphere, but something similar to Filo and the others' sanctuary magic, canceling out the enemy interference.

“What?!” Our foes were taken aback, which created an opening. Both Gaelion and Filo had used Sanctuary magic, so they had probably thought a double repeat casting would have covered it. However, with the Raph-chans using some unexpected magic, it had created an opening for us to use a teleportation skill.

“Now!” I shouted. Ren, Motoyasu, and Itsuki each grasped their weapons tightly, then cast teleportation magic.

“Transport Sword!”

“Portal Spear!”

“Transport Bow!”

“You won’t escape!” Takt got his whip out. Then he swung it leisurely at our allies coming up the rear—the old lady, Raphtalia, Fohl, and Eclair.

“Bind Whip!” The weapon rapidly snaked like a living creature, slicing forward to enwrap Fohl and Eclair.

“I won’t allow that!” Raphtalia rushed in.

“Student Raphtalia!” the old lady shouted, even as Raphtalia thrust her sword into the whip and then stamped it onto the ground, preventing the binding attack.

“Big sister—” Fohl called first.

“Raphtalia—” In my semi-conscious state, I managed to call her name myself.

“If anything happens to me, please take care of Mr. Naofumi,” she said to Fohl—as though she knew very well that something was going to happen. Then she gave me, who could do nothing but look on, a warm smile.

“Raph . . . talia . . .” When I spoke, my lungs made a horrible whistling sound. I

had to move, or I was about to lose something precious to me again! Quickly! I had to move!

“Get out of there! Student Raphtalia!” the old lady shouted.

“If we miss this chance, we may not get to teleport again . . . but—” Ren wasn’t sure what to do. If we missed this chance, any opening to teleport was quickly going to be blocked again.

“If you don’t escape here . . . we’ll be wiped out!” Raphtalia said.

“But . . .” Ren was still hesitating.

“If you don’t get Mr. Naofumi out of here, more people will die! Ren! Sword Hero! You finally reached an understanding of your purpose, thanks to Eclair. Is that going to end here?” Raphtalia raged.

“Raphtalia! I still can’t just—” Ren stammered.

“Eclair! You understand, right? Move!” Raphtalia changed tactics.

“Ren. I’ll take responsibility. Get out of here!” Eclair said.

“No. This one will rest on my shoulders. Even if Naofumi kills me for this, I don’t think this is the wrong choice! Transport Sword!” Ren completed activation of the skill. Raphtalia was headed in the opposite direction from us.

“Big sister!” Fohl yelled again.

“Raphtalia!” I managed myself, both of our shouts ringing out. Immediately afterward, I felt everything I was seeing shift and change, getting darker and sliding away.

Ren’s teleportation had been successful. The same for Motoyasu and Itsuki. However, it was only after making the jump that we determined that Raphtalia hadn’t been included—that we had left her behind.



Chapter Five: The Spirits

My body felt so light and floaty. Flowing through me were all sorts of images of various people in various places that I thought I couldn't possibly be.

The queen and I, with our serious injuries, had been carried by portals created by Ren and the others to the largest medical facility in Melromarc.

Both of us were badly hurt. So bad that even I thought it looked like we were done for.

"This is serious. They have suffered a powerful curse. We must prepare ritual magic at once!" the head doctor declared, placing a summons for users of ritual magic from the Church of the Four Holy Heroes. We were clearly going to get the full treatment.

"Hang in there," someone shouted.

"That's right! Brother!" Fohl said.

"Master!" Filo said.

"Raph," Raph-chan added. Ren, the other heroes, and Sadeena were taken to different rooms to have their own injuries treated. Luckily their wounds weren't as bad as mine and the queen's. It wouldn't take long for them to be moving around again normally.

"It's time to start the treatment. Everyone else in the room, you can also be healed if you need it," the doctor stated. Filo and Fohl continued to repeatedly call my name. Then I blacked out.

The next thing I saw was the queen and Trash.

The queen had been seriously injured. Enough for anyone to start thinking the

worst. She gave a spluttering cough. Trash was at her side, holding her fingers in his own trembling hands, praying.

“Concurrent with the application of the Elixir of Yggdrasil, the application of Drifa Heal and the use of high-concentration holy water, we also need to trigger the ritual magic—” The head doctor applied healing magic to the wounds while giving instructions to the other doctors. Being the queen of the nation, she was receiving the highest level of care—and yet none of the healing was working at all.

“This curse is so powerful. Almost as bad as the one the Shield Hero suffered from,” one doctor said.

“The Shield Hero had such vitality,” said another. “The queen, however . . .”

“Mirellia,” said Trash. As though responding to his words, the queen opened her eyes and looked at him.

“I heard . . . what you said . . .” she managed.

“Your majesty, please! You must not talk!” said the head doctor while continuing to apply healing. But the queen slowly shook her head.

“I understand what’s happening. I can’t be saved,” she stated.

“I-I’m sorry, your majesty . . .” the doctor started. Trash immediately glared at the stuttering healer and stood up.

“What are you talking about? You are currently healing the queen of this nation! If you are truly the head doctor here, then you should give your very life to save her!” Trash roared.

“You can’t . . . give such orders,” the queen admonished, her voice frail. It felt strange to understand how Trash was feeling, but in that moment, I did. It felt the same as when I lost Atla. The sadness at losing someone important. The

despair at your own helplessness. Anger at the cause of it all. All of these things mixed together, pushing rational thought completely aside.

“B-but . . .” Trash stuttered.

“I think . . . this may be divine retribution. Punishment . . . for trying to save our country, save the world, no matter the cost . . .” the queen went on.

“That’s not it! That can’t be it!” Trash said, vehemently denying the queen’s words.

“Are you so sure? I can’t help feeling that this is all my fault. That my own failings led to our daughter—to Malty—growing up into that monster. I failed to make the hard decisions . . . and that led to all of this,” she said.

“No . . . that was me. That is on me . . .” Trash managed, his voice trembling. Maybe he thought losing the queen was his fault. Then the queen continued.

“I fear the Whip Hero—no, invaders—are going to attack our nation.” Trash made no reply. “Melromarc currently stands in such a precarious position. The only ray of light is Hero Iwatani, the other heroes, and their companions.”

“But the Shield Hero—!” Trash started.

“You understand the situation, don’t you? You need to cast aside your past grievances and proceed into the future,” the queen said. Tears tumbled from Trash’s eyes. This was the same as when I made my own ardent wishes, and Fohl made his prayers. I knew without question what Trash was thinking.

“Mirellia . . . Lucia . . .” Trash said, then continued and softly said Atla’s name too.

“You were known as the Wisest King of Wisdom . . . You can surely find some hope in this situation,” the queen said.

“But the staff won’t even answer me!” Trash replied.

“That’s not right. The staff lent you its power because you had such wonderful wisdom, far greater than anyone else.” Trash remained silent. “I believe in you. Believe in your strategy, being able to bring us back from such disadvantage . . . to save Melromarc from the precipice to which it hurtles.”

“I . . . I’m not sure . . .” Trash stammered. The queen gave a gentle laugh.

“With all the powerful pieces now at your control, how will the Wisest King of Wisdom surprise the world this time?” the queen said.

“Mirellia,” Trash breathed.

“I leave the future of our nation with you. Please, alongside Hero Iwatani . . . save the world. Staff Hero . . .” The queen smiled at Trash, even as she coughed up blood. “My beloved . . . show the world once more . . . that towering intellect against which all foes . . . feared to fight . . .” In that same moment, the queen’s strength finally, fatally, gave out.

“Your majesty!” With a crash, another one of the nation’s leaders came into the treatment room. “Faubrey has declared war on the entire world! They state that we should be unified under Faubrey!” The situation seemed to demand a decision far more quickly than even the queen had considered.

It was two more days before I experienced anything else.

“Faubrey declaring war on the entire world? Ridiculous!” Ren and the others, having completed their healing, were conversing with the coalition army that had been resting in the castle, and I could hear fragments of them talking.

Everyone gathered had subdued looks on their faces. That was how massive the power of Faubrey was. Ren and the others knew their strength firsthand—

strength close to three times their own levels. They wanted to stop Faubrey, of course, but also understood how difficult that was going to be.

“The nerve of them. That cowardly hero . . . We still have the waves to face, and he thinks he has the time to conquer the world?” Ren seethed.

“I think he probably does,” Itsuki intoned.

“Hurting my father-in-law, Filo, and everyone else so badly! He’ll find no forgiveness from me!” Motoyasu raged. There were sounds of general agreement from the coalition army. They had been told of everything that had happened in Faubrey. Members from Siltvelt were also in attendance. Even the old genmu guy and Werner.

“Naofumi is still in treatment, and we face a war with Faubrey?”

“That’s right. Faubrey is marching its entire force in this direction, coming directly to attack Melromarc first. Those nations along the way who will not obey the glory of Faubrey and resist . . . face troop drops and bombardments from their new airplane weapons. Any attacked in such a way will quickly raise the white flag.”

“There’s a reason they’re being defeated so easily?”

“Yes. Aerial battles using flying monsters have been attempted, but they have no way to deal with attacks from these airplanes.”

“Their pilots must have high levels.”

“Fehhh . . .” Rishia gave her normal exclamation, and Itsuki stroked her head to calm her down. Ren hammered his fist down on the table.

“It’s so bad that Naofumi’s been injured! How is he doing?” he asked.

“It isn’t good. He’s been close to death numerous times.”

“Oh, Naofumi . . .”

“Just who is this Takt, anyway? How does he have the power to steal heroes’ weapons?” Even as Ren complained, a soldier burst into the conference room.

“A new report! Shieldfreeden has announced they have formed an alliance with Faubrey!” the man said.

“What?!”

“Furthermore, the Seven Star Hero Takt Alsaholn Faubrey has declared in front of the people that he is a child of the gods, making public his possession of multiple seven star weapons!” the soldier continued. Everyone in attendance stood, their chairs rattling, surprise on their faces.

A solid move. Being able to use multiple hero weapons meant he was either feared by the gods, loved by the gods, or both. With the faith in legendary weapons so deeply rooted in this world, he would be seen as special indeed. Even if he had killed heroes.

“He has also been spreading lies in each nation that he is the true one to save this world, that those summoned as the four holy heroes are evil, and that the four heroes must be wiped out. He has also declared that he has already purified four of the evil seven star heroes!” the report continued.

“He thinks it’s okay to say such things?!”

“The Faubrey Church of the Seven Star Heroes seems to have accepted it. But other churches both inside and outside Faubrey are disputing his claims, with revolts breaking out. And those blessed by the hero are gradually using that strength to put down the uprisings,” the soldier explained. In the same moment, a shadow whispered to the old genmu man. That couldn’t be good news either.

“There’s no question . . . of which side we are on,” the man said. The situation was still heading in a terrible direction. “What are your thoughts on the matter, Gauntlets Hero?”

“Are you asking me as a single hakuko? Or as the Gauntlets Hero?” Fohl asked.

“As the Gauntlets Hero, subordinate to the Shield God himself. Or do you wish to make your declaration to our nation as the successor to the bloodline of Tyran Ga Fayon?” The old man’s tone was challenging, as though he was taunting Fohl. “Our people’s anger is already at boiling point due to the death of Atla. A representative of Siltvelt, killed by the cowardly actions of this Faubrey hero? That is unforgivable.”

At these words, Fohl shook his head. Then he gave a clear and confident statement: “I am the Gauntlets Hero, defender of the village restored by the Shield Hero. My bloodline comes a distant second to that.” The old genmu codger looked at Fohl with fire in his eyes.

“You seem to understand, Gauntlets Hero, that it is upon your own resolve that we all stand,” the old man said.

Werner followed up those words with his own: “Indeed! The Shield Hero shed tears at the loss of our people and raged in anger against the perpetrators. To bend the knee to the very ones who created this terrible situation will besmirch not only our honor, but also our very faith!” All of the demi-humans participating in the coalition nodded at the words from these two. There was no forgiveness for what had happened. No forgiveness for the evil that had killed their comrades.

Revenge against them—against him—didn’t belong solely to me.

For the sake of all who died during the battle with the Phoenix, those responsible had to pay. The room throbbed with that single intent.

Fohl just quietly watched the proceedings. The old genmu had boasted later that Fohl's quiet, composed appearance had looked just like Fohl's grandfather.

"What approach should we take, Wisest King of Wisdom? We already know the route they will take to reach us. How will you answer to the final words of your wise wife?" Ren said, keeping the meeting moving along.

"That begs another question. From that guy's personal history . . . something just feels off. Is it just me? Just what level of genius are we talking about here? Airplanes and bombs? Those are more like weapons from our world."

"There is technology that heroes have left behind in this world, so maybe a genius could realize it . . . but still . . ." Itsuki trailed off for a moment. "One possibility is that he's using his 'stealing' ability to take other abilities, like in my world. There are lots of novels in my world about people awakening to such powers. Also, there are stories fantasizing about becoming stronger by stealing other people's powers. Maybe he was born with exactly that kind of power?"

"I see. That does sound possible, coming from you, Itsuki," Ren said.

"The reason he hasn't really made himself known before now is because, just like in the stories I know about, for some reason he was recently forced to use his powers in front of other people, even though he didn't really want to stand out. Just like what happened to me," Itsuki struggled to explain to Ren.

That sounded possible to me. I knew of stories myself in which a main character who obtained too much power decided to live in secret. Generally some kind of incident forced them to reveal themselves, and that was what Itsuki was talking about.

“He probably avoided going after the heroes’ weapons because that would surely get him exposed. Now the die has been cast, however. He has to go full throttle in unifying the world. But I’m only guessing,” Itsuki continued.

“Knowing all of his companions to be women, I also think he has a little of the old Motoyasu in him. Very well. That seems to make sense. I understand now.” Ren nodded, at least some of his questions seemingly resolved.

“So it sounds like his history is a bit similar to Kyo, that man from another world who controlled the Spirit Tortoise. Definitely sounds dangerous. But still, how should we handle the fighting with Faubrey?”

“The Q’ten Lo technique . . . Without Raphtalia here, how about we have Ruft place blessings and use Astral Enchant?” came the suggestion. There was a Q’ten Lo technique that allowed all the levels to be gathered in a single person. It also had the effect of weakening the holy weapons and seven star weapons. That sounded like a solid plan.

“That wouldn’t be easy. My master said it can be triggered by using the sakura stone of destiny, but it has a level cap too. We might be able to put up a good fight, but we’d fall short due to the pure difference in levels, eventually. I attacked them with the sakura stone of destiny sword and it had hardly any effect,” Ren replied.

“I don’t know why that would be. Maybe they have some tactic in place already,” someone else said. The meeting between Ren, the heroes, and the coalition army continued.

My floating feeling flew me off to the next location. This time I was in a flickering, empty space that didn’t look like anywhere at all.

“Where was I now?” I wondered.

Even as I wondered why I was able to experience these events away from my body, I felt the arrival of two who might be able to tell me. When I saw them though, I was at a loss for words.

“Atla . . . and Ost?” I finally managed.

“That’s right.” There was Atla and Ost in front of me, floating in the air, both of whom should be dead. First things first, I gave Atla a hug to confirm she was the real deal.

“Ah! This is exactly what I want, Master Naofumi!” Her reaction was just as I had expected—exactly the same, even in death, although this could just be a hallucination produced from my memories. Ost gave a grin.

“This is Ost. She has a complete understanding of how wonderful you are, Master Naofumi. Now can you please hug me again?” she asked.

“Atla, calm down! Where am I? The world beyond?” I asked. Was this some kind of out-of-body experience? From what I’d seen and heard, it did seem like I was still alive, but I thought maybe I was just braindead.

I’d taken quite a beating, but I didn’t want to die like this. I’d also thought I’d be going to hell when I died, but I couldn’t believe this was the afterlife. It couldn’t be heaven, surely.

“If you’re asking if this is the world of the dead, then the answer is no. If I had to explain it, then this is the world of the shield . . . or rather, the world of the legendary weapons,” Ost said with a smile.

“I see. Atla, are you in pain?” I asked.

“No. No pain at all,” she replied. Hearing that put me at ease. Thinking back to what I’d seen, every scene had included the other heroes: Ren, Motoyasu,

Itsuki, Fohl, Rishia, and Trash—all people selected as heroes.

“Can I see the whip seven star hero too?” I wondered. “He stole my shield, but he has it.”

“Yes, you can. But your shield hasn’t been stolen,” Ost explained.

“What? He took it, that’s for sure,” I replied. There was no doubt about that.

“He doesn’t have the power to completely make the four holy weapons his own. It’s all just appearances, on the surface only. He won’t be able to use their full power,” Atla said.

“Indeed,” Ost chimed in. “His power can’t steal one of the officially selected four holy weapons.” Events from the past played out in front of me, via Takt’s weapon.

On the march, Takt had captured the royal families and representatives from nations opposing him and was holding a public execution.

“Raaagh!” An older man, who looked like a general of some sort, was rolling on a hot steel plate. His entire body was getting burned. “You arrogant scum! The four holy heroes will rain punishment on you!” he proclaimed, finding his feet by sheer force of will and pointing an accusing finger at his laughing audience—Takt and his gaggle of women. It looked like that man, a general, had a daughter . . . but there was something odd about her. She was gazing at Takt with a vacant look in her eyes.

“Daddy . . . thank you for approving my marriage. You’ve finally agreed to let me marry Ollie,” she said dreamily.

“I’ll make you forget this ‘Ollie’ soon enough, although his keeping you a virgin for so long is something to be thankful for!” Takt cackled. It was clear that he was using some kind of illusion to make her think he was her beloved.

“Those who don’t give proper thought to their daughters’ happiness have no right to live!”

“You scum!” The general’s shout turned into another roar of pain.

“Master Takt is right! Your girl will be happy, so just rest assured in that fact and pay for your crimes!” one of the women in Takt’s retinue crowed.

“Pay with your life,” offered Witch. All of Takt’s women seemed to be enjoying the scene immensely. Executing a parent in front of their daughter . . . while telling the parent that the child was going to betray everything they stood for . . . These animals were disgusting, pure and simple!

“The crime of standing against a child of the gods is severe! Worthy of punishment!” another of the women cackled, to laughter from the others.

“There’s no value in these fools stubbornly clinging to those trashy heroes! The times desire something new, not these dusty old legends!” another woman spit out. Seriously! What were they ranting about?

“What about Raphtalia?” I asked.

“This is a little further in the past,” Atla said. The execution scene faded, to show Raphtalia being held in a cell. Takt and his women came along. He seemed to be whispering all sorts of sweet words to her for a while, but there was no sign of Raphtalia falling for his charms. Takt left, looking pretty pissed off. For a brief while, Raphtalia was left alone in the room. Just as I was starting to get worried, Raphtalia’s body—no, her katana—started to shine out, and then she vanished.

She teleported. But I didn’t know where.

I saw Raph-chan II looking in this direction and waving her paw. After Raph-chan II hid herself in the corner of the cell, Witch and the others came back.

Huh? Raph-chan II's tail swelled up. She had cast some kind of magic.

Then . . . for some reason Witch and the others tied up one of their allies, one of the other women, and started to torture her. It seemed Raph-chan II had used illusion magic to make them think their victim was Raphtalia.

"I don't think you need to see this," Ost said.

"Hold on. I'm worried about Raphtalia," I said.

"Raphtalia is safe, of course," Atla said. "If this was going to take her down, you would have been mine long ago, Master Naofumi," Ost said. I mean . . . good point. It still made me wonder about the nature of the trust between them.

"So where's Raphtalia gone?" I asked.

"Probably to the world that her weapon came from," Atla said. She'd been summoned away to Kizuna's world then. I wanted to know if she was okay. I really wanted to go and find her at once.

"So? What am I doing here?" I asked.

"You were called here by the Shield Spirit, the spirit who lends his powers to you," Ost explained.

"I see . . . That cursed shield?" I inquired further.

"That's right. That cursed shield," Atla confirmed.

"I feel a little sympathy for the Shield Spirit, I must admit," Ost said. A ball of light was moving up and down between Ost and Atla. This was the Shield Spirit. The ball didn't look especially dependable. Perhaps my feelings were imparted to it, because the spirit started to make larger movements.

"He says that this was all very unexpected," Atla said.

“I see. How about we start with a punch in his shiny face?” I sneered. Time to get some payback for being summoned here.

“I understand your feelings. But apart from the first hero, you are the only one to have ever reached this region,” Atla revealed.

“Okay. Whatever. And what does the Shield Spirit want with me?” I asked, keeping things moving along.

“He wishes for you to make a decision, Iwatani,” Ost revealed. Other balls of light started to gather around the Shield Spirit. These were likely the Weapon Spirits. I counted them . . . Why were there fourteen? There were four differently colored ones, including the Shield Spirit. Then there were eight that were all the same color, just shining at different degrees. If those were the seven star weapons, there was one more than expected. Five of them were also shining very weakly. Then there were two other balls of light, both different colors again. So I wondered what those were.

“They want me to make a decision?” I asked.

“Yes. To put it plainly, in regard to the ultimate destination of this world, the Shield Spirit is proposing that abandoning your duty is also a possible choice,” Ost said.

“Abandon my duty?” I asked.

“Correct. So you have been invited here to be asked whether you wish to receive your reward in advance,” Ost continued.

“Reward?” That was the first I’d heard about this.

“A reward from the legendary weapons, for safely saving the world or overcoming the waves,” Atla reported to me after listening to the voice from the floating light.

A reward for saving the world, huh? Perhaps they could have opened with all this.

“The first step is to return to your own world. In this case, your reward includes three wishes there, for almost anything you could want,” Atla continued.

“Anything?” I questioned.

“Apparently the spirits can exert some influence over the ‘causality’ that your world operates under, Master Naofumi. They can make you rich or give you a good job to ensure you’ll never want for anything in your life,” Atla explained. “No living forever though.”

“Interesting,” I murmured.

“As this would constitute leaving early, however, they wouldn’t be able to do quite that much for you. Maybe you could take a few people back with you, something like that?” she said.

“Atla. How would you feel about that?” I asked her.

“I am always at your side, Master Naofumi. I would go with you to your world,” she replied without hesitation. I mean . . . that wasn’t a bad reward.

I looked at Ost and she gave a wry smile.

“Don’t worry about me. I know we don’t have that kind of relationship.” She chuckled.

“I should just be happy we met again at all, right?” I said.

“I live on inside your shield. I am the Spirit Tortoise, after all,” she reminded me. Very humble of her . . . She did seem like a nice person.

“Is there no way I could bring you out of the shield somehow? As a familiar or

something?” I wondered. For some reason, Ost looked at the image of Raph-chan II. There was definitely something going on with that cutie.

“That might be possible . . . but I’m happy where I am,” she said.

“Okay . . .” I got my thinking back on track. I did want to return to my own world and couldn’t really ask for more than that.

“The Shield Spirit proposes that you return to your own world, forget all conflict, and live in peace. Of course, he promises to make things work smoothly even if Raphtalia goes with you. However, he is also saying that the negotiations with Raphtalia’s spirit may be a bit troublesome.”

“Raphtalia?” I asked.

“The Shield Spirit is asking if he got the wrong idea about the two of you,” Atla said.

“I mean . . .” It wouldn’t be a bad choice to have Raphtalia come to my world and for us to stay together forever. Raphtalia’s feelings mattered too, of course. She had said that she liked me. There was a bit of an age gap, but she looked like an adult and the Shield Spirit was saying he could make it work.

Yeah. That seemed like a pretty good reward for all the effort I had put in.

“Let me tell you the other choices,” Ost continued. “The second is to remain in this world and live out your days here, worshipped as a hero. This is the one that many heroes from the past have chosen.” I mean, I couldn’t understand it myself, but I could see it working for those lucky enough to just have been normal heroes. If you never learned the shitty truth about this messed-up world, it would probably be pretty awesome.

“That doesn’t sound like much of a reward to me,” I sniped.

“Isn’t fighting for others, forging a place for yourself, and saving an entire

world the most brilliant possible reward?" Ost responded in the words of the spirit.

"I feel like I'm being pumped by a salesman!" For being a ball of light, this shield had a silver tongue. Seriously. I wasn't naive enough to fall for that kind of "reward."

"The third option is to return once to your own world but retain the right to come back here again," Ost continued.

"Any point to that?" I asked.

"Don't ask me . . ." she said. I gave it some more thought. I guess being able to go and then come back made some sense—completing unfinished business in the other world before coming here to live out your days. I could understand it. This world was rotten to the core though, so I wouldn't be choosing that one.

Then the faces, the smiles, of everyone from the village appeared in my mind. I wanted to go back, and yet . . .

"I've got lots of questions," I said.

"Go ahead," Ost said.

"Do I have to decide this right now?" I asked.

"Yes. It seems so. Timing this at any other point would be difficult, and your next chance would likely be when the world is finally at peace," Ost explained. That meant I could go home right now. I might even be able to take Raphtalia with me, who was currently off in Kizuna's world.

"Why am I being offered this now? After all this time?" I'd been tricked, suffered, almost died, and been through so much already, and this option had never come up. So I wanted to know why I was being presented with this choice now.

“To put it plainly . . . the Shield Spirit is saying that you have suffered the cruelest fate of any of the past Shield Heroes, Master Naofumi,” Atla said. The spirits the same color as the shield were rotating around close to me.

That was one honor I could have done without.

“The spirits are saying that, now that the end draws near, the legendary weapons have been worn down too much by the hand of the enemy. The coming fight might already be beyond them. In that case, at least saving the heroes who were summoned against their will to this world is one possible move,” Atla explained.

“Now, though? After everything I’ve been through?” I couldn’t let that point go yet.

“Your being close to death is also part of the reason. They intend to give the Sword, Bow, and Spear Heroes the same opportunity, if they fall close to death themselves,” Atla continued.

“If I choose to return . . . what happens to this world? To everyone in the village? To this nation?” I asked, with some trepidation.

“Most likely . . . they will be wiped out,” Atla replied. I couldn’t take them all along. I could only take Raphtalia and Atla with me to my world. I wondered what kind of face Raphtalia would make if I told her to cast this world aside and say goodbye to everyone.

I also remembered what Atla had told me before she died.

“I can’t leave yet. I’ll go back once I’ve saved this world . . . once I can accept the outcome,” I decided. I did want to go back. But I had people I needed to protect too. People I could never forgive, and people I needed to defeat. So I had to stay here until I was satisfied with everything.

Not to mention, this whole deal was pretty suspicious. If I chose to return right away, it felt like they might tell me I wasn't a hero after all—the bad ending.

Okay, so I'd played too many video games.

As I pondered such pointless things, the place on my arm where the shield had been started to softly glow. I thought this must be the Shield Spirit acting happy for some reason.

"Are you sure about this?" Ost confirmed. "Recklessness will only get you killed. Are you sure you have no regrets?"

"I may have some. But rather than go home and regret things there, I'd rather stay and regret them here. I've got too much baggage to carry back . . . I'd need a car to make the trip," I said. You could make a trip even with the heaviest baggage, if you had a car. Rather than walk home now, just dropping out, I wanted to drive off into the best possible ending.

If I was going to take Raphtalia, I wanted her to choose that for herself. I only wanted to return after seeing everyone happy in the village. I'd taken on a lot of burdens, that was true . . . but it felt good.

"The other spirits are saying the Shield Spirit made a good choice," Atla reported.

"Whatever. Just give me more info," I replied. I still had a bunch of questions I wanted to hit this Shield Spirit with. There were still so many mysteries here that at times it was like this world was purposefully keeping things from me.

"First . . . back to the beginning. Why did you summon me?" I asked.

"Because, apparently, you were qualified to become a hero, Master Naofumi," Atla relayed. "He seems happy with his choice too, citing your

determination to carry on even as you spew up blood.” All of the four holy spirits were moving around rapidly, trying to tell me something. In the middle of them, it looked like the Shield Spirit was almost puffing up his chest proudly.

“Spewing up blood! Whose fault do you think that is?!” I fumed. Still, qualified to become a hero! It did feel nice to hear, but here I was, casting doubts on how legitimate this offer was; that alone seemed to put any “qualifications” I had into doubt.

“The Sword, Spear, and Bow Spirits are upset with the Shield Spirit right now. They are taking exception with him always managing to skillfully summon his first choice for hero,” Atla reported.

“What does that make the others?” I inquired. First choice? It made it sound like some kind of entrance examination.

“Hold on . . . yes . . . it sounds like they were generally around the third choices,” Atla finally relayed. Ren, Motoyasu, and Itsuki were . . . the backups. I couldn’t very well share this information with them.

Even worse, I was his spirit’s first choice—the one of the four of us who probably had the most issues. I wondered if this spirit was quite right in his glowing spherical head. Maybe he just hadn’t shot too high, just compromised with me from the start. I wouldn’t be happy with that either.

“It seems that even if they do manage to summon their first choices, they often just get killed really quickly. So sometimes the first choice doesn’t work out the best,” Atla explained. A trip to Siltvelt was likely to get you killed by some plot or another. I could attest to that.

There could also be heroes whom they didn’t expect much from but who really grew into the role. In other words, the order of candidates probably

didn’t matter that much. From that perspective, Ren and the others had survived for this long, so they might not have been bad picks after all.

“Third candidates generally have high potential as a hero, but also have some serious problems they need to work through,” Atla said, providing more details.

“Okay. And?” I said.

“When they receive their rewards, their deaths are of course corrected,” Atla went on. Those three had died before they were summoned, after all, so that seemed like an absolute condition for their reward. Suffering long and hard to save this world just to go home and die again instantly didn’t seem very fair.

“By that logic, it makes it sound like I’ve got a serious problem too,” I said. At my response, the Shield Spirit started to bob up and down. What was he doing? It almost felt mocking in intent.

“He said that, it being his duty to protect others, the Shield Spirit would never make a mistake in choosing his hero. Indeed, there is no way you would ever bend before the obstruction we face,” Atla relayed. Obstruction, he said. That sounded like the spirit knew something about the cause of all this. That was something I should definitely be asking about. “You don’t seem to understand. The Shield Spirit chose you, Master Naofumi, summoned you specifically for this task. You should be proud of that fact.”

“I do understand. I just have other things I want to ask,” I said. “So tell me.”

“They don’t seem to know much about anything other than the role of the legendary weapons. Would you like to hear about that?” Atla asked.

“Yes, that sounds good. What was this ‘obstruction’ he just talked about?” I replied.

“That would be the original enemy against which the legendary weapons are

intended to fight," Atla revealed.

"Which is what? Who?" Any more information would be fantastic at this point.

"That . . . they don't know. This isn't an entity against which they can hope to win in a direct fight, an entity that eats worlds. It is the role of the heroes to stop that foe from getting into this world," Atla said.

"So they are hunkering down and fending this foe off?" I asked.

"In the least, they tell me, it is an entity with more power than the four holy spirits that control this world," Atla relayed. Hah! Mysteries on top of mysteries.

"In any case, it sounds like this foe is the one pulling the strings, seeking to destroy the worlds by fusing them using the waves," I pondered. Sounded like "World Eater" might be a good name for now. In game terminology, this sounded like one of those awful unwinnable story battles, which meant we had to protect this world and stop the World Eater from having their way.

"Yes. That is the case . . . most likely," Ost confirmed.

"The enemies this time are also the vanguard of this foe. There was some interference with the gauntlets, and they also jammed the part meant to tell you about the shield power-up method . . . The same goes for the user of the book vassal weapon," Atla continued the explanation. So this is what I understood: we didn't get help with the power-up method because of this enemy interfering. And that meant Kyo was also the vanguard of this foe. That really made sense. The personalities of the two of them were far too similar!

The Shield Spirit started floating around again, making his presence known.

"If you wish it, Master Naofumi, the Shield Spirit will respond to your brave resolve. You won't fall to that pathetic attack again. Scum like him is no enemy

of yours,” Atla said.

“Big words, but still . . .” I couldn’t be so sure. Then the other spirits swooshed around in front of the Shield Spirit and started to appeal to me as well. As though cutting off the two different colored ones, one of the eight was also trying to get my attention.

“Do you wish to fight that imposter directly, Master Naofumi? By your own hand?” Atla asked.

“Yes. If at all possible,” I responded.

“These spirits are saying that they wish to temporarily lend you their powers. If you accept, then until you summon the Shield Spirit again the restrictions on having to use a shield can be stopped,” Atla revealed.

“In other words . . . I’ll be able to fight with a weapon other than a shield?” I confirmed.

“Yes. You can call the shield anytime you like. Until that time, and with the permission of the other seven star heroes, you will be able to fight using their weapons,” Atla said. “However, in order to fully revive it, you will need to take your stolen weapon back from that scum.” As the spirit flew around me, lending me his power, I understood which weapon it was. The way to defeat that Whip Hero—no, that infiltrator from another world—was also imparted to me.

Interesting. So that was the proper way to defeat him. With that, yes, I should be able to win.

I’d lost before because losing Atla had narrowed my vision. Next time I could take him.

“The spirit asks that you correct the holder of his weapon,” Atla reported.

“I can only do my best. You’ve seen what that looks like. Don’t expect too

much from me," I cautioned.

"He isn't one of the four heroes, and he isn't one of the seven star heroes either. Free the five trapped vassals from him, please," Atla responded.

"I will. I know how to do it now too. One last thing . . . Right before being summoned, I was reading *The Records of the Four Holy Weapons*. Just what was that?" I asked.

"A text that predicted a sliver of the future and the door to another world. It seems it greatly missed the mark," Atla responded. Then both Atla and Ost, accompanied by the spirits, floated up into the air.

"I am with you always, Master Naofumi," Atla said.

"Atla . . . I failed to protect you," I managed to finally say.

"Master Naofumi," she replied.

"What?" I almost couldn't look at her—but then she smiled at me.

"I don't want the things I said upon my deathbed to chain you down in life. I want you to live as you are, Master Naofumi," she explained.

"You mean you've been watching me since your death?" I asked.

"Yes. It is difficult for me to see you pushing yourself so hard," she replied.

"That's another difficult request . . ." Live as I am. I was a pretty arrogant and distrusting human being, even if I did say so myself. Accepting the feelings of those who cared for me while not changing how I lived would be almost impossible. This was Atla herself telling me this though, so it seemed okay to disregard her previous comments.

She was dead, and she was still lecturing me.

"Very well. You gave your life to protect me, Atla, so I'll do my best to take

your request onboard,” I replied.

“That’s the Master Naofumi I remember! If you meet someone who displays the same kind of love for you as Raphtalia or I, you should just accept it,” she said.

“I can’t imagine anyone else meeting those conditions anytime soon,” I commented. I couldn’t really imagine anyone giving Atla or Raphtalia a run for their money in loving me. Atla just had to laugh.

“There are more rivals than you think,” she said.

“You don’t seem that bothered by them,” I replied.



“That’s right. I’ve already become your shield, Master Naofumi.” I’d expect no less from Atla. It brought a smile to my face.

“Indeed,” I replied. I reached out toward her . . . and we held hands. Touching her again, I wasn’t even sad, and yet tears came to my eyes.

“Will I see you again?” I asked.

“I’m always with you,” came the reply. Then I held Ost’s hand as well.

“As you fight to save this world, we are always at your side. If you call out to us, we will respond. May mercy and the heart of the Spirit Tortoise be with you, Shield Hero,” Ost said.

“Very well,” I managed around the lump in my throat.

“One final message from the Shield Spirit,” Ost said.

“What now?” I wasn’t one for long goodbyes. The Shield Spirit was bobbing about close to Ost, trying to draw attention back to himself.

“The woman called S’yne who currently stands by you, the Shield Spirit is also going to lend her some of his power. She should be a little more potent going forward,” Ost relayed. So the spirits saw S’yne as an ally.

“Okay . . . sounds good,” I replied.

“I pray that happiness lies at the end of your path, Shield Hero,” Ost finished, smiling down at me.

“I will always be watching over you,” Atla added. Then both of them turned into pure light and slipped away. After watching them go, my awareness started to wake back up to reality.

Chapter Six: The Staff Hero

As I opened my eyes, pain lanced through me. I grunted.

“Nao—”

“Naofumi!” It was S’yne and her familiar who shouted out to me as I awoke and sat up. Had they been nursing me? There was something on my chest . . . a square gemstone.

The stone glittered with a pale light. I could tell it was stopping my pain. So the power of this accessory had healed the wounds in both me and the shield?

Giving the matter some thought again now . . . I wondered who just S’yne was, anyway.

I mean, I knew she was a vassal weapon holder from another world. But it was also true that there were still many mysteries surrounding her.

“I’m fine now,” I said. I likely couldn’t talk to them again without the shield here, but even without it, the shield was still lending me its power. “Ren and the others are still in conference?”

“Yes. About Raphtalia too. She risked her life to save us, and then . . .” the familiar started, but I cut it off.

“I know what happened.”

“Raph!” Raph-chan came out from under the bed and leapt up onto me.

“Even when I was unconscious, I was aware of my surroundings through the weapons,” I explained. “I have some idea of what’s been going on. The queen is gone too?”

“That’s right. After we escaped from Faubrey . . . none of the treatments could save her,” the familiar confirmed.

“I saw it,” I said.

“Melty and Filo are participating in the funeral at the moment,” the familiar said.

“I see . . .” I’d pay my respects later.

“What are you going to do now?” the familiar inquired.

“Grief has closed the eyes of one of the seven star heroes. It’s time he opened them again,” I declared.

The state funeral had seen everyone crying.

After it was finished . . . one person was left standing in front of the queen’s coffin, inside which the monarch slumbered so peacefully. Behind them stood Melty, her eyes red, holding hands with Filo.

“Melty!” I called.

“Ah, Naofumi!” She came running over to me, crying anew. “My mother . . . my mother!”

“I’m sorry. I failed to protect her,” I said.

“No . . . no need for that. Filo and all the others said how hard you tried . . . and I saw how badly you were wounded,” Melty replied.

“But I still failed,” I said. That was the truth. The queen had done so much for me—never lying, lending me her strength, mobilizing the entire nation to aid me.

“Melty. There’s no need to hold back. I failed to protect her . . . You can hate me, if you need to,” I told her. She gave a scream of anguish and grabbed onto me, tears streaming down her face. It hurt, without the protection of the shield, but this was pain that I had to accept.

Seeing Melty break down, Filo also started to cry her eyes out. For a short while, I just stood there and comforted the two of them.

“I’m sorry, Naofumi,” Melty eventually said.

“No need to apologize. I hope you feel a little better,” I replied.

“Thank you,” she managed. Melty stood up and moved to leave the church.

“Are you finished with the funeral?” I asked.

“I’ve said my goodbyes to my mother. Now I need to prepare for the coming battle,” Melty replied.

“I see. You’re tough, aren’t you?” I said.

“Filo!” Melty called.

“I’m here!” Melty climbed onto Filo’s back and they raced away. They were headed to the same conference the heroes were currently holding.

“Well then . . .” I proceeded toward the one standing in front of the coffin—Trash.

The queen looked beautiful, even in death, like she was about to sit up and start giving orders. Trash was quietly looking at her corpse. The images the legendary weapons had shown me had told me how much he loved the queen. Trash had noticed me, but he still only looked at the queen.

“Have you come to laugh at me? An old fool, unable to protect a single thing that’s precious to me?” he asked.

“No,” I replied. I placed some flowers into the coffin. Just that simple act filled me with sad feelings.

The queen had continued to lend me her strength. That was why I’d also done my best to meet her requests. I could have gone to Siltvelt and started a war with this country. It was thanks to the hard work of the queen that Melromarc hadn’t gone to war with Siltvelt. I understood now just how hard that had been.

Nobles and religions from within the nation had continued to hate and hound me. She must have been defending me from attacks I had no idea about. That would explain why she had always seemed so busy. She’d given herself for the sake of her nation, for the sake of the world, and yet none of it had been rewarded. Now on top of that, she’d tried so many times—countless times—to set her daughter right.

None of those efforts had taken either. Witch continued to happily knock people down for the sake of her own desires.

I saw how the queen had been desperate to change the minds of her daughter and husband so they wouldn’t hate me. But all of that was finished now. That same daughter had rejected her mother’s maternal feelings, and in turn it led to her mother losing her very life.

All Trash had been able to do was watch his daughter’s twisted work.

“Shield Hero. I leave this nation in your hands. I won’t be fighting,” Trash said. My anger instantly flared up, and I grabbed Trash by the collar.

“Did your wife tell you to leave this nation with me?! You aren’t even going to try and understand what it was your wife tried to impart to you, as she lay dying?!” I raged. A flicker of reciprocal anger did appear on Trash’s face, just for a moment.

It vanished just as quickly, however, and he looked away.

“What should I do, then? I can’t . . .” Trash mumbled.

“Will standing here grieving bring the queen back? Will praying return Atla to life? Will wishing for a miracle bring peace to the world?” I questioned, almost accusingly.

“Shut up! What . . . what the hell do you know?” Trash’s anger ignited again, and he took a swing at me. I avoided it smoothly. Trash glared at me as though he had finally found something to smash his anger against.

“You think I don’t understand?” I countered. Trash had no reply for that.

I thought of Atla.

The girl who I whispered to, the girl inside my shield, was no longer in this world. She had given up her body in order to protect us all.

“I am going to avenge Atla. I’m also going to execute your daughter, Witch. She’s nothing but a poison to Melromarc.” I was going to put on a real big show. If the spirits didn’t like that, they’d just have to lump it. “Siltvelt treats the Shield Hero as a god. Melromarc is already mine, and Faubrey will fall next. Then all the major nations will belong to me!” I gave an evil cackle. “The start of a new world order.”

“What are you talking about?!” Trash raged.

“Once that happens, you are first on the chopping block, old man. You worthless hero. Then Melty, I reckon. She seems to think I’m a good person. Big mistake. It will be fun to see how she reacts. Or maybe I’ll do what your wife wanted and make her my sex slave,” I pondered. God, if Melty actually heard any of this, the wounds from Takt would be the least of my worries. Without the shield, even Melty’s magic could really put the hurt on me now.

Still, I hoped that was enough to make Trash really mad.

“I won’t allow that!” Trash focused his pure anger on his fist and swung for me.

I let him hit me.

I didn’t know what level Trash was. With the shield slumbering, however, I did taste blood in my mouth.

“I will be the one . . . I will protect the Melromarc that Mirellia so loved! I won’t let scum like you have it!” he declared.

“Good. That’s the way. See, you can do it,” I said, recovering from the blow.

“What?” Trash was stunned by my response.

“I ask you again. Did your wife say to leave this nation to me? She didn’t, did she? She left it to you! The Staff Hero and the Wisest King of Wisdom! You need to listen to the final request of the woman you so loved!” I shouted. With a stunned gasp, Trash’s eyes opened wide and he took a large step backward.

Then he wiped away his tears.

“You are right. My eyes have been clouded. I let my sadness, my grief at losing someone so close to me, overtake me . . . and I directed all my hatred from the past at you, Shield . . . Hero Iwatani,” Trash said. In truth, he probably wanted to attack me for failing to protect his wife. Trash still hated me, clearly. They all seemed pretty selfish to me, but he had plenty of reasons to hate the Shield Hero. And yet, from the Trash standing in front of me now, I couldn’t feel a single one of them.

I felt something regal from him now, like when we had been opposed before the arrival of the queen. Indeed, something even more than that, as he looked at me so sharply.

“My wife left this nation to me. All I can do is abide by her final words. I won’t ask for your forgiveness. But will you still fight for my nation? Please, I beg you!” Trash bowed low before me . . . and I couldn’t help but splutter with laughter.

“No need to bow to me for that. The queen has already bowed enough for both of you,” I told him.

“But . . .” Trash started. The queen had said that she wanted my aid in protecting her nation. That she would do whatever she could to aid me in that. The queen had kept her word right up until she died, meaning I had to keep my promise with her.

Now I had to fight in order to clean away the true trash infesting Faubrey.

Just like Ren, Motoyasu, and Itsuki had changed, like I myself had changed, everyone had the potential to change.

“You’re going to change, right?” I asked him. “Then stop talking and bowing your head and take action.” It was easy to talk about defeating Takt, the one who had killed Atla, to claim you could save the world in an instant. But someone who was just all talk couldn’t defeat our foes and couldn’t save the world.

We weren’t going to be playing at politics now. We were going to war. A war we absolutely must not lose. A war to avenge all who had died.

“What are you still doing here then? Go and get to work for this nation!” I barked.

“Very well.” Trash lifted his face and gave me a salute with a sharp expression. As though responding to his words, a shining staff appeared in front of Trash. “This is . . .” Yes. The very moment the Seven Star Staff had been

waiting for—for the clouds to clear from Trash's festering eyes. Or in this moment, should I say King Aultcray?

Trash grabbed the staff. Lightning scattered around him, and the seven star hero was revived.

Staff Spirit, I've kept my promise to you.

Trash accepted the staff . . . and then took out his ceremonial dagger, cut off his overgrown hair and beard, and then stood straight.

"Let's go, Hero Iwatani," he said.

"I am with you. Wisest King of Wisdom . . . Aultcray," I responded. But Aultcray shook his head.

"I failed to protect the one I loved. 'Trash' is the only name worthy of a fool like me," he said. I had no response to that. "I am Trash. I brought all of this upon us. You should continue to call me Trash," he told me. He was like a different person. I'd heard that only fools called themselves wise men, but what kind of man called himself "trash?"

I had to believe he was the better of the two.

"As you say. Trash, I'm leaving our strategy to you. I'm counting on all that wisdom supposedly packed into your head," I told him.

"We shall destroy these enemies with the fewest sacrifices possible," he said.

We turned from the queen's coffin and quietly . . . started walking.

We arrived in front of the conference room where Ren and the others were in discussion. I'd picked up Motoyasu along the way, who had been playing with his three filolials.

“Ah. The Shield Hero, and . . .” The castle soldier swallowed his words, looking behind me to see S’yne and Trash giving off a radiant aura. An aura you could see in a single glance—truly something only a hero was capable of.

It was true. Trash looked like a completely different person. It wasn’t whatever I’d felt the first time I saw him but rather . . . a charisma, almost. Like I couldn’t take my eyes off him.

“Your majesty,” the guard responded, carefully choosing his words.

“Good man. I wish to talk with the heroes and the coalition army. Will you please open the door?” Trash asked.

“Your majesty!” The guard gave a salute and then opened the door. We proceeded into the conference room.

“Naofumi!” As soon as Ren saw me, he stood up and came over. “Have you recovered from your injuries?”

“For the time being,” I responded. There was still pain, but I could move, and I was continuing to recover. Combined with the blessings of the shield, by the time it came to fight the scum, I would be recovered enough to take him.

“And . . .” Ren saw Trash and stopped dead. “Is that who I think it is?”

“Yeah, one and the same. I’m just as surprised as you,” I replied. With a stern look on his face, Trash looked over everyone in the meeting and showed them his staff. His face looked so regal it almost made me want to check if it was really him.

It wasn’t his arrogant face from when I first saw him, or the pathetic and hate-filled one that had come later. If he’d been like this from the start, I’m pretty sure I’d never have beaten him.

“So the Staff Hero of Melromarc is finally ready to fight, huh? A little too late,

isn’t it?” The old genmu guy took an aggressive stance with Trash.

“I’m not going to deny it. My eyes were clouded before, but no longer. In accordance with the final words of my wife, the queen, I will defend this nation,” Trash said. Even just yesterday, hearing such a comment would have sent him into a rage, trashing the room before being chased out. This new Trash, however, admitted to his own mistake.

“Melty,” he said.

“Y-yes,” his daughter answered, standing up straight. She had been running the meeting alongside Ren. Perhaps sensing something out of place, Melty knitted her eyebrows as she dealt with her father.

“Will you continue this discussion? Hero Iwatani and myself will join you,” Trash said.

“Very well,” Melty agreed. Trash pulled out a chair for me and then sat down next to me. Just that made everyone hold their breath. It was clear that he had let our past wash away and was showing respect to me.

It was even freaking me out. All he had really done so far was pull out a chair with a really serious expression on his face, and even I was thinking that something was up with him.

It was like that old trope when someone who had been completely worthless up until that moment suddenly started pulling their weight and it made them look so cool. The only test now was how far he could exceed the obvious expectations being heaped on him.

“What are you doing, daughter? Proceed. We have little time remaining to us, correct?” Trash said.

“V-very well then,” Melty stumbled. She proceeded to take out some

documents and start to write on a board placed on the wall. It was a breakdown of Takt's forces. He had seemingly deployed all sorts of weapons into battle.

Things looked bad for us, I'd say that much.

Takt was coming directly for Melromarc from Faubrey. He was calling for the nations along the way to surrender and taking those that wouldn't by force. For that, his progress almost seemed too fast to me.

He was even finding the time for all those public executions.

They would reach Melromarc within a few days, anyway. That was the situation.

"The Sword, Spear, and Bow Heroes have not participated in the defensive line yet?" Trash asked. Melty even went so far as to raise her hand before answering.

"The Faubrey weapons and abilities of their hero pose too significant a threat. So long as they have their hero, we cannot deploy ours carelessly, and so we made the hard choice to keep them out of the fighting," she explained.

"Hmmm. A wise decision. These 'airplanes' then. I have some understanding of the kind of weapon they are, but do they really pose such a threat?" Trash asked.

"Yes. After bombing using airplanes and airships, they drop troops via parachute and occupy the target. Anybody who gets close to them is repelled by machine guns. High-level dragon knights from each nation have attempted close combat, but the pilots remain far too high a level for that to work," the report continued. The level gap meant just trying to muscle through couldn't work against them either.

A simple strategy, but that simplicity itself made it difficult to defeat. Magic or

long-range attacks might have proved effective at shooting them down, but the levels of the pilots prevented those attacks from landing too.

“How many airplanes do they have?” Trash asked.

“They apparently use a maximum of five. They board close to the battlefield and then drop their infantry from the airspace over the enemy nation and suppress the inhabitants,” Melty explained.

“I would like to hear the opinions of the heroes about these airplanes,” Trash stated.

“I’m afraid we can only provide an outline. I guess they are possible to realize here, but it’s not like you summoned aerospace engineers,” I responded.

“I need to know how these airplanes are used in your worlds, heroes. How they feature in conflicts, and what other applications they have. As much as you can tell me,” Trash clarified.

“Is that stuff really important? They have already existed in the past in this world, correct?” I confirmed.

“They have, but I need to confirm all the possible details or I won’t be able to create a strategy,” Trash said. With that, he proceeded to dig down as deep as possible into our knowledge on the subject, pressing for information so detailed I couldn’t imagine it would possibly be of any practical use. He also asked about guns too. Itsuki turned out to know a lot on that subject, including the names of the parts themselves.

So he came from a world with superpowers but was a military fanboy himself, I guess.

I wanted to make such a comment, but it wouldn’t help anything. I decided against it.

Thinking about it for a moment longer, I realized he would need a gun or a bow or something to use his Accuracy ability. So his knowledge of guns probably made sense.

“That’s still not enough,” Trash said once we were finished.

“What?” I asked.

“There’s still something that feels incomplete,” Trash clarified. After everything we’d already told him, he still pressed us with further questions. The other heroes, Melty, and I considered that attitude with suspicion to start with, but the other heads of state—especially those of around the same age as Trash—were all quietly smiling with reassured looks on their faces.

“Hey. What’s going on?” I asked one of them.

“That’s proof that the Wisest King of Wisdom is truly back with us. He continues to gather information until he has everything he needs. After all we’ve done to him, that’s how we know he can be relied upon now,” came the reply.

“Fair enough . . .” I managed.

“If he isn’t confident in his strategy yet, that means he still hasn’t received a piece of critical information from you. Please continue to aid him,” the man asked. I still didn’t understand where that faith was coming from, but I’d never seen Trash like this either. I decided to remain quietly optimistic.

“Hero Iwatani,” Trash said to me.

“Y-yes?” I responded. It still threw me off to no longer have him just call me “shield.” There was an incredible light in his eyes too. Like, I might get sucked into it and start spilling all my secrets, whatever they were.

“I will leave the leader of our enemies to you, Hero Iwatani. Is that

acceptable?” he asked.

“Yeah. I’m going to crush his face,” I responded.

“Naofumi, can you handle it? Your shield has been taken from you, right?” Ren asked, concern in his voice.

“I’m fine. Which reminds me . . .” In the same moment I had the thought, the weapons of the heroes who were present all started to faintly glow. The light moved from Ren, Motoyasu, and Itsuki, through the place where my own shield had been, and then out to Fohl and Trash.

“What’s this? ‘Convert?’” Trash queried.

“Release of the power-up method? An item I’ve never seen before popped up,” Fohl said. Both of them muttered to themselves while tracking something with their eyes.

That had done it, anyway. The synergy effect between my weapons and the heroes’ weapons had been further unlocked. The power-up method for the gauntlets had also been updated. Trash reverently offered his staff to me.

“The staff apparently wishes to make a special exception and lend its strength to you as one of your personal possessions, Hero Iwatani,” he explained.

“Are you okay with that?” I questioned.

“I am fundamentally a strategist. Weapons are not so important to me,” he clarified.

“I see,” I said. I gripped Trash’s staff. An item appeared, much like when I still had the shield. Then a system message popped up.

Possession by the Shield Hero permitted as a special exception!

Exception weapon unlocked!

Fenrir Rod conditions unlocked!

Fenrir Rod 0/90 C

<unable to unlock> equip bonus, Fenrir Force

special effect: gleipnir rope, rebellion against heaven

mastery level: 0

I proceeded to check my status. When compared to the status I was familiar with, quite a bit had changed. I was going to have to adapt my fighting style a little.

The rod itself was decorated with an engraving of a wolf biting it. It had chains wrapped around it, making it somewhat difficult to hold. When I checked the weapon book, quite a lot had been unlocked. It looked like the seven star fixed ability called Convert allowed the unlocked status of weapons from the trusted four holy heroes to be carried over.

That alone provided a pretty big boost in stats. However . . . they were lower than the shield values I remembered. This was likely because the seven stars were lower-ranking weapons than the four holy ones.

Next I looked at the staff power-up method.

“Fohl, share the power-up method in your help with us. We’ll tell you ours too. Then put them into practice,” I said.

“S-sure. I can see it now. I searched all around before and couldn’t find it at all,” Fohl reported.

“Ren, Motoyasu, Itsuki, you guys understand too, right? Powering up heroes is about trust. I’ll tell you the power-up method on this staff that Trash had, and Fohl will do the same with his gauntlets,” I said.

“Sure thing,” Ren said.

“Understood, I say!” Motoyasu chimed in.

“Okay,” Itsuki added. We proceeded to share our power-up methods among ourselves.

“Hold on a moment. Isn’t that one of the power-up methods that we tried before, and it didn’t work?” Ren asked.

“It’s used as the seven star power-up method,” I explained. “With the restriction of only getting stronger if the heroes work together.”

“Like we need another pain in the ass,” Ren grumbled. He wasn’t wrong, of course. This was also likely due to the hindrances caused by the wave enemies. At least I finally had an answer that maybe made sense.

It was a piece of luck, anyway, that the gauntlets and staff had the same power-up method even though they were different types. I proceeded to perform various enhancements on the Fenrir Rod.

My status got a big boost as a result, even if it was still not enough to match the Spirit Tortoise Carapace Shield. It would be unfair to compare anything to that, what with the enhancements it had received from the Shield of Compassion that had unlocked thanks to Atla.

“I’ve unlocked it, but I can’t use the equip bonus yet,” Fohl reported to me.

“We don’t have long, but get it done. The state will provide any materials you need for enhancements. You can take anything you need from the storeroom in my village too,” I told him.

“Okay,” he replied.

“Does that conclude our hero business? Then it’s time to narrow down our strategy.” Trash sat in his chair and declared the continuation of the meeting. He then proceeded to continue to ask us for knowledge about our home worlds, digging down into the finest details—so deep that just that information alone might be enough for him to have some kind of revolutionary idea.

Before I realized it, the sun was starting to set.

“There’s still more you need?” I asked.

“I could use some more, but that should be enough for today.” Trash started to write on the board. The castle guards gathered and started to note everything down. The old genmu guy had ordered them to do so.

The other heroes and I couldn’t help but nod when we saw what he was writing. Even more surprisingly, he even had detailed potential new weapons the enemy might use and ways to combat them.

I wondered what he was planning to do with all the information we had given him.

“I think that covers initial proposals,” Trash said, finally finished. Ideas numbered one to twenty were written up on the board, and Trash ordered the soldiers to prepare them all.

“Looks pretty thorough,” I replied.

“I’d like you heroes to divide up and operate in separate units,” Trash explained.

“I understand that much . . .” My eye had caught the date that Trash had written for when Takt would invade Melromarc. “You really think they will attack on this day?”

“Yes. The Faubrey hero will surely attack on this date—because that’s exactly what I would do. If he comes any earlier than that, we can only mock his ignorance,” Trash said. That made sense, as it would indeed suck if they attacked on that day—the day of the next wave.

That would be the most effective strategy.

We had all registered the dragon hourglass in Melromarc, anyway.

“What’s the state of the waves in each nation?” I asked.

“The shortest is the Melromarc hourglass. The others have more leeway,” came the reply.

“Okay.” This was still a serious problem. We wouldn’t stand a chance if a wave was called during a war with Faubrey, but we also couldn’t ignore the waves completely.

Which meant we needed to divide up the heroes.

“We’ll need the heroes to prepare in advance, too, as quickly as possible. Make use of those fast filolials if you can,” Trash said.

“Very well! Let’s move, my angels!” Motoyasu almost dashed out of the room with his trio. No one knew where he thought he was going.

“Then I’ll place you in this unit, Spear Hero,” Trash said. Then he carried on, making some other designations.

“Something else. Trash, I’ve got some people to introduce to you as further sources of information,” I said.

“Very well. Who might they be?” Trash asked. One of them was a pure source of information. Filled with pent-up anger, she would surely cooperate with us. She was my slave, first and foremost. She couldn’t turn me down.

As for the others . . . it would be faster for him to see for himself. He’d probably seen them before, but he wouldn’t know the extent of their abilities.

We set out to make the introductions.

Evening was closing in, but we needed all the time we could get, so I’d decided to show Trash the situation . . . that was, those in my village who might prove to be useful. He had joined us with the queen in fighting the Phoenix, so he had some idea of what we were working with, but probably no details about our fighting strength.

“Hey, bubba!” As soon as we returned via Ren’s portal, Keel spotted us and came over. “Are you okay now?”

“Getting there. Any problems here?” I asked.

“Nope. This guy here is the one who was next to the queen, right?” she said.

“That’s right,” I confirmed.

“This is our first time talking. Everyone in the nation knows my name, so I’m sure you do too. I’m Trash. Call me whatever you like,” he introduced himself.

“Bubba. Is this guy okay? He’s not another one like Bubba Spear, is he?” Keel asked.

“He should be okay . . .” I didn’t want him getting too masochistic either—although I was the one who named him.

“Bubba . . . where’s Raphtalia?” Keel asked.

“Staying alive, I can tell you that much. She’s fine. I’m going to bring her back, I promise,” I reassured her. Raphtalia’s vassal weapon had taken her to Kizuna’s world in order to keep her safe. Once everything here calmed down, I’d go and find her. I just needed her to hold on until then.

“Okay then, bubba! I’ll do what I can to help!” Keel enthused.

“Good girl!” I replied and was rewarded with some barks.

“I’m off to get stronger right away!” she yapped, turning into her puppy form and running off, likely going to raise her level. I’d leave her to it.

“Trash. Please come with me. Ren, you explain the situation to the others in the village,” I said.

“I’m on it,” Ren replied. Then I took Trash with me to make the introductions.

“Oh? Count, are you healed up already?” Rat asked.

“Getting there,” I repeated. I had arrived in Rat’s laboratory with Trash. There was something floating in the large culture tank. It looked a bit like a carriage. But it looked like it had a tail like Raph-chan. I wondered what the hell it was.

“Rat, you understand what we’re dealing with here? The upcoming war?” I asked.

“Yes. It was that seven star hero who injured you, Count, correct?” she confirmed.

“The one who cast you out?” I asked.

“Yes. He chose an alchemist, my rival, over me. Our research also overlapped, so it was a total mess,” Rat said. She’d talked about something like this before, but I hadn’t imagined them to be enemies.

It was an advantage to have someone who knew about our foes on our side, in any case. Takt had also made a mistake by letting someone with Rat's skills get away.

"They have an alchemist too?" I asked.

"Yes—an alchemist who still looks like a young girl," Rat confirmed.

"She specializes in machinery," I guessed.

"That would be the seven star hero. There's another one. She specializes in the creation of artificial life and, if I recall correctly, also has some skill in physical modification. I'm not sure how she pulled it off, but there's a chance the special ability to steal hero weapons was somehow provided by her," Rat theorized.

"Hmmm . . ." Itsuki had said he had probably been born with it, but there was the possibility it was an ability that was added later. Kyo had used an invention to steal the power of the Spirit Tortoise. Maybe this alchemist had given him that power.

The description kind of sounded like the one who had been tortured due to Raph-chan II's trickery. Then there was talk of being the advance guard for the waves . . . so we still needed to get to the bottom of who was behind all this.

"If you ask me, a pretty average alchemist," Rat went on. "More knowledge than most when it comes to artificial life perhaps, but not on my level. But I'm a specialist in monsters." So now we had a young girl alchemist and a sexy woman alchemist—and when making a choice between them, he had chosen the young girl. She didn't make as much of a strong impression as the one behind it all, however. "I'm still infuriated with her. She gave herself over to romance. I defeated her at alchemy. And he still chose her!"

It sounded like maybe Takt kicked Rat out once he realized she wasn't going to fall for him.

"So you got kicked out for not getting along with her?" I asked.

"More like because the field the seven star hero himself was following and my own research had some overlap. Airplanes, wasn't it? I remember debating with him that we should just use dragons and griffons," Rat explained.

"I also recall that Faubrey are using heavily modified tanks in their invasions," Trash commented.

"Is that so?" Rat replied. You only had to look at the culture tank to see that Rat's current research was into carriage-like monsters. If I recalled correctly, these monsters had a long-range sniping function among their attacks.

Their areas of research clearly did overlap then. It was just that Rat used monsters and our new enemies used machines. It was unclear what kind of difference that would make. I thought about bringing the concept of levels into it. I guessed machines had the advantage of relying on the level of their pilot. But if they got damaged or destroyed, then a whole new machine was required. Living creatures had to be leveled up individually, but unless they were completely killed, they could then be kept in battle by using healing magic.

I guess Rat had just proven too technically competent a rival, leading to her being kicked out of Faubrey.

"Raph!" One of the Raph species popped up. Rat was proceeding with her precise investigations into them, and there were loads of them in the village.

"Good timing. Trash, this is a type of monster that I want to show to you. I think we can make use of them in the operation you came up with," I said.

"My wife told me that these were monsters you brought here from another

world," Trash confirmed.

"That's right. They started out with a shikigami—a familiar from another world—but have now undergone their own unique evolution," I explained. I recalled how much Raph-chan had grown before using a class-up to turn most of the village monsters into a totally new species. "We call them the Raph species."

"I recall seeing them fighting the Phoenix. There's a wide variety of types, correct?" Trash said.

"It's a type of monster reached using a class-up, meaning many of them still have the original monster mixed in," I confirmed.

"I see." Trash nodded.

"Raph?" the newcomer asked.

"I'll want to use these in the fighting too. We have a severe lack of numbers," I said. To be brutally honest about it, the Melromarc soldiers were pretty under-leveled when compared to the horde from Faubrey. Hand-to-hand, I really thought we would be at a disadvantage. Of course, I planned on gathering volunteers from among my slaves, but that still wasn't going to reach anything close to the numbers we needed. That was why I wanted to also use our monsters, including the Raph species.

"Tell me, then, what kind of abilities do these monsters have?" Trash asked. I turned to Rat.

"There's a wide spread of abilities, depending on type. However, all of them can use illusion-type magic," she explained. They were modeled after Raphtalia, after all, who was skilled at illusion magic herself. Under the category of light and dark, she was good at concealing herself or causing confusion.

That said, Raphtalia herself didn’t use magic all that much. She was more focused on use of sword techniques.

“Users of illusion magic, huh? They do sound useful for my strategy. I think we can expect much from them individually too,” Trash assessed.

“I’ve got some other firepower I can bring to the table. If there are any weapons we need before the war starts, some guys I know will be able to help make them,” I said. I’d be placing an order with the old guy, Imiya’s uncle, and their master Motoyasu II before long. They were skilled and trustworthy.

“If they can work in collaboration with those from the castle . . . fine. Your explanation has provided much food for thought, Hero Iwatani,” Trash said.

“Glad I could be of help. I’m counting on you to provide the goods, tactically,” I told him.

“Leave it with me. I’m going to take a look at your other fighters and then return to the castle and hone my strategy again,” he replied.

“Okay,” I said. With that, Trash started to select those from my village who would take part in the fighting. Trash did provide some advice that, perhaps because we were fighting humans, indicated there were some individuals who probably shouldn't take part even if they wanted to. Those people really wanted to join in, so it wasn’t easy to talk them down. As Trash had indicated, there were some who had the will but not the way—those whose hands trembled once real combat started. There were also those who could probably handle monsters but wouldn’t be able to kill other people. I consoled those who shed tears at not being able to take part by telling them they didn’t need to take part in the violence. There was a tendency for these people to be among those who had originally been in the village. A lot of them had been women and children, after all.

“Shield Hero. I want to fight too,” Ruft declared, looking me right in the eye with his fists clenched. The way he looked at me reminded me of Raphtalia. They really were related. Their faces looked so similar.

“Ruft, I’m sorry, but you can’t join us,” I told him.

“Why!?” he responded.

“We have something we need you to do . . . but you lack the level, strength, and experience for actual combat. Even to protect everyone here, could you really bring yourself to kill people in battle?” I asked. He had no reply for that. I placed a consoling hand on his shoulder. “I understand how you feel. But you can’t push yourself too hard. Taking too much on and getting yourself killed is the worst thing you could do. I need you to help look after the Raph species,” I told him.

“Okay. But one day I want to become strong enough to protect everyone. After coming to this village, that’s the conclusion that I’ve reached for myself,” he replied. He was really growing up from the young kid he’d been when I first met him. He definitely was a lot like Raphtalia.

“You stick to it. That feeling is important. If possible, you should look at Melty and Trash as your examples, rather than Raphtalia or me. That would be the best thing for you and also allow you to help us the most,” I told him. Not to mention fulfilling his destiny of making Q’ten Lo a better place.

“If you say so,” he said, giving a nod filled with resolve.

As night descended further, I finally asked Ren to take Trash back to the castle.

Returning to the village, I saw Sadeena and S’yne drinking with some familiar-

looking faces.

“Hey, little Naofumi!” Sadeena waved me over. “Let me introduce the three Zeltoble mercenary gladiators who have rushed to my aid in this moment of crisis!”

“Huh? Rushed to whose aid now?” I wondered.

“What are you talking about?” The three in question had much the same reaction as me. Putting aside the pathetic noise I made in response to this statement, Sadeena started to introduce her battle buddies.

“First we have Larsazusa of the bamboo grove! She may also be known as little Sasa, but she’s the big sister to coliseum fighters everywhere!” Sadeena proclaimed with a flourish.

“What kind of an introduction was that? Stop making up weird titles for me!” snapped a panda therianthrope. I recalled that she had been fighting in the coliseum when I first met Sadeena. It looked like she had a dog—more like a wolf—therianthrope serving under her too.

“Next we have Elmelo, the earth tremor queen! This popular gladiator, also nicknamed little El, is a fixture in the coliseum’s heavyweight class!” Sadeena continued unabated.

“S-Shield Hero . . . it is a pleasure,” stammered out a large elephant therianthrope. Perhaps nervous at seeing me, she was wringing her hands terribly. For a moment, I had a flashback to being attacked by that mammoth in the baths in Siltvelt. In any case, there was a big gap with how she’d been when fighting in Zeltoble. Elephant therianthrope or not, it seemed more like she was playing a wolf in sheep’s clothing at the moment.

“You said there were three?” I asked. The panda therianthrope’s underling

shook their head, making clear it wasn't them. It couldn't be Shildina either. Was she so drunk she couldn't even count to three?

"And finally—" she started.

"Lady S'yne, the master clown! Keeping her audience entranced with her mysterious and chilling combat style!" S'yne posed proudly as her familiar talked her up—almost as though it was talking about itself!

"You're having some kind of meeting?" I asked. Sadeena seemed incredibly jovial about the entire situation, so much that it was hard to stop myself from commenting.

"We were trying to decide which side of the war to fight on, and then we got this summons," the panda revealed.

"Hold on!" Sadeena said. "I just introduced you because of the strength you would bring to our side. You guys are in the top five among everyone I've ever fought. And yet the two of you are still going to join the Faubrey forces? Sasa? El?"

"The other side is pretty selfish, just having their way with whatever they like. Folk in Zeltoble are angry at being made such a mockery of," the panda pondered.

"Takt and his forces are quite disliked," the elephant politely explained, looking at me the entire time. "What with all the turmoil they have caused in Zeltoble, and the killing of the heroes." These two were likely connected to Siltvelt. The panda therianthrope seemed pretty easygoing anyway—easy to get along with.

"Think you've got a chance to win? We might help out, if certain conditions are met," the panda therianthrope continued, making a circle with her fingers

to indicate money.

“And if they aren’t met, you’ll leave?” I asked.

“Not necessarily. I’ve heard talk of the Wisest King of Wisdom getting back in the game. A victory as part of the forces of the Shield Hero himself also seems likely to boost my earning potential,” the panda reasoned. Yep. That sounded like a mercenary working for money. Really easy to understand. I liked her analysis and her way of thinking.

“Nadia . . . Sadeena was your real name, right? With you here, I reckon the safe money goes on you guys,” the panda continued. Interesting. They were choosing to join this side because they knew how strong Sadeena was.

“Sounds good. If you’re joining our forces, have at it. Sadeena, you handle the details,” I said.

“No problem. All shall be as you say, little Naofumi,” Sadeena replied.

“You’ve got this drunkard completely under your thumb, haven’t you? Sounds like the rumors are true,” the panda muttered.

“Just so we are on the same page, what rumors are you talking about?” I asked.

“That you’re a monster when it comes to drinking, Shield Hero. Am I wrong?” the panda questioned.

“Oh, it’s true. Too strong almost for me to handle,” Sadeena admitted.

“Sweet Naofumi holds his liquor like no other!” Now Shildina sidled over. This many heavyweight therianthropes in one place was a little overwhelming.

“Geh! There’s another one!” The panda therianthrope was surprised.

“This is little Shildina. She’s my younger sister,” Sadeena explained. The panda

therianthrope looked like she'd broken out in a cold sweat. I guessed that Sadeena alone had drunk her under the table multiple times in the past.

"Are we done with this yet? We'd like to get out of here tonight," the panda said.

"Oh my. You're leaving? The night is young! Let's drink some more!" Sadeena proposed.

"Let's drink lots more!" Shildina chimed in. Then the killer whale sisters proceeded to latch firmly onto the panda and elephant therianthropes.

"Hey! Stop that—" The elephant therianthrope looked at me with pleading eyes.

"Don't give them too hard a time," I managed.

"Of course not. If you'll join in, little Naofumi, I'll let up on them completely," Sadeena suggested.

"Oh, good idea!" Both of the killer whale sisters tempted me with a drink. I guess I didn't have a choice.

"Just a quick one. I don't want to cause any trouble for your friends," I said. I had an image of mercenaries liking to drink, but these two were different, it seemed.

"Thank you so much! You handle these drinking monsters!" the panda therianthrope said, and the elephant therianthrope and panda both nodded their thanks multiple times, grateful expressions on their faces.

It turned out that they did like drinking, but not enough to be forced to do it along with the killer whale sisters.

In just a few days, the war and the wave were coming.

We were ready. Every preparation we could make had been made.

Chapter Seven: The Wisest King of Wisdom

The war with Faubrey eventually started . . . a few days earlier than expected.

“Is this Whip Hero just a moron?” Trash furrowed his brow, head tilted, in the operations meeting room. Trash had predicted that they would invade Melromarc at the same time as the wave, but Takt had attacked much sooner. Maybe he thought speed was the key to victory.

There might have been a chance of catching us unprepared, but thanks to Trash’s expedient orders, we were completely ready for anything.

Standing by the trenches in the castle town and squinting, you could see the Faubrey forces advancing. I was therefore in discussion with Trash in the castle concerning their earlier-than-expected invasion.

“The only reason I could think of is that once the wave occurs you and the other heroes, Hero Iwatani, will be boosted to the total level with other worlds . . . but surely he would still expect to win even in that situation . . . so I just can’t see why he’d do something this stupid,” Trash reasoned. Maybe that was the reason, but when I considered it from Takt’s perspective, he would probably still think he could beat us regardless of our levels. “There might still be something behind this . . . but no matter. If this is when they choose to attack, then we must simply respond,” Trash stated.

“Everything is ready?” I confirmed.

“Yes, Hero Iwatani,” Trash replied.

“You’ve really thought up lots of different strategies, haven’t you?” The other heroes and I had been involved to some degree in preparing his operations. Of course, we’d also been training in between.

That said, while heroes didn't have a level cap, it was impossible for us to catch up with the self-proclaimed level-350 Takt in just a few days. Yet we still had a few trump cards up our sleeve—the knowledge I had provided, and the knowledge obtained from Trash and Fohl's seven star weapons had mobilized us, leading to the proposal of a specific strategy.

Yesterday, our enemies had taken a certain fortress in Melromarc. To be more accurate about it, we had let them take it. This was all a part of Trash's strategy.

Ren, Motoyasu, Itsuki, and I had memorized all the strategies that Trash created and decided upon what to tweak as circumstances demanded. The basic plan was for Ren and me to attack Takt, while Motoyasu and Itsuki would respond as required on the battlefield. Trash would give battlefield orders and defend our base. Fohl would be with me, while Rishia would be fighting alongside Itsuki.

In other words, the heroes would be divided between Takt's party and the battlefield.

Filo, Raph-chan, Gaelion, Sadeena, S'yne, and Shildina were intended to go with me. Keel and anyone else from the village capable of fighting humans would be sent to the battlefield. The Raph species would be operating as a separate unit.

Everything else just came down to Trash's strategy. We just had to pray his airborne countermeasure would go off as planned.

"Hero Iwatani, I'm just providing a framework," Trash advised.

"I know," I replied. Still, I hadn't expected much from Trash, and those expectations had been suitably betrayed. It was easy to sign off on his plan. It

had a much higher chance of success than anything I would have come up with, that was for sure. Letting people play to their strengths was always the best approach.

If everyone just did the best they could with the time that they had, the results couldn't be bad.

No. I'd make sure it wasn't bad.

"It's almost time," Trash said.

"I know." I was ready. I took to a podium that had been erected in front of the battlefield. The soldiers from Melromarc, Siltvelt, and Q'ten Lo were all lined up, along with the slaves from my own territory. They could all see me. A wry smile curved my lips and then I made a declaration.

"Everyone! This is the battle to avenge the queen of Melromarc. Not only that, but we face the very scum who interfered with our battle with the Phoenix and now seeks to besmirch the legend of the four holy heroes! You all understand what this means?" My question was met with shouts of agreement. "We are fighting in order to protect this world. But what about our foes? They seek only to take this world for themselves, underestimating the threat posed by the waves and killing the innocent with reckless abandon! We cannot allow them to perpetrate such acts in the name of the four holy heroes!" More shouts. Everyone clearly felt as I did. "Everyone! Bring your hearts together! We shall make this enemy of our world pay for these misdeeds! This battle is when we take our revenge! Let's put the scum in the ground who caused such harm to us and our allies!" Further cries of agreement rang out across the battlefield.

Seriously . . . I didn't do this kind of thing often, but it definitely had a positive effect on morale.

“Little Naofumi!” Sadeena came over as I climbed down from the podium.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I’m glad to see you looking so well. You seem to be through the worst of it now,” she said.

“I guess so. More can happen than you’d expect when you’re half-dead,” I said cryptically.

“Okay. At least you are better. If you’ve shaken it off, I need to do my best too,” Sadeena replied with a smile.

“Just don’t get too carried away,” I cautioned her.

“I’ll be careful! Say, little Naofumi. Once we win this battle, how about we have some fun together?” she asked, a twinkle in her eye.

“Yes, yes. I’m now more receptive than before, so if you’re talking about some serious playtime, I might give it some thought. After we’ve gone to get Raphtalia and taken care of some other stuff,” I said. Hearing that reply, Sadeena placed a hand on my shoulder with a grin on her face.

“You’re in top form. I’m happy to see it. Let’s both do our best out there!” she said.

Having finished my greeting, I lightly waved the staff I had received from Trash and started to put his strategy into action.

It was a few hours later.

Takt was standing on a terrace in the fortress he had captured. This vantage point offered an excellent view. Surrounded by women, he looked out over Melromarc. There was black smoke rising from the direction of the castle town

in the distance.

His expression was of one drunk on victory.

“Reporting!” shouted a messenger. At just that word, Takt seemed assured that the report was a good one, and actually . . . it was. “Your new weapons and strategy, Master Takt, have successfully landed our nation’s troops in the capital of Melromarc, throwing their command structure into disarray. The heroes barely arrived in time, and though they hold their own for now, considering the disparity in numbers, it is surely only a matter of time before they fall.”

“I’m sure it is,” Takt replied with a chuckle. “We’ve won using this strategy every time until now. No way these chumps could wrap their heads around it.”

“Well said, Master Takt!”

“You’re so incredible!”

“No army can withstand such an assault!”

“Your aircraft bombing and troop deployment strategy is simply incredible, Master Takt! No one will ever defeat it!”

“Please, ladies, restrain your praise,” Takt said over the gaggle of his retinue. “I’m doing this for the sake of this world and the sake of its people. The fastest way to end this conflict is to eradicate this trashy nation from the map.” There was a light smile on his face as he spoke. “I admit, it’s a bit lacking in entertainment value when it’s this easy. But nothing is more fun than a battle you can win. Especially when it’s a strategy you came up with yourself.” More comments of agreement and laughter rang out at his words.

“At least, that’s what you wish had happened,” the messenger continued.

“Huh?” Takt’s laughter was abruptly cut short, and he turned to look at the

soldiers who had come to make this report—the soldiers who happened to be me and my allies in disguise.

Here's how it went down.

I had registered a portal to the fortress that we let Takt take. We'd infiltrated through that, pretended to be messengers in order to reach Takt, and then shared with him the report as dictated by Trash in order to gauge his reaction. If it was as expected, we were to reveal ourselves and take him out.

The messenger uniforms and equipment had been provided by the Zeltoble Dark Guild. Faubrey was a nation with a long history, so there was a lot of that kind of stuff floating around. Just in case, we'd even had Raph-chan cast some illusion magic on us that changed our odor. Making things invisible wasn't the only use for illusion magic after all. Even those among Takt's party with powerful noses hadn't picked up on anything.

"For a start, why would so many messengers be reporting to you? Are you really such an idiot?" I continued. Takt and the others were still looking on dumbfounded, so we ended the charade completely. There was Fohl, S'yne, Ren, Raph-chan, and me. Filo, Gaelion, Sadeena, and Shildina had already engaged the soldiers around Takt.

"You sounded so pleased with yourself for a moment there. I'm sorry to spoil your mood, but that smoke is where your precious toy planes crashed into the ground," I happily reported.

"No way! Not Rulina and the others?" Takt really couldn't believe it, but it was the truth. By now, Trash's strategy should have knocked all of Takt's airplanes out of the sky. The planes he planned to use for bombing and troop deployment should have run afoul of the ore from the Glawick mines, which Trash had gathered in the air over Melromarc.

Glawick ore was basically rock that could float in the air.

This world had a lot of these kinds of rocks that could float, so Takt's forces would be prepared to dodge them, but that was where the Raph species had come in. They were incredibly good at concealing things, after all. Using something on the level of cooperative magic, they had made it look like there was nothing at all in the skies over Melromarc. Even better, that day the weather was clear. It really looked like the perfect day to take to the sky. Of course, that sky was actually filled with floating Glawick ore.

Those airplanes were unable to make sharp turns. It wasn't hard to imagine them being unable to avoid the rocks and just crashing right into them. It went without saying that the plan also considered that the rocks alone would not be enough to take all the planes down. The paratroopers they carried had then been targeted by wind and gravity multi-cast magic from Melromarc magic users working together and standing up on the rocks.

Parachutes had pretty obvious weak points, after all. Hit the chute part with some magic and they were screwed. Our enemies might have been planning to use wind magic to protect themselves in the case of an emergency, but they wouldn't be able to cancel out an increase in their descent provided by gravity magic. Not to mention the poor fools would also have magic and arrows targeting them down below, so regardless of how high their levels were, they wouldn't be getting away in one piece.

For once, things seemed to be in our favor. All thanks to the Wisest King of Wisdom.

"W-what happened?!" Takt asked.

"I'm not here to share my life story," I said mockingly. "If I had to boil it down, you should have paid more attention to all that talk about the past genius of the

Wisest King of Wisdom.”

“Bah!” Takt’s retinue raised their guns.

“That same Wisest King of Wisdom told me to tell you that your strategy is the lowest of the low. Every bad decision you could make, you made it,” I told him, really rubbing it in. The most idiotic strategy Takt could possibly have chosen was what had led to this exact situation. That he was completely unprepared for us reaching him was again was, according to Trash, proof of that fact.

The one that I’d personally considered pretty dangerous was Takt coming to the front lines and deciding to fight us singlehandedly, but according to Trash, that would have been a mistake too. Even if it had come to that, the combined heroes should have been able to defeat him, so it probably wouldn’t have been too much of a threat.

Immediately after the fighting started, Trash had muttered the following. “He’s coming at us with a strategy even worse than the most idiotic ones I considered for him . . . almost as though this is some kind of suicide attack. Is he trying to lure us in? Or does he just consider us incapable of opposing him? If this is a trap, then let us pretend to be caught in it and see what he does in response. If it isn’t a trap, that will still put us in an advantageous position.” Trash had now probably seized that advantage for himself.

Whatever. Right now, I just needed to concentrate on what I could do in this situation.

If there was something I was worried about, it was not having the old lady with us. She had looked very displeased about it, but due to her experience on the battlefield, I had been forced to put her with our main force. I’d told her that Raphtalia had already managed to escape, which had at least put her a

little at ease.

The complicated smiles on the faces of the Siltvelt leaders at seeing Trash in action had also left an impression on me.

“I never dreamed the day would come when we fought on the same side as the Wisest King of Wisdom, our most hated foe for so many years,” one of them had muttered with deep emotion. “We really were up against a monster, weren’t we?”

He had also planned all sorts of strategies to use in the melee fighting. He had not shared them with anyone for fear of the information leaking out, but he had one or two hundred strategies ready for simultaneous deployment as required. These included providing combat support using our excellent means of communication.

“They might not all function, but some quick modifications should provide much of what we need,” he had said. All we needed to do was concentrate on defeating the enemy commander in the enemy base. I wasn’t sure if he was mocking the enemy or had some plans to win that I didn’t know about. The only thing I could say about that was, “You’ll have to ask Trash.”

Seriously, he was like some kind of genius general from a story or anime. Things were going so well I almost wanted to make a joke about him being some kind of psychic.

Honestly, I was just happy I never had to face Trash in the prime of his powers. If the Trash I had faced when I’d been framed had been on his game like this, I wasn’t sure I would have been able to prove my innocence.

“In that case, I’ll head over to the battle right now!” Takt deployed his claws and looked ready to dash away at once.

“Hold it. You’re not forgetting about us, I hope? We’re not the same guys you fought the last time,” I told him. We were here not just to stop him from leaving, but to defeat him.

“You really think you pond scum can defeat me?” he taunted.

“Of course. The whole point of this battle is to end your life. As you fight us, try and think about where you went wrong,” I replied. I was having so much fun thinking about how his face would twist once we defeated him that I couldn’t even get angry anymore. We hadn’t come here unprepared, after all. We were here because we had a good shot at winning.

“What are you talking about? You’ve come all this way just to help me get stronger, is that it? Then I guess I have to fight you,” he replied. Takt’s women raised their guns again.

“So? Another cowardly volley of fire and then you pick off whatever remains?” I said. This taunt had been scripted by Trash too. Takt’s expression tightened, his brow furrowing. He was incredibly simple, that much was for sure. A few choice words and he was hooked. “It sounds nice when you call it a ‘grand strategy,’ but really it’s just a coward’s way of winning.” If he didn’t take the bait, we had other plans too.

Crap, I looked around and didn’t see Witch anywhere. I didn’t know where she was.

“Very well. I’m enough to handle you rabble alone. I am level 350.” He had a relative sense of justice then. Or maybe he was just an overly proud moron.

In either case, Trash’s strategy for the fight against Takt proceeded to the second phase. From here it was about my personal fight and had nothing to do with Trash.

If I lost now, that would make me a laughingstock!

“You rabble? That’s my line. Why do you think I haven’t paid you back for the cowardly surprise attack you unleashed on us?” I questioned.

“No surprise attack will work on me!” Takt suddenly exclaimed. Was he even listening to anything I was saying? It seemed impossible to talk to this guy.

“In any case, in order to truly destroy everything you have established, I’m choosing to fight you head-on,” I told him. I had a trump card with which I could definitely win, but refraining from using it was what would prove my own claims. “I’m enough alone to handle a fake hero like you.”

“Brother?!” Fohl voiced his surprise at my comment.

“Sorry, Fohl. Just hold fast,” I said.

“But—” he started.

“Hold it. I’m not telling you not to fight at all. Just stay calm and watch what happens,” I told him. Then I took a step forward, staff up on my shoulder, and made sure Takt saw it.

“Hmmm. That staff . . .” Again, he took the bait right away.

“Yeah. It’s one of the seven star weapons that you want so badly. I’m its current wielder,” I told him.

“What luck for me. I’ve already taken the shield from you, so taking another weapon won’t be an issue,” Takt jibed.

“If you think you can do it, go right ahead,” I told him. The two of us glared at each other. “Where’s Witch, anyway? Waiting amid all these people to launch a cowardly magic attack from behind us?”

“You mean Malty? Hah, she’s still back in Faubrey. Even with how low this

place has fallen, she probably doesn't want to see the end of her homeland," Takt theorized.

"You have no idea who Witch is, do you?" I snapped. He had no idea who that bitch was. She of all people would be the one happiest to see Melromarc destroyed.

"Master Takt, let us fight too." A number of his women stepped forward. There was the aotatsu who had fought with Fohl and the fishy-one who had been hostile to Sadeena during our last encounter. There were two others, as well: the lizard-like woman and the one with wings on her back like Filo.

Gaelion and Filo stared down each of these respectively.

"Nelshen, Shate, Leludia, and Ashil too? Very well. Better than just having you watch. Show him what you are capable of! It will be the true hero and his allies who win this battle," Takt said.

"True hero, you say? Doing all of this, there's no way any of you are heroes!" Ren declared, taking a step forward. The woman with the lizard-like tail glared at him and Gaelion.

"Master Takt isn't a hero?" she responded. "You must be blind. You four holy heroes are known for nothing apart from being weak. We'll show you who the real king is!"

"Allow us to beat the truth into you!" added the aotatsu woman, moving up to stand in front of Fohl. "We'll show you how noble, how wonderful the man is who you face. That you hakuko with your faith in the Shield Hero—that all of Siltvelt—are just backward rejects!"

"Move aside! I don't care about you!" Fohl shouted.

"Fohl," I calmly said. "You can join in with my battle once you take care of her.

If this idiot hasn't been defeated by then."

"Understood. I'll be right with you, brother! Leave this to me!" Fohl returned, continuing to glare at the aotatsu . . . Nelshen, wasn't it?

"Who am I going to fight?" Sadeena asked. "You?"

"Female orca! You are not allowed to exist!" said the fishy woman. Then she transformed. She was a shark-like therianthrope.

"You look like a noid and kusha mix. Do you have something personal against me?" Sadeena asked.

"Such impudence! You orca have always mocked my kind!" the shark woman spat back.

"I don't know anything about that, but if you want to fight me, then I'm game. You fall back, little Shildina," Sadeena said. The shark woman seemed to be holding some kind of inter-species grudge. I didn't have time for that. Sadeena seemed to consider the chip on her shoulder to be an annoyance too.

"What? I want to fight too!" complained Shildina.

"Then go and help Filo. I think she's going to struggle," Sadeena commented. Shildina looked at Filo and the Griffon and nodded.

"Oh my. I'll finish that quickly and then get serious with you," she said.

"Good. Just do your best," Sadeena replied.

"Enough joking around! I'm going to finish you both off!" the shark woman raged. Immediately after that, Sadeena unleashed her own murderous wave of energy. Shildina's face had a huge grin on it. The two were acting like members of a certain warrior race—I almost expected their hair to change color!

"You think you can handle Shildina and myself on your own? Joking around

like that is more likely to make me mad than make me laugh!” Sadeena shouted, pushing out another wave of pressure to put the aggressor in her place.

“That arrogance!” The shark-like therianthrope was pushing back for a moment and then shouted back in rage. “I’ll show you what I can really do!” As the bickering went back and forth, S’yne suddenly stepped forward from my side and deflected an incoming bullet using her scissors.

“You’re getting—”

“Ahead of yourself a little, aren’t you?” her familiar said for her, while she pointed her scissors at the maid-looking woman at Takt’s side. She’d apparently attempted to make an advance move on me with a rifle.

“You will pay for the crime of upsetting Takt,” she said.

“I won’t allow that!” It looked like S’yne and the maid were going to be fighting.

“Holder of a Dragon Emperor fragment, you got away once and then came back again? You must really want to hand it over to me,” said the lizard-like woman.

“Kwaa!” was Gaelion’s response.

“Hah. Let me show a weak, pathetic fragment like you the terror of a true Dragon Emperor!” she shouted. With a series of cracking sounds, the lizard-like woman started to turn into a dragon—a big one. She was even bigger than father Gaelion. I couldn’t quite say what it was, but I felt something from the dragon as she faced down Gaelion, something crackly, similar to the Spirit Tortoise and the Phoenix. The place my shield had been ached too . . . There was definitely something about that dragon.

To be honest, I hadn't been able to understand why I needed to bring Ren along when I was facing just Takt. But Trash had sent Ren along with me just in case, having a bad feeling about the whole thing. Maybe this was what he had been worried about.

"Puny Dragon Emperor fragment! Takt said to leave the women alive, but that doesn't apply to you," the dragon spat.

"Hey. Don't forget about me," Ren quipped, leveling his sword at Gaelion's side. "Naofumi, who should I fight?"

"That dragon looks the strongest. You help Gaelion fight it," I told him.

"Okay," he replied with a nod and then leapt onto the now large Gaelion. It looked like a combination father Gaelion would have something to say about. It would probably be along the lines of the twist of fate that now put two who had tried to kill each other on the same side.

"You think any of the four holy heroes stands a chance against me?!" the dragon roared.

"Leludia, you can take the hero?" Takt asked.

"Who do you think I am, Takt? Any number of these fools can't hope to take me down!" the beast responded. At her side, the woman with the wings also transformed. She was the griffon. Filo faced her down.

"Filolial. Our hated foe who crawls along the ground! I am the griffon who shall end the bloodline of the queen," the creature spat.

"Wow, are you a bird? Or a cat? Either way, I'm not losing to you again," Filo responded, her face as relaxed as ever. Her opponent was meant to be a higher level than Filo . . . but she wasn't letting it show at all.

"Bird God . . . let us fight together. I will end this quickly and prove I am

superior to Sadeena," Shildina said. So she called Filo "Bird God" too? Of course, in Q'ten Lo, a proclamation by Ruft had meant that Filo was treated as a bird god.

I had to shake my head and push these unnecessary thoughts to the side.

"Let's get this farce underway then—a battle with a conclusion that is already determined." At my words, Takt gave a provocative laugh.

"Well said! The start of a battle we will definitely win!"

With that, each individual fight started.

Chapter Eight: X

The fortress's terrace was too narrow for this.

In order to better conduct their battles, everyone other than Takt, the woman at his side, and me quickly moved down from the terrace and started fighting each other inside the fortress. Gaelion, Ren, Filo, and Shildina headed into the sky. Gaelion was flying with Ren on his back, while Shildina was supporting Filo while using magic to make her float.

"Raph . . ." Raph-chan's tail was all puffed up as she stared down the fox woman from among Takt's retinue. So the enemy was stooping to using illusion magic. They really were filthy. And Raph-chan was blocking it for us. She really had been making great progress recently. The fox woman was probably trying to conceal herself in order to provide surprise support for an ally just when they needed it.

Bad luck, foxy.

I had to focus on Takt, anyway. He was already laughing.

"You have one seven star weapon, while I have five of those and a holy weapon too! That makes six! And you think you can beat me?!" he crowed.

"Power obtained by illegitimate means. I'll teach you how a fake can never defeat the real thing," I replied.

"You talk a good game," Takt cackled back.

"Tell me. Why are you spitting toward heaven?" I asked.

"Huh? What are you rambling about now?" he asked.

"You're so dumb, so let me spell it out for you. You've got a big boomerang

coming right back at you," I told him.

"What do you mean?" he raged. Surely it wasn't the number of weapons one possessed, but the number of power-up methods one knew that was important. While it may expand a range of available strategies, there was a limit to the number of different weapons a single person could hope to effectively wield alone. To be quite honest, rather than one person hoarding them all, I would have been more worried about facing a group of people each armed with one weapon.

From that perspective, Kyo had been smarter than this guy.

I immediately held the staff in both hands and started to incant magic. The Seven Star Staff had an innate ability to reduce the time it took to cast magic. Trash had told me that, once mastered, it allowed even Drifa-class magic to be used without any incanting time. It also allowed magic for which one had no aptitude to be learned. That had proven pretty useful too, enough to surprise me when I tried it out. Simply holding the staff in my hands made me painfully aware of how difficult a weapon the shield was to wield.

I almost didn't want to have to give the staff back to Trash.

While mixing SP and magic, I cast a spell on all of my allies who were present. Casting this would normally take a considerable amount of time, but thanks to the staff, I was done almost at once. Normally I would need to solve five floating puzzles when I cast it, but all I needed here were two. They had really easy compositions too.

Then I activated the power-up method inside the Seven Star Staff.

"I, the Shield Hero, order heaven and order earth. Cut free the bonds of truth, reconnect them, and spout forth pus. Power of the Dragon Vein, I form power

by fusing magic and the power of the hero. The source of your power, the Shield Hero, now orders you. Reconsider the state of all things once more and provide my intended targets with everything. All Liberation X!”

Internet games often included systems in which you used points acquired for such things as leveling up to increase your abilities. Increasing your level and then distributing the resulting skill points was how you learned skills. It was a standard system in online games. A skill learning system, if you would.

That was the power-up method for the staff and the gauntlets.

The staff allowed points to be spent on magic, and the gauntlets on skills. Points were acquired based on your current level, and they could then be spent on both magic and skills. That said, focused spending on just one type of magic would consume a considerable number of points. One of the issues with such a system could be doing the points over again, but that was allowed here, so it also wasn’t an issue.

The power-up points inside the weapon—in this instance, the mastery-level points that Ren had told me about—seemed the easiest to use. You could assign a certain number of them and then wait for the cooldown and reassign them after waiting one day. It really was quite a good ability.

The spell I had just cast was an aura, excellent support magic that could increase the abilities of all allies. It was also a Liberation-class multi-target aura that only a hero could cast. When this was combined with the staff power-up method via distribution of points, I didn’t know what might happen.

“Eat this!” Takt unleashed a Wahnsinn Claw attack toward me. I avoided it with absolute ease. Why so easily? Because Takt’s attack was incredibly slow. It was like a beam of light coming right for me, but I could see the exact trajectory it was going to take.

A beam of light, and yet traveling so slowly.

When I thought about it, the generic shout of “eat this!” that Takt had just unleashed also reached my ears incredibly slowly, stretched out into a lengthy drawl.

Takt’s attack passed by and shot off behind me. It had some homing capacity, but even that was limited.

This was one clear example of how boosted our abilities had become.

We weren’t in the Internet game that Ren had been playing, but each boost provided a significant increase. As well as the effect itself, there were some that made specific effects last longer or caused additional effects to be triggered. It was a pretty deep system, offering some real potential for magic and skills that I’d considered pretty difficult to use effectively up until now.

Powerful magic like All Liberation Aura required a lot of points to increase, but the resulting increase in the effect was also large.

This was the power of the staff and the gauntlets. The intent to defend this world! The spirits were lending us all of their power!

“You dodged it?” Takt exclaimed.

“What’s wrong? You only capable of big special attacks? We deflected that first one too,” I reminded him. It looked like Takt hadn’t even seen me move. That was how boosted my support magic had become.

So he suddenly launched a special attack, it was dodged, and then he was acting all surprised . . . It was like something from that show about rangers with power. I’d often wondered why they didn’t just go to the big guns right away, but now I understood. If the enemy dodged it, then this was what would happen.

“Huh. I held back and missed on purpose. This wouldn’t be any fun otherwise,” Takt blustered.

“Whatever. You just keep telling yourself that,” I retorted. Then I gripped the staff tightly and imbued it with power. The staff had other abilities too. For example, any gamer would probably understand the term “charge attack.”

“I’m just going to toy with you a little,” Takt said, and then he swung his claw at me a few times in succession. I avoided every attack, one after the other. I ducked. I leapt through the air. I even launched myself off from Takt himself. I wasn’t the Shield Hero right then. Even though I’d borrowed the Seven Star Staff, my defense was still weaker than Ren and the other four holy heroes. These attacks from Takt were going to do more than just sting a little if they hit me, not to mention holding my ground might just get my weapon stolen again.

Takt’s stance and movements were pretty refined. Maybe he had some martial arts training. But I had been training against Atla and Raphtalia—women who knew how to throw a curveball in combat, betraying expectations and knocking you on your ass. Having sparred with them for so long, this guy was almost boring.

None of these attacks were ever going to betray my anything.

A means for the strong to defeat the weak was how Takt saw combat and combat techniques. He was no different from Trash II in Kizuna’s world.

Takt made a feint and then went for a killing blow—

“Air Strike Slash!” He unleashed the skill, but even the feint had been so obvious. I practically yawned. I left my dodge until the last moment, my face filled with confidence as I stared Takt down.

“Watch it!” I yelled. Then I performed the most sarcastic dodge possible.

“Gah! You’ve got some moves. I thought all you could do was block, *former* Shield Hero,” Takt whined. I actually was getting bored. I could have avoided these attacks in my sleep.

“You seem to have got the wrong idea about some things, so let me instruct you. Defense is actually more difficult than attack. You need all sorts of tricks, like redirecting the impact of an opponent’s attacks to reduce their power,” I told him.

“Now! Second Slash!” He unleashed another sudden claw attack, but I redirected it by striking his arm with the tip of the staff. That prevented Takt from unleashing his Second Slash skill at anything close to full force, and it fizzled away.

“That wasn’t what I would call an opening,” I chided him.

“Bah!” he spat.

“Try as many skills as you like. I’ll stop them dead before you can even say the name. This is how the Shield Hero fights,” I told him. Just because I was the Shield Hero, it didn’t mean I had to take every enemy attack head-on. I could also parry attacks or take cunning steps to hinder their strength. In regard to this kind of stuff, I’d been learning it since the day I arrived in this other world, so I knew all the tricks when it came to interfering with enemy attacks.

I also had methods of keeping attacks focused on me, but at the moment, Takt was doing that already, so that wasn’t an issue.

I wasn’t going to break a sweat like this. That gave me a moment to check on how the others were doing. They might be in danger, and I’d made up my mind not to lose anyone again.

First, I checked Fohl.

“If you surrender at once and stay out of our way, I’ll let you go, aotatsu woman,” he said.

“Quite the tone to take with perhaps the strongest clan chief of the aotatsu. Hakuko . . . no, from the stink of you, a mixed blood? You fool,” his adversary said.

“Shieldfreeden is a nation that looked down on Siltvelt for their pure-blood beliefs, seeking freedom for themselves. To hear you speak now as a representative of that nation, anyone from Siltvelt would laugh,” Fohl replied.

“You’ve done it now! I’ll put you back in your place!” the aotatsu shouted. Fohl turned into his therianthrope form and pointed his fist at her. The silhouette of the aotatsu—Nelshen—started to swell and expand. Before long, Nelshen had transformed into a large, eastern-style dragon.

“Amid all of our long history, being able to transform into this shape is proof of being chief! Can you achieve this, mixed-blood hakuko?” she taunted.

“Pathetic. I could if I wanted to, but there’s no value in expending such power on you,” Fohl replied, just as brazenly, punching the air.

“Come then, hakuko and Gauntlets Hero! Time to bring an end to the long enmity between our peoples! To prove that the aotatsu are the mightiest race!” Nelshen raged at the same moment she launched some water magic. Fohl casually dodged the attack, instantly zipping in close and launching a kick into the aotatsu’s face.

“I’m sorry. Did you just do something?” he wisecracked.

“No more games!” the dragon roared. The sound of thunder pealed out and then lightning rained down on Fohl. So the dragon used wind and water.

“Air Strike Rush V!” Fohl’s fist ended up buried in Nelshen’s abdomen. The

dragon woman groaned, barely able to speak. It seemed the mighty “aotatsu chief” was no match for the new and improved Fohl.

Next, I looked over at Sadeena and Shate. The two were glaring at each other against a backdrop of thunder and lightning.

“Die!” Shate rushed forward with a thrust . . . and Sadeena avoided it, although barely, thanks to the support magic I had provided her with.

“It’s so sad, failing to protect someone you care for. I understand exactly how little Naofumi feels, painfully so . . .” Sadeena just took a tail attack from Shate right in the face and then simply shrugged it off. “. . . at the anger at failing to defend them, and the feelings upon discovering that hated enemy.”

“So glib! Let’s see how long that lasts!” Shate snapped back.

“We owe you for Atla, not to mention for capturing Raphtalia,” Sadeena said, spat out some blood, and glared Shate down. “I can’t forgive you for either of those things. So I suggest you retreat. Right now. If you do so . . . you’ll get to live for a little longer.” Then she grabbed the harpoon that Shate was holding with one hand. “Before you come to regret having stood before me, you, a mere mixed noid and kusha.” Shate backed down, suddenly looking more like a chicken than a shark. “Well?”

“Enough! Enough!” The shark woman suddenly leapt back to her feet, swinging the harpoon to unleash some magic. “Maelstrom Spear!” The technique that Shate unleashed flew toward Sadeena and swirled around.

“I think you’re making a fundamental mistake here,” Sadeena cautioned, her harpoon crackling with the lightning magic she was so adept with. Shate looked even more perplexed when she saw that sparking electricity.

“An orca . . . using lightning?!” she stammered.

“You’d do well not to put me in with those other weaklings. Right, little Shildina?” The lightning harpoon unleashed by Sadeena wiped away the attack launched by Shate in the blink of an eye. Then she turned to Shildina, who was supporting Filo. Shildina nodded while she supported Filo.

“I’m really angry. How long do you think you can stand against me? As the object of my rage? Now face my true power!” With more crackling, Sadeena underwent another transformation. A request for beast transformation support appeared in my own field of vision.

Hmmm. There were quite a few of Takt’s party pulling second transformations, so why not do it too? I gave permission for beast transformation support and activated it. Sadeena turned into a large killer whale and floated up into the air.

“Your love has powered me up, little Naofumi!” Sadeena made a crazy comment as always.

“Ah, that looks like so much fun. I want to try it too,” Shildina said with envy in her voice as she looked at Sadeena. Maybe there would be a chance next time, but for now, I needed her to wait.

“Time for that fishy body of yours to feel the true power little Naofumi has given me!” Sadeena crowed, light scattering around her. A look of despair filled the face of the shark therianthrope who was fighting her.

Last but not least, I checked the battle in the skies.

Gaelion alone might have been in trouble, but he also had Ren with him. There was no chance of those two losing. That was the level of power we—that the heroes—had now obtained.

“I’ll smash the terror of the Dragon Emperor into your broken bodies!” the

massive dragon called Leludia shouted, just unleashing fire breath that looked far more powerful than anything father Gaelion could cast. “Mega Prominence Nova!”

“Liberation Magic Enchant X!” As he rode on Gaelion’s back, Ren raised his sword and incanted some magic of his own. Ren’s sword absorbed the blazing and undoubtedly very powerful fire magic. Of course, any magic hit by Magic Enchant was absorbed and instead applied to the sword itself. It looked like that also worked on dragon’s breath.

“Haikuikku!” Filo shouted.

“Haikuikku!” replied the griffon, the two of them zipping around as little more than high-speed shadows. Shildina was casting support magic on Filo, keeping magic on her so that she could fly around.

“A flying filolial . . . I thought your kind was wiped out! Some of you survived?” The griffon was amazed. I vaguely recalled Fitoria telling Melty something like that. Surprised at seeing Filo flying, the griffon had mistakenly thought she was actually a flying filolial. Not being able to see what Shildina was doing, I could only shake my head.

“You’ve got it wrong!” Filo said, the two of them continuing to trade idiocies as they attacked each other.

“Drifa Tornado!” they both tried at once.

“Spiral Strike!” Filo countered.

“Screw Strike!” the griffon came back. To the side of these two combatants, Gaelion drew a deep breath and blew out fire.

“Kwaa!” It was white. Father Gaelion had mentioned that he was practicing a special kind of breath. I tried to recall what he had said. . . something about a

difficult-to-perform, enemy-hindering type of breath that would be ready soon. That was likely what this was.

“Gah! What’s this?” Leludia gave a choke as though there was something stuck in her throat.

“Next it’s my turn!” Ren declared, pointing his sword. The blade was glowing red. “Flame Edge X!” He unleashed a deep crimson sword slash right at the massive Dragon Emperor.

Chapter Nine: Fenrir Force

S'yne, meanwhile . . . was clashing with the maid.

"How about you concentrate on me?!" Takt raged.

"Sure, sorry, sorry," I said. Enough showing off. It was time I got seriously involved in this fight myself.

"Everyone, cast support magic on me! With all of your power, I can defeat this guy easily!" Takt shouted. So now he was just going to change the rules. After all that bragging about handling me alone!

"Zweite Burst!"

"Zweite Magic!" Support magic started to come in from his allies, but it didn't seem to change much. Comparatively speaking, the specs of All Liberation X were far superior. It increased stats enough to cover almost a triple-level gap. He wasn't even a hero, and wasn't using any power-up methods, so I probably shouldn't have expected any better than this from him. Pearls before swine. If he couldn't draw out the true power of the weapons, then he was just another grunt. The weapons weren't lending him their power. Not like with Kyo.

"Right! I can take you now!" Takt cackled.

"You really think that's enough to handle me?" I asked.

"Don't get too big for your boots just because you've gotten a little stronger!" Takt raged.

"I certainly don't want you saying that to me," I retorted.

"Laugh it up while you can. Prepare for a taste of my magic enhanced by everyone's power!" Takt roared. I almost felt like telling him that I wasn't

laughing; I was just at a loss for words.

As I considered doing so, Takt started incanting his magic. It was . . . Yes, it was a little faster.

“The source of your power, the one true hero, now orders you. Reconsider the state of all things once more and bring down a storm of flame upon my target! Drifa Firestorm!” Takt completed the spell.

“Only Drifa!?” I exclaimed. Hold on! He claimed to have mastered magic and only cast Drifa. Fake or not, he was claiming to be a hero.

Man, this was hilarious.

When I thought about it for a moment though, Liberation was magic exclusive to real heroes. At a world level, that did make Drifa the strongest.

“Eat this!” Takt unleashed the magic with a grin on his face. It created a flaming tornado that flew toward me.

“The source of your power, just a hero, now orders you. Reconsider the state of all things once more and scatter the storm that would burn its target! Anti Drifa Firestorm!” I read the magic Takt had incanted and activated magic to nullify it. With that, the fire tornado scattered into nothing, as though it had never existed.

Even with that time gap, I still managed to completely cancel it out.

“I’m not sure what to say. Have you really mastered magic? You should at least cut out the incantation time,” I advised him. That said, all the magic I knew that didn’t have any incantation time was low-powered garbage. He actually might have posed a threat if he was capable of firing off Drifa-class magic in rapid succession.

“Wh—” Takt was shocked, stunned at how easily his trump card magic had

been nullified. It looked like it had been wide-range magic. Maybe that was what he'd used to raise his level.

"The abilities of that staff . . . I will steal them, I swear it!" Takt roared.

"You've got it wrong," I replied. He still thought it was just the abilities of the staff. It reminded me of how Ren and the others had once been.

The quick analysis was coming from the staff, sure, but reading the magic was a result of all of my own training. Sadeena could use Drifa-class!

"You've got a Dragon Emperor in your party, right? So you've got the Way of the Dragon Vein. That's magic that specializes in interference! Can't you even think for yourself?" I told him. I really was at a loss for words. He did incant fast. It hadn't taken five seconds to cast Drifa. But I could incant faster than that—thanks to Trash's staff and support magic, of course. I was starting to have suspicions about this guy . . . but that could wait until later.

Huh? I turned toward the sensation of further magic. Takt's harem all unleashed magic right at me. I wasn't going to let them pull a Witch move on me! I maneuvered to get them all along the same line of sight and prepared to wipe them all out together.

"Zweite Wing Blow!" came the attack.

"Fenrir Force X!" Focusing my life force, I lined up the trajectory and unleashed the skill to take out Takt and his women all together. The staff flashed—the part with the wolf decoration opening up. Then it fired a beam from the gemstone. A thick laser appeared in front of me and flew straight for Takt.

"Uwah!" I thought it would hit for a moment, but the kickback knocked it just slightly off course. Takt was closest, and he avoided it. So he had some reflexes

after all. It could only have been around three seconds between my lifting the staff and activating the magic. It missed, so I canceled it, but the SP consumption was rapid.

“Bah! Missed!” I shouted. I’d been hoping that wouldn’t happen.

“Naofumi,” said S’yne, speaking through her familiar and casting dispersions in my direction.

“Oh, crap. Sorry.” I’d missed my intended target, perhaps, but I had hit something—the human dressed like a maid whom S’yne had been fighting. There wasn’t anything left of her.

I wondered if that was murder. I didn’t feel bad about it, not at all. She’d been picking a fight with S’yne, and if getting hit by an attack that wasn’t even intended for her was enough to take her out, that was fine with me.

“Ah!” Takt was staring vacantly into the air at a scarf that was dancing there, probably all that was left of the woman whom I’d eradicated.

“I won’t miss next time.” The cooldown time was pretty long for the attack. I gripped the staff and started charging again.

Takt, meanwhile, unleashed a worthless cry of rage and came right at me, swinging all of his weapons left and right. He reminded me of Trash from back when I first met him.

Claws, whip, ax, hammer, projectile, I dodged them all.

“You shit! You killed Ellie! I’ll never forgive you for this! I’m going to rip you limb from limb!” Takt raged. As his harem realized that had happened, they started to scream and rage in confusion too. However, his anger only served to make Takt more predictable. In anime, getting angry often made someone stronger, but in reality, it looked more like this. It made me remember the

scene of cursed Ren fighting Eclair. It had probably felt much like this, dodging those angry attacks.

A bit of a contradiction, perhaps, but one really needed to keep one's head when getting angry. Like I was right now, getting angry while thinking in intricate detail about how to kill your opponent.



“You don’t even understand what you’ve done, do you? Ellie was with me since I was a kid, a childhood friend! She was the first girl I was ever with and someone who accepted me completely. You didn’t have the right to kill her!” Takt thundered.

“Like I care about any of that! Once you set foot on the battlefield you could die at any moment! What about all the people you’ve killed yourself?” I retorted. His logic was about as flawed as it could be. So he could kill whomever he liked, without anyone being allowed to kill his allies, he thought. Ridiculous. If he didn’t want anyone to die, he needed to be ready to protect them with his life.

That was what Atla had told us. They may even die in a place other than the battlefield. If you truly wanted to keep them safe, you had to stay somewhere you could protect them at all times. When I swung my staff, Takt wasn’t there. He hadn’t moved to protect her, far from it. His precious childhood friend had been reduced to ash because he dodged my attack. If she was so important to him, he should have protected her with his own body, his life, without even thinking, if he considered the attack a threat.

“I killed her, so let me say this. It’s your fault for dodging that attack. You need a better awareness of your surroundings. Moron!” I shouted. There was no debate to be held here. This battlefield was a place where people were going to die. If you wanted to prevent as few people from dying as possible, you needed to put your own life on the line. There were all sorts of ways to do it. This guy lacked the conviction to risk being taken out by such attacks alongside his friends.

Gah, this was all such a pain.

“Air Strike Front Mirror, Second Front Mirror,” I incanted, using the staff

version of the Front Shield skill and deploying them to rotate around Takt.

“Gah! Stop it! Stop running away!” Takt complained.

“I’m not running from anything. I’m avoiding. Why should I let your attacks hit me? I’m not fighting with a shield now,” I replied. It wasn’t that I didn’t have decent reflexes; I just chose not to avoid things. The guy with the shield wasn’t doing his job if he was dodging things—his job was to hold the enemy in place. “I’m going to fire off some magic. How about you just let it hit you?” I quipped.

“As if I’d allow that!” Takt retorted. In reply, I unleashed some magic with short incantations.

“Zweite Fire! Zweite Water!” These were the only two elemental magic attacks I had learned. I couldn’t use them myself. Borrowing the staff had given me access to them, but there was no need to learn more.

“You won’t hit me like that—” Takt easily avoided the magic, which just traveled in a straight line—but hitting him head on hadn’t been the idea.

Each magic attack struck the mirrors behind Takt.

“What? W-what are you doing?!” he shouted.

“I’m sure you can work it out,” I replied. The ability of Front Mirror was to reflect skills and magic at a stipulated angle. “Or should I give you a demonstration? Air Strike Blast!” I gripped the staff I had been charging and unleashed a skill. The magic was fired off like a beam. Takt tried to avoid it again, but I reflected the blast from the mirrors, over which I had complete control, and sent it flying around Takt.

I had no plans to hit him. I was basically playing around. I’d created a cage using Blast.

Ah, it created a combo. It could even do that. The mirrors were just moving

around on their own. This was all pretty convenient. I didn't know if Trash could control this. I bet he probably could. I could imagine that being pretty dangerous. Each weapon really did have different suitability depending on the user. I bet the recovered Trash could really pull off some crazy stuff with this technique. He'd told me he could use the advanced version of it. Unlike my mirrors, his could create objects with multiple surfaces, allowing skills and magic that hit them to be reflected in multiple directions to cover a wide area. It could even allow enemies hiding behind things to be hit, which sounded very convenient. It had sounded like it might also hit allies, but he'd said that could be covered with careful calculations. I wasn't going to be pulling moves like that off anytime soon. The best I could do was just move the mirrors around a bit, which came from my experience with Front Shield.

Thinking of mirrors reminded me of that vassal weapon from Kizuna's world.

"Blast Prison!" In the same moment I shouted it, the prison created from Blast exploded apart. With a roar of pain and anger, Takt was sent flying by the blast. His retinue of women all screamed too. Some of them managed to recover from their confusion and raise their rifles at me.

"Not yet! This doesn't hurt . . . doesn't even tickle. Nothing but a scratch," Takt blustered.

"Yeah, whatever you say," I retorted. Such hollow pride . . . and even as I thought that, his women started to cast healing magic on him. I wondered if his pride would allow that. I guess he was too angry to worry about it.

"You really don't want your women to die? Then if I aim for them, all you'll be able to do is defend," I suggested. Takt paled and turned to look at the women around him. The women in turn looked at me and started trembling.

I really felt like a bad guy in that moment. It felt really good. I'd never known

before how great revenge could feel.

As my weapon had been the shield up until now, I hadn't been able to cause pain in my enemies directly. Who was it, I wondered, who said revenge didn't achieve anything?

My current feelings would suggest that, if the target of the revenge didn't show any regret or intent to reform, it would be better to kill them. That was a dangerous path to tread, however. If I got too carried away, I was likely to get cursed again, so I decided to hold back.

"I don't mind doing that kind of evil," I continued, "but I don't want to be a killjoy either, so I won't take any hostages today. You can thank me for that." It might make me feel a bit better, but that was for later.

That thought still painted me as quite the bad guy.

In the next moment, some of his retinue—women who obviously couldn't read the room—went and did something really stupid.

"Don't move! Twitch another muscle and this woman is dead!" I looked in the direction of the voice to see some of the women, clearly out of their minds . . . bring in a weakened "Raphtalia," barely able to move, hands in cuffs. They had clearly brought her along because they thought she might be useful as a hostage. Now they thrust a gun at her and threatened to kill her if I moved.

"Raphtalia" was gagged, making muffled noises but unable to speak. She was resisting, pinned down by some of the other women.

"Seriously, I just said I didn't want to be a killjoy and you go and pull this. Just how low can you get?" I despaired, unable to find any other way to put it. I looked at the women keeping "Raphtalia" hostage with disgust in my eyes, and Takt gave a smile as though he'd just taken the head of a demon.

“Well done, women!” he crowed. I gave a sigh.

“What do you mean ‘well done’? I literally just said I wasn’t going to be a killjoy and take hostages, and then you go and do it! What does that make you?” I said. Then I raised my hands, pretending to obey what they said, and gave a signal for everyone else to stop attacking and focus on just parrying.

“Shut it! I don’t have to play by your rules! The one with the better strategy is the winner!” Takt retorted.

“I’m not sure I’d call this a ‘strategy.’ I say it’s a cowardly act, ignoring all propriety. Hardly the act of a hero,” I replied. I believed that from the bottom of my heart. I knew that those in the right didn’t take hostages and then still try to stand above others.

“She’s cute, so I had planned on taking some time to make her see my appeal, but I’ve changed my mind!” Takt exclaimed. He really seemed to believe he could have allured Raphtalia. If that kind of thing was going to work on her, I would have lost her during our troubles with Motoyasu.

“I owe you for Ellie! Now you’ll feel the same pain!” he raged. He was clearly going to kill the hostage even if I did stop moving. What a total coward.

“I’ve already felt it, you scum! That’s why I’m here taking revenge!” I replied. This was the guy who killed Atla! His woman died, did she? I was going to feel the same pain? “We’re already even for dead women, you hero of the trash heap! You need to take some responsibility for your crimes!” Sure, I’d just killed someone myself, but Takt was the one behind the death of Atla. I thought maybe we’d be able to understand each other, both being murderers . . . but that wasn’t going to happen now. If we could come to an understanding and he took a step back though, I would at least listen to what he had to say. Perhaps reduce the punishment levied upon him after this was all over.

“Ten times this woman of yours wouldn’t be worth a single Ellie! You can’t call us equal!” Takt imbued power into his claws and unleashed a skill. “Wahnsinn Claw!” His target was the “Raphtalia” that the other women had all trussed up. And yet I just quietly watched the slow progress of the skill.

“Raphtalia” continued her muffled protests, even as Takt’s flicker of light flew toward and passed right through her, sending her flying away.

“I did it. I did it!” Takt cackled around his laughter. “I’ve killed your woman! She was a feisty one, I’ll give her that!”

“This wouldn’t have happened if you just did what Master Takt said,” one of his retinue chimed in, laughing as well.

“That’s right! It’s your fault!” said another.

“Poor thing, the only one she has to blame is you!” said a third. All of them were standing around laughing and congratulating themselves at what Takt had done, even though we were still in the middle of the battle.

“Boy. You guys really are nasty,” I said, shaking my head in amazement. Neither Takt nor any of his women had noticed that none of my allies looked the slightest bit panicked.

“Huh?!” One of the retinue, the fox woman, had been standing there to protect the other women. She finally seemed to notice something. “What?” The fox woman swung her claws at one of the other members of the retinue.

“Dafu!” came the cry.

“Impossible! We caught her, I’m sure of it! She can’t possibly have escaped!” With a metallic clang, the targeted woman caught the claws of the fox woman . . . and then that target changed form.

The person who appeared wasn’t who I’d been expecting.

“You! It can’t be?!” the fox woman proclaimed.

“I remembered something, eh. Remembered a foolish little fox who was so focused on tricking others she never considered that she was being tricked herself, eh.” As the now-revealed newcomer spoke, Shildina looked over with a start. This was the woman who had possessed her body, after all.

The past Heavenly Emperor was standing there, as casually as all the world.

“You continue to involve yourself in these futile power struggles, eh. I’m sad to see that your seal broke without you first repenting your deeds,” the past Heavenly Emperor said to the fox woman. She just burst into laughter.

“I’ve found you! I’ve finally found you! You stinking raccoon! So this is where you’ve been hiding!” she cackled. For my part, at the point I cast Liberation Aura X on my allies, I had known pretty much where she was.

“Raph!” said Raph-chan, who had been hidden up until that point. She now dashed toward the past Heavenly Emperor. The past Heavenly Emperor was really Raph-chan II, surely. But I was unsure of whether I had the wrong end of the stick or not.

“I wouldn’t call what I was doing ‘hiding.’ Bringing an old warrior like me, someone long gone from this world, back to life and pressing me into service again . . . I’m half-amazed, half-disappointed. That said . . .” The past Heavenly Emperor raised her hammer. “Last time I chose to just seal you away, hoping you would learn your lesson, but this time I’m going to be sure and take your life.”

“Face my rage at sealing me away! You will pay for all you have done! Die!” The fox woman headed straight for the past Heavenly Emperor.

“Right! Back to the fighting, everyone! Finish off your own targets!” I made a

slashing movement across my throat with my thumb. My party all nodded and started fighting again.

“What?! So that woman I just killed—” Takt, stunned, looked toward the body of the woman he had thought was Raphtalia. The smoke parted to reveal what looked like a young girl, dressed in white, clearly deceased.

It looked like the woman Rat had been competing with in her research. So she had been the unlucky one.

“Tell me. How does it feel to have killed one of your own women?” I taunted.

“Your cowardice—” S’yne started.

“We shall ensure that is the end of your cowardly interference,” her familiar translated for her, and then S’yne pointed her scissors at the retinue of women.

“This . . . can’t be . . .” Takt was really having a bad day.

“Come on. Tell me! What does it feel like to have killed one of your own women?” I asked again, really leaning into the role of the bad guy. After all, he’d taken a hostage and then tried to kill her—no, actually killed her—telling those he thought to be her companions just to sit and watch, fully intending to break any promises he made to them.

“You will pay!” His cry degenerated into a gargle of rage.

“You killed her. How am I meant to pay for this? I’ll say it again. You killed her.” I shook my head in mock amazement. I wasn’t going to let him push responsibility for this onto me, not after he did the deed. He needed to check his targets more carefully.

I couldn’t believe he really did not suspect anything when I seemed ready to just let the hostage die.

“Right then. I’m going to take some hostages and then attack them myself. Just like you did,” I said. Then I activated Gleipnir Rope, a special effect of the Fenrir Rod. Chains appeared from the ground, which I selected to target the women.

“Stop—” Takt started.

“Hah. As if. I’m not like you,” I said, dropping the act, capturing Takt. He was still suffering from all that earlier damage from the look of it and I captured him easily.

“I can’t . . . move . . .” he grunted.

“I should hope not. You won’t get out of these chains easily,” I told him. The length of the effect of Gleipnir Rope was influenced by the magic of the user. Chains that were famous for being wrapped around a god-killing wolf in my world. They weren’t going to break easily.

“Gah! You’ve forced my hand! See how you like this!” With a pained expression on his face, Takt brought out the shield that he had taken from me.

Based on the shape of the shield, he was using the Shield of Wrath. I guess he was pretty pissed off with me.

“I think you’d have better luck with the Sakura Stone of Destiny Shield,” I commented. That shield could nullify a wide variety of skills and attacks from heroes.

“Bah! I’m not going to follow any advice from you! I can’t even change to it, anyway!” Takt spat a reply. Of course, the sakura stone of destiny was a pacifier’s shield. There was no way he’d be able to change to it without actually having the shield itself.

“This one is far stronger anyway! I’m not paying any attention to your lies!”

Takt retorted. I mean, the Shield of Wrath had been super powered up by the Demon Dragon, so it had pretty monstrous stats. It was true that, from a certain perspective, this was the one I wanted him to change to the least.

I'd have to watch out for Blood Sacrifice and Iron Maiden.

I wasn't sure if the negative effects would be triggered, but if I could goad him into using them, it might give me an advantage. But no, it seemed safer to just stay quiet and keep on attacking.

"Okay, I'm going to hold back on you. Be sure you block this, or it will go straight into the women behind you," I cautioned him. Takt glanced at the women behind him, all too scared to be able to move, and then glared at me with eyes burning with resolve to protect them.

That was it. That was the face I'd been wanting to see. That face, belonging to the one who had taken so many from me—including Atla, the queen, people from my village, from the coalition—now twisted in hatred directed at me.

"Don't waste your best glares on me yet. I've got plenty more pain coming your way," I said. Having finished the charge, I unleashed the skill again.

"Fenrir Force V!" This time I was ready for the kickback, and rather than focusing my life force too intensely, I unleashed just about the amount I thought he could take. A thick beam was unleashed from the tip of my staff directly at the constrained Takt.

He grunted, but he was using the shield he'd taken from me. It was tough. The women behind Takt hadn't taken any damage at all. But what about Takt himself, standing in front of them? He was certainly groaning loudly enough.

"Ah, I forgot. This is the legendary Fenrir Rod. It has a special effect called Rebellion Against Heaven. Its effects are . . ."

It had been the first time I used the staff in sparring with Ren and the others. I'd been holding back, so my attacks hadn't done much damage to Fohl, but it had been different for Ren and the other heroes. They'd complained about the attacks being more painful than normal.

That suggested to me that the effect of Rebellion Against Heaven was to increase attack power when a seven star weapon attacked a four holy weapon—although such a thing didn't really seem possible from the laws of this world. Maybe it was intended as insurance, prior to the arrival of the pacifiers. I hadn't seen a weapon with the same skill before. Perhaps the staff spirit was lending me power in order to fight effectively against the stolen shield.

Meaning it might be something special, just for the time being. The Fenrir Rod itself had been called an "exception weapon." If the point was to just take him out as quickly as possible, a Sakura Stone of Destiny Staff, or something like that, would have been faster.

"I guess you decided to try a shield due to their high defense, but that one is just going to increase the damage you take," I warned him. Of course, the shield itself did offer high defense, so for me it would probably have been okay.

After about five seconds, I stopped the attack. It revealed Takt standing there, his entire body smoking, battered and beaten, breathing ragged, barely standing. The Fenrir Force beam had caused considerable damage to him. He couldn't even speak, just barely groan.

"Hey, don't collapse," I said. "I'm not satisfied yet, and I have to keep toying with you at least until Fohl gets here." It was almost as though I was picking on him. Bullying him. And yet it also felt as though I could do whatever I wanted to him.

Since the day we had lost Atla during the Phoenix battle, this was the exact

moment I had been looking forward to.

“P-protect Takt! Everyone!” shouted the commander of his women, snapping back to herself. A serious-looking female knight who could have been a palette swap for Eclair raised her rifle. Then the knight attacked S’yne in order to catch her attention.

“Go! I’ll pin them down!” she shouted.

“S’yne, you play with this one. Give her a little of what you taught me,” I ordered.

“Okay. Bind Wire!” Nodding at my command, S’yne started to bind the female knight up in what looked like thread. The knight gave an annoyed grunt.

“What’s this thread?! I can’t move! Gah!” That took care of one of them. As for the others . . . I wondered if that was that.

Then I realized they had started incanting some ritual magic.

They were giving some thought to their approach. I wouldn’t be able to stop ritual magic alone, no matter how hard I tried. Of course, we had also expected this development.

It felt like a long time ago then, but after fighting Motoyasu for the first time, I had personally experienced the same thing we were going through right at that moment. Guys like Takt said they would fight fair and square, but as soon as they got into any kind of trouble, they would immediately employ every cowardly attack they could find.

Which meant we had naturally planned for my own party to provide attacks and support. Takt had just been dumb enough to rise to my taunts; our entire strategy had been conceived around a small number of us fighting a larger number of them. Luckily Fohl and the others were fighting the more

threatening among them, making things a lot easier for me. S'yne didn't even have anything to do! Talk about the right people to have your back in a scrap.

"Fire!" The women pointed their rifles at me and opened fire, gunshots ringing out. I quickly deployed the defensive strategy we had come up with. Lead shots flew toward me, traveling so fast they could almost be called instantaneous. These were rifle shots from enemies at level 250, after all. They were likely on par with the power of rifles from my own world. That said . . . it wasn't like I'd seen a real gun back in my world.

The women would be confident of hitting me—and yet their faces showed only concern, only worry for saving their ally. I had to wonder how they could make such faces themselves and yet not understand the feelings of others, but I also didn't really care. In fact, I was about to trample their feelings into the ground.

All of the bullets coming for me . . . hit Takt instead.

He grunted in further pain, while his women dropped their weapons in shock.

"W-what just happened?" they exclaimed, all stunned.

"Seriously? You guys need to be nicer to each other," I mocked, a grin spreading across my face.

"Why did the bullets hit Takt?!" They didn't have a clue. In fact, I had used a technique S'yne taught me to adjust the trajectory of the rifle shots and direct them all at Takt.

"How's that feel, Takt? How'd you like the taste of the lead fired by your own gaggle of level-250 women?" I really put the boot in.

"H-how dare you! How dare you make us shoot Takt?!" they screamed. Incensed, the women started to hurl insults in my direction. Their nonsense just

made me feel good.

I really had changed. I found real enjoyment in moments like these.

The old me, back at home, would have likely been pushed close to tears by this kind of treatment from a horde of women. I'd become stronger—maybe "hardened" was a better word for it—but it was tough to tell if that was a good or bad thing.

"You're ones to talk. Beating down your foes with sheer numbers, using every cowardly strategy in the book. You don't have a leg to stand on!" I shot back. Snapped back to reality by my retort, the women fell silent. They'd likely finally realized that logic wasn't on their side.

"I'm kind at heart, so let me use some magic on poor little Takt. Drifa Heal." I wasn't going to waste a Liberation on him. Bolstered by my healing, Takt glared at me with increased intensity and he started to chew his lip. "I'm not done with you yet. See if you can withstand this." Even as I taunted him, lightning crashed down from the sky toward me. It was the ritual magic Judgment. Once the casters hit level 250, they could use it even with numbers for cooperative magic. They had probably focused the power of the Judgment to ensure it wasn't going to hit Takt.

"Still haven't learned your lesson," I chided. With a sigh, I deployed my mirrors into the sky above me.

"Stop—" Ah. It sounded like at least one person had worked it out. But it was too late.

"Die! Just die!" The overeager others dropped the Judgment on me with a terrible rumble of thunder. I pushed my life energy into the mirrors and adjusted the angle of reflection. Just as I predicted, the reflection worked

perfectly, and I was rewarded with a cry of pain from Takt.

“Takt!?” the women shouted.

“What are you doing?! This guy . . . it looks like he’s got the power to make all of our attacks hit Takt,” one of the gaggle explained. The others all looked in stunned amazement at the battered Takt. Some of them were even trying to run to him, being held back by the others.

“Hmmm. How about that one? The taste of magic unleashed by your allies?” I quizzed him. I’d thought I was fighting Takt, but at some point, that had changed to me fighting his retinue.

Takt had been using the shield when the attack hit, so he hadn’t taken much damage, but he still looked to be on his last leg.

“You guys are basically killing him for me. You understand that, right? How stupid can you get?” I said. Then I glanced over at the past Heavenly Emperor. She and Raph-chan were caught up in an illusion battle with the fox woman. They were literally throwing everything they had at each other—unleashing fire, calling up water, twisting the very air around each other. The same things had happened during the fight in Siltvelt. This was a rematch for Raph-chan.

“Raph!” she called.

“Hah, clone magic? You think I can’t see through that?” the fox woman said. Raph-chan had turned into an identical copy of the past Heavenly Emperor and was standing at her side. Raphtalia and the past Heavenly Emperor looked a lot alike, meaning it was easy for Raph-chan to copy her. It also sounded like the past Heavenly Emperor had sealed the fox woman away in the past.

Affinity really was important.

Anyway, I needed to concentrate on my own battle.

“Damn! You made all their attacks hit me!” Takt raged.

“You demon!” his women said, continuing to call me unpleasant names. Demon, huh? It had been a while since I’d been called that one.

“I’m fine with being called that. I’m the Shield Demon, after all. What’s so bad about making use of enemy attacks, anyway? You’re doing far worse than me, getting involved in what was meant to be a one-on-one battle. I still want to have my fun. I’ll heal him again.” I proceeded to cast healing magic on Takt. Both my magic and SP were getting pretty low. I took out a healing item, a rucolu fruit, and prepared to—

“No you don’t!” One of Takt’s retinue suddenly appeared and made a grab for the fruit. She was dressed a bit like a ninja. I thought it might be a Faubrey Shadow.

She grabbed it so hard she squished it in her fingers. Those things weren’t cheap. What a waste.

Some of the juice splashed onto the face of the woman who had grabbed it. She gave a cry. I’d been told this was one of the raw ingredients for other alcoholic drinks.

“Melrith!” one of the others shouted.

“Ah, this stinks of alcohol! Ah!” Hah, the woman was already unsteady on her feet. This stuff was basically poison to anyone but me. On the Cal Mira islands, Motoyasu ate one, threw up straight away, and then still just dropped off to sleep. Potent stuff.

“Don’t interrupt my healing magic,” I warned her, then kicked her in S’yne’s general direction. S’yne was quick to wrap her up in threads. I proceeded to take out another rucolu fruit and finally got to eat it. Takt looked at me with

hatred blazing in his eyes, shaking his head.

“You think I’m committing suicide, eating a rucolu fruit like this, don’t you? Sorry to say that’s not the case,” I told him.

“So you’ve been given an ability,” he said.

“What do you mean? Ability from who?” I asked. Had he received an ability from someone? The white-clad child-woman had been into homunculus research, and from what Rat had told me she could make physical modifications too. Maybe Takt thought Rat had performed some kind of modifications on me, then.

The Shield Spirit had warned me that Takt was an assassin sent by the one behind the waves, however. I needed to try and get some details out of him concerning that side of our problems.

“I was born like this,” I explained, hoping this could be a good opening. “It sounds like someone gave you your ability though. That’s the difference between us.” Now that my magic and SP were recovered, it was time to carry on.

Huh? Takt’s glare was only getting stronger and stronger. I wanted to know what it was. He’d been given a special ability and so couldn’t forgive me for being born with one. He really did operate entirely on a sense of superiority.

“We’ve had some unnecessary disturbances, but let’s get back to it,” I said. The charge had finished powering up, and I pointed it at Takt again. He couldn’t withstand another one of these, but he also had to know that if he moved some of his women were going to die.

Takt desperately focused his power, concentrating intently on the shield.

Heh, good luck with that.

“Fenrir Force VI!” As a little bonus, I also prepared a Hengen Muso Technique Point of Focus and weaved it into the thick beam.

“I-impossible!” Takt gasped around his groans of pain. “This hurts . . . even more than last time! What is this attack?!” I was hearing multiple impacts, as though Takt was being hit many times in succession. The Hengen Muso Technique Point of Focus looked like it worked well against the shield.

With a final cry, Takt, unable to withstand the attack, was sent flying through the air, spinning like a top. That felt like enough of that. I could have wiped out the women behind him, but no need to go that far.

Takt came down onto the ground with a crunch. His retinue all desperately screamed his name. None of them seemed to understand yet that they had no way out of this situation. With the support of his women, Takt still managed to climb back to his feet. His retinue started providing healing magic again. No one was giving up yet.

“Come on, ladies. Just healing magic isn’t going to cut it. You need to handle his exhaustion too.” Stamina was important too. He was so beaten up he couldn’t take me right now even if he was awakened.

“I’m not done yet. I can never forgive you,” Takt managed.

“That’s my line. I’ve already decided that your death is going to be so horrible you’ll wish you’d never been born in this world. Not just me but all of Melromarc wants this,” I told him. After the death of their queen, the people of Melromarc saw this as their battle to avenge her. Killing the one who had caused her death went far beyond my own personal feelings. That was why I was just taking my time, enjoying putting him through the wringer without actually killing him.

Atla, the queen, the people from my village. That was the bare minimum of those close to me whom I had lost. Those weren't the only lives lost in the conflict though.

Then there was Ren, Itsuki, and Motoyasu. After being defeated by the Spirit Tortoise and taken hostage by Kyo, they had been labeled as worthless. But they had learned from that defeat and made significant strides toward becoming better people.

Takt was different.

He underestimated the waves, killed heroes, and had almost caused the eradication of the coalition army. Then he had started a war to take over the world. If he had shown any kind of remorse, and although I didn't like the idea, there might have been some room for leniency. But he had to pay for continuing to spread the fires of war.

"I'm going . . . to kill you!" Takt proclaimed, lifting the shield on his arm. He was probably planning on unleashing a curse skill. It was too late for that though.

I raised the staff high in one hand and gathered magic and SP . . . life force that had scattered in the vicinity. Then I activated Gleipnir Rope on Takt and bound him in place.

"A skill that applies both Fenrir Force and Hengen Muso Style," I said. The name of the skill appeared in my field of vision. Incredible. An amazing new application of Energy Blast.

Magic started to concentrate into firefly points of light all around me and collect into my staff. It felt like a special attack ripped right from an anime.

"Now, see if you can handle this!" I shouted the combo skill name from my

field of vision. Annoyingly enough, I still had to hold back enough not to kill him. That was why I wasn't weaving Point of Focus in this time. Sure, I could have literally eradicated him like that, but doing so wouldn't be enough to satisfy me.

"Blood Sacrifice!" Takt intoned.

"Ragnarok . . . Blaster!" I shouted. It was a skill allowing for the concentrated deployment of Fenrir Force. It sure had taken a while to charge. That was why I hadn't moved since Takt stood back up. I had also recovered my magic in order to fire off this very attack.

Just as I had hoped, a beam so concentrated it couldn't be compared at all to the normal Fenrir Force tore straight for Takt, instantly blowing away the Blood Sacrifice that was coming toward me.

The scream he gave when it hit was like nothing in this world. Unable to withstand the attack, Takt was knocked by the Ragnarok Blaster clean up into the air. I'd been careful with the trajectory to make sure he didn't hit any of the women. I could have let him crash into them, sure, but I wanted to keep the fun going for a while longer yet.

The Ragnarok Blaster passed through his entire body and then carried on off into the sky, shaking the very air as it went. It even caught up to the Dragon Emperor that Gaelion and Ren were fighting in the sky above. The Dragon Emperor gave a roar of surprise and pain at the sudden attack. Once it passed, the charred Dragon Emperor was still in one piece, however.

"Now!" Ren shouted.

"Kwaa!" Gaelion agreed. Using the smaller dragon as a platform to launch himself, Ren leapt forward and slashed into the Dragon Emperor.

"Phoenix Gale Blade!" Ren's sword glittered red, creating a storm of flames

and a bird of fire formed from pure energy.

“Kwaa!” In the same moment, Gaelion charged in, breathing fire. It was like two separate birds of flame, both piercing through the Dragon Emperor.

“A puny fragment and the weakling Sword Hero . . . are not enough to end me!” she screamed. I was impressed. That much of a beating still wasn’t a fatal attack. Not a bad performance.

Thinking that, I turned my attention back to Takt as he plummeted from the sky and collapsed.

“Hey! You still alive?” I called over. The guy looked like a piece of burnt trash. I hadn’t used a defense rating attack, so he shouldn’t be dead yet. I’d held back. He should at least still be breathing.

Finally, he made a pathetic noise.

“Phew,” I said as Takt clambered back to his feet. I even gave him a round of applause, really rubbing the salt in. He really should be considering retreat, having taken such a beating. Not that I was going to allow it. I had Gaelion, Filo, and Raph-chan here with me. Land, sea, or air, there could be no escape for him from us. Not to mention, he’d cast a barrier on himself that meant he couldn’t run away. It was like he was closed up in a cage of his own making.

Of course, even if he took it down, I’d just put one on him myself. As for the curse skill . . . I’d let Raph-chan and the others handle that.

“You think you can get away? I’m not done with you yet,” I taunted. I was getting bored of hitting this punching bag.

Chapter Ten: Two Regular Guys and the Strongest Seven Star Hero

“You’re about to regret . . . getting so carried away!” Takt raged.

Interesting. The Blood Sacrifice curse didn’t seem to have affected Takt. Man, was this guy a cheater or what? I’d held back on the strength of the attack to take the curse into account, but it looked like I needn’t have worried.

“Let’s say that attack just killed you. That’s for the Staff Hero, who hates you just as much as I do, but couldn’t be here himself due to other responsibilities,” I explained. Trash would have surely wanted to take revenge for the queen himself. It probably wouldn’t have satisfied me if the roles were reversed, but as the temporary Staff Hero, I had now defeated Takt once.

Next it was time to avenge Atla, those from the coalition army who shouldn’t have died in that battle, and those from the village.

With an enraged cry, Takt gathered his remaining strength and lunged to attack me. Having changed to the weapon he favored the most, his claws, I chose to let him get in close. He was strong, I had to give him that. I couldn’t last long in close combat.

I knocked his attack aside and took some distance, and then Takt finally smiled.

“Got you! Your staff is mine!” he cackled, still grinning and nodding happily to himself. Realizing what had happened, his retinue also quickly relaxed again. “You toyed around with me too much. I win!” I mean, there was a long history of the strong mocking the weak, just to have the weak come back with an unexpected attack and strike the strong down. It was a common trope. I actually liked a lot of manga that used it.

But this time, that definitely was not going to happen.

“You seem pretty pleased with yourself, so let me explain,” I said. “It was so easy to fight you using the staff I was getting bored. So I let you take it.” Build him up again, then tear him down. Nothing hurt more than thinking you had a chance and then still getting your ass kicked.

Takt quickly activated his ability, and the staff sparked. Then it turned into pure light and flew over to Takt’s hands. As he took the staff in his hands, his smile was transformed into a grin of certain victory.

“All that smiling makes me want to punch you in the face. Are you really that happy to have obtained the staff?” I asked.

“Sour grapes, that’s all I hear from you. Now, prepare yourself for pain! By the time I’m finished you’ll be begging me to end your life!” Takt crowed.

“That’s my line,” I said. “Stop making me repeat myself.” I looked up at Ren. Sensing the situation below, Ren took a sword—not his own four holy sword, but another from his hip—and threw it down to me from the air.

I raised my right hand and caught the sword.

“I’m here to destroy everything you possess,” I menaced quietly. “Your pride, your dignity, everything you treasure. I’ve already half-destroyed your composure and your arrogance. Now it’s time for the other half. False hero, possessing six of the seven star weapons and the shield from the four holy weapons! Now face the reality of being defeated by a regular guy who holds none of the legendary weapons!” Then I drew the sword from the scabbard.

I had little experience in sword fighting myself, but I’d been hit by sword attacks plenty of times from Ren, Raphtalia, and Eclair. I could probably make a go of it. The sword itself had been created at top speed by the old guy, Imiya’s

uncle, and Motoyasu II from Phoenix materials. Just like the Spirit Tortoise materials, they had been a bit tricky to work with, but the three of them had quickly adapted and created this weapon.

It was called the Phoenix Sword. It had all sorts of effects applied to it, but just like the Spirit Tortoise Katana, my half-assed appraisal abilities couldn't handle it. The Phoenix Gale Blade that Ren had just unleashed had been a skill from his copy of this sword. Apparently, its basic stats were almost identical to the base values for the Spirit Tortoise Sword that Ren also had. It was a pretty impressive piece of gear, and due to it being a scissors sword, even S'yne had been able to copy it.

I pointed the sword at Takt and beckoned him to come get me.

"I'm going to show you that heroes' weapons are too much for you to handle. Come and get me," I taunted. I made this declaration in order to further tear down his pride. In that same moment, there was a crashing sound. I looked in the direction of the noise to see the exact moment in which the dragon—her head blown completely off—collapsed to the ground.

Of course, Fohl was the one who had landed the killing blow.

"Sorry to take so long, brother," he said.

"You did take a while, Fohl," I replied.

"All that flying around made it hard to finish her off," he complained. It did make sense she was going to try and use that to her advantage. "The Sakura Stone of Destiny Gauntlets didn't have much of an effect on her either. She wasn't receiving any hero protection, not like you provide us. No growth or status adjustment."

"Because the one protecting her isn't a real hero, that's why. The range it can

nullify must be really narrow.” That was one thing that did make sakura stone of destiny gear hard to use.

Whatever. Now that Fohl was here, there was no need to hold back any longer.

“I’ve lost count of the times I’ve almost killed this guy,” I complained to Fohl, waiting for Takt to come to us. Takt gave a shout of disbelief at the scene before him.

“Nelshen!” The dragon was gone, however, and wouldn’t be responding to Takt’s shouts. “You have to die too!” As though weeping tears of blood, Takt unleashed magic toward Fohl while running toward us. Fohl skillfully dodged all of the attacks, all the incoming magic, and then immediately landed a kick right in Takt’s face. The noise he made was most delightful.

“That was a bit sudden,” Fohl commented.

“He’s angry at having lost someone important to him. You killed the aotatsu woman, right?” I said.

“If anyone should be angry here, it’s me. Atla’s life was worth more than all of his women put together. He’s the one who killed one of his own, thinking she was Raphtalia,” Fohl replied.

“You said it,” I agreed. Fohl proceeded to stamp down on Takt’s face, putting almost too much of his weight behind it, and then he came over to me.

“It looks like you’ve given him the staff too?” he asked.

“Yeah. He’s just so weak I decided to lend him that as well. We have to beat him down into utter despair, after all. Teach him, through physical pain, the things that a hero truly needs,” I explained.

“I see. Then I too would like to fight him, not as a hero, but just as a regular

hakuko. As Atla's brother," Fohl said. He felt just like I did then. So I too would fight not as a hero, but as a regular human . . . as Naofumi Iwatani.

"Unforgivable! I'm going to kill you both, you'll see!" Takt raged. He hadn't given up yet, coming again at Fohl, staff swinging. When Fohl took the blow on his gauntlets and knocked it away, Takt started to laugh again. He went from anger to laughter in the blink of an eye; he really did.

As expected, the gauntlets turned into light, left Fohl's hands, and moved over to Takt's. He hadn't been paying any attention to what we'd just been talking about. Fohl had chosen to lose his status as a hero in order to avenge Atla's death. He was so lost to his anger that he couldn't understand even that.

Even if he was, the same could be said for us.

"Now I've obtained all of the seven star weapons! I'm the one and only seven star hero in the world! The ultimate hero! You can't hope to defeat me now! Just give up and die!" he raged, triggering cries from his women.

"You're so lovely! Master Takt!" one of them shouted.

"Now we can avenge all of our losses!" another one squealed. The entire retinue was buzzing with this new development, when just a moment ago they had been frozen in terror.

He wasn't afraid to give himself a crazy new title either: the One and Only Seven Star Hero in the World, the Ultimate Hero! Hah! What if he got all four holy weapons as well then? The greatest hero in history, perhaps?

So pointless. Truly, so pointless. Even a pacifier weapon could probably take this punk out!

"You're getting far too excited over picking up one more weapon. None of this matters if you don't win. I fought someone before who was so fixated on

being the strongest the weapons ended up hating him.” Takt really was incredibly similar to Kyo. I’d probably believe it if the big twist was the two of them being brothers separated at birth.

They were the enemy vanguard, right? So this enemy must just be mass-producing punks like these two and educating them to be dicks.

“And? Now that you’ve become the ultimate hero, what do you plan on doing?” That was something Eclair had once asked Ren—what his plans were going to be once he was the strongest. It was a desire I certainly couldn’t understand.

“First I’m going to kill you! Then the world will be mine!” he responded. I wondered if that was a better answer than the one Ren had given. I wanted to believe Ren was the better of the two. Even if he hadn’t truly meant it, he had answered that he wanted to save the world.

“Come then, Mr. Ultimate Seven Star Hero. Time for round two.” I pointed my sword forward and focused my awareness. Fohl did the same.

“Muso Activation!” we both said together. Unlike Fohl, I was just mimicking what I had seen other people do. Without a complete understanding of the principles though, I wouldn’t be able to do this. I wasn’t as adept as Rishia or Atla, of course, so I didn’t know how many minutes I would be able to last.

“Drifa Burst III! Hold on? Why can’t I do the same kind of magic as him?” Takt had a puzzled expression on his face. That was because the staff and Liberation were completely unrelated. Even more than that, the staff wasn’t lending him its true power, meaning he couldn’t achieve a maximum power-up. Even if he did, we still had a trump card to play.

Just like Kyo, Takt hadn’t paid enough attention to his power-up methods.

“Air Strike Slash!” Takt used his claws to unleash a horizontal slash toward us. We avoided it by the barest hair’s breadth and closed in on him. Just as before, it wasn’t that I couldn’t see his attacks coming; it was just that the Shield Hero shouldn’t be avoiding them, which was why I let it hit me before. Now that I was just a regular guy, I couldn’t let any of his attacks hit me.

“Wahnsinn Claw!” Takt shouted.

“Again?!” I exclaimed. This guy really did like his claws. They did look to be the fastest among the seven star weapons he possessed. Maybe he was a speed freak. It was still possible to avoid the attack, anyway.

“Give me a moment . . . This is how you use a magic sword, right?” I asked. I placed my hand on the tip of the blade, applied Zweite Decay, and then thrust the weapon forward. Decay was an attack spell that originated with healing magic. Just like Motoyasu and Ren could use fire-or water-based healing magic, healing-exclusive magic also had this kind of application. As the name suggested, it could cause decay of a target’s cells. If healing magic could vitalize and heal cells, this had the opposite effect. It wasn’t really all that effective on its own either. It was magic that could slow down the healing process by causing decay around a wound.

Of course, I was using it as a defense rating attack, and I had woven in Hengen Muso Style Point of Focus.

Takt gave another pleasing sound upon impact. I had to be careful not to break the sword. The three blacksmiths had worked together to make it, so I needed to treat it with respect.

“Now you’ll taste my true terror across your entire body!” Takt recovered enough to spit more bluster. “Drifa Elemental!” He cast some more magic while swinging the sword. He could manage this much then.

“That’s not going to work,” I retorted. Elemental was unified affinity magic with which Rishia was pretty skilled. Fohl and I focused, using the Gather technique, which Atla had been so talented with. We gathered up the magic unleashed by Takt, turned it into Bead, and shot it back at him.

“Wha—” A white flicker flew toward Takt and sent him flying. His retinue were so stunned they couldn’t even move to try and save him.

“Come on, don’t let us kick you around so easily!” My mockery was perfectly highlighted by Fohl literally kicking the airborne Takt back toward me.

“How are you weaklings doing this to me?!” Takt gasped.

“Are you forgetting who almost had you dead just a few moments ago?” I sliced with all my strength at the incoming Takt. Of course, I was still only mimicking what I had seen others do.

“Multistrike Demolition . . . er, kind of . . . !” I shouted as I tried the attack. Takt moaned and groaned again. I wondered what would Eclair have to say about this.

Takt was tough, I’d give him that. I’d been using the Seven Star Staff until just a moment ago, which made the difference even more evident. This was what Filo, Sadeena, and the others had been working with during battle. I could see where things like Hengen Muso Style came from.

“Tiger Rampage!” Fohl dashed over and started punching the same place I had just chopped. I immediately started chopping some more with the Phoenix Sword.

“More, more!” I shouted, weaving in additional Points of Focus while unleashing multiple slashes at Takt. To be completely honest, my attacks completely lacked firepower. My only choice was to make use of life force and

magic to increase my number of attacks. Luckily, Fohl was more than pulling his weight in that regard. It almost felt like we were playing one of those combo-focused versus fighters.

“S-stop it!” Unable to sit back and watch any longer, the women from Takt’s retinue rushed in, weapons raised.

“No you don’t.” S’yne blithely cut down the approaching women. Some particularly quick ones managed to escape S’yne’s control, but a punch from Fohl scattered them like skittles. I wasn’t sure two regular guys, as we were right then, could bring enough force to kill a level-350 target, but perhaps he happened to hit him just right, because Takt was writhing in pain.

“I can’t hold anything back any longer! If you don’t want to die, shut up and stay out of this!” I was possessed by complete rage, as though my blood was boiling. Maybe due to having little experience with combat other than defending, or maybe because I hated these enemies so much, I couldn’t be sure. In either case, I was so charged with emotion that even I was starting to feel like I’d become a different person.

I’d once read a manga that had someone who entered a heightened emotional state during combat or other intense situations. Maybe this was similar to that.

I started attacking Takt again, stabbing him repeatedly.

“You’ve obtained all the seven star weapons, and this is all you can do? Is this a joke?” I mocked.

“Brother, have you had enough yet?” Fohl asked. “I’d quite like to finish him off.”

“Sorry, Fohl,” I replied. “He still needs to suffer. The world can’t forgive him.

No, even if the world did forgive him, I never could. He needs to suffer more, more horribly, before he dies. You understand what I mean?”

“Yeah!” Fohl said. Takt was down on the ground now, and I stabbed him repeatedly with my sword, while Fohl continued to kick the crap out of him.

“Come on, come on! Suffer more. The ones you killed felt far more pain than this!” The pain of their bodies literally turning to ash! This guy had no idea of their suffering!

“Agh! It hurts! It hurts so badly! S-stop! Spare me! I’m going to die!” Takt moaned. I pressed on, determined to beat into him the despair of dying in the arms of a beloved partner—or the feelings of one choosing to sacrifice themselves to save others.

“Brother, if you want to keep him alive, we’d better stop!” Fohl cautioned.

“. . . Yeah, okay.” I was breathing hard. I’d stabbed the guy until I was out of breath. When using the staff, I’d been doing everything at long distance and had more raw firepower too. In this instance, I might have got a bit too carried away.

I’d made a good account of myself too, even without a legendary weapon. I’d been able to see every move he was going to make. I was starting to have my suspicions about him really being level 350 and having eight of the legendary weapons. Compared to Kyo, Takt was just a punk who had tried to let his level and gear do the talking.

“Such insolence!” As we stopped attacking, Takt got to his feet again and shouted at us.

“What happened to pleading for your life?” I asked him. “Most pathetically, I might add.”

“S-shut your mouth!” he roared back. “Lightning Whip!” I guess maybe we had played around a little too much, giving Takt the opening to change to the whip and unleash a skill across a wide area. We dodged and weaved our way through his attacks, Fohl proceeding to land another kick while I placed a hand on the pommel of the sword and thrust it deep into Takt’s shoulder.

He screamed. It was definitely harder work than using the staff. Maybe because I wasn’t using the shield, which was better suited to effectively activating Point of Focus.

“This is for the queen you killed! For the villagers you killed! For the coalition members you killed!” With that, I released the catch on the handle. Just like the Phoenix having turned out to be two birds, the Phoenix Sword was a scissors sword, allowing it to split into two blades like a large pair of scissors. So I wondered what happened if it was split into two while it was stabbed into someone. The blade was even sparkling red, burning Takt’s flesh black.

His terrible cry was music to my ears. That said, I’d never fought with two blades before and had zero confidence in my ability to do so now. So I crossed them like scissors and slashed at Takt as though cutting his chest from the inside.

“And this—” I returned it to a single blade.

“—is for Atla!” Fohl finished for me, and together we proceeded to shred into Takt. His clothing was torn into tatters now, his whole body covered in blood. This was the ultimate seven star hero? Hah, that was a good joke.

It was time to finish this.

“Drifa Decay! Have a taste of . . . Decay Blade!” I shouted. The Phoenix Sword slashing into Takt had both magic and life force imbued into it as well as decay

magic.

“Dragon Slaying Conflagration Fist!” Fohl backed me up with a series of blows faster than the eye could see. Then we both landed synchronized final attacks.

Takt’s screaming seemed well suited to the punishment—it was as though the wounds I was causing were festering on the spot. It was pretty gross, to be honest, but that also meant it was pretty strong. I had poured my entire mastery of Hengen Muso Style into it—an attack as close as possible to the limits of a regular guy and most suited to a true hero. The same could be said for Fohl’s attack, which was a re-creation of one of his gauntlet skills. It was the same attack he’d used to kill the dragon.

Takt groaned, defeated by the double attack from Fohl and me.

“Phew. That really . . . doesn’t make me feel any better at all,” I spat, kicking at the collapsed Takt.

“Me neither. I’m really feeling like just finishing him off,” Fohl said.

“Don’t be like that. He’s not getting off this lightly for killing Atla, the queen, and everyone from the village,” I replied.

“I know, brother,” Fohl agreed. Then I took a moment to check in on everyone else.



First, I looked in the direction that was still sparking with intermittent lightning and peals of thunder.

“Hey! I’m not feeling satisfied at all yet. Hello?” Sadeena was continuing to attack her target, who was being kept up in the air by lightning and looked like . . . well, a fried fish by now. I wasn’t one to talk after everything I’d done to Takt, but she was probably taking things a bit far. Maybe she was channeling some of my own rage, but I still felt like I was getting a glimpse of the former miko priestess to the water dragon and executioner. Her opponent . . . looked like she was already dead, surely. I certainly wouldn’t enjoy getting electrocuted to death.

“Little Naofumi, I’ve still got so much more rage to give,” Sadeena said.

“Enough. Change back, please,” I told her. “Just how much of my magic are you planning on using up?”

“Oh dear, now I’ve made you all mad with me!” At my command, Sadeena ended her beast transformation and returned to her killer whale therianthrope form. She was messing about, striking a silly pose at being called out by me, but I knew what she was doing. “I was feeling quite vexed, thinking about little Atla, and you, little Naofumi, but now I feel a bit better.” Just for good measure, she pointed her harpoon at Takt and shocked him a bit too. From her words, it sounded like she was just letting off a bit of steam, relieving some stress. But I could tell how angry she really was. She was the type who kept things light and breezy on her face but was raging deep inside.

It made sense. She was one of the oldest in the village, making her like a big sister to everyone. She had to be livid at what had happened to Atla. Then Sadeena turned her harpoon on the women that S’yne was holding back.

“I don’t like picking on the weak—” S’yne started.

“My proclivities do not extend to bringing harm to the weak, but I wish they would bring an end to their pointless resistance,” her familiar said, filling in the blanks.

“Me too. How about I help you keep this gaggle under control, little S’yne?” Sadeena gave a meaningful look at the woman she had just charred to a crisp, then looked at the other women. She’d gone overboard in order to set an example, I guess. “Keep causing trouble and you’ll end up just like her! So stop it!” The women all cried out together at this command. Seeing what happened when you messed with Sadeena was enough to shut them up.

I mean, we had Takt looking like warmed-over crud on the floor, the aotatsu getting her head blown off, and then another of their allies getting shocked to death. If I was in their shoes, I probably wouldn’t be doing much moving around either.

Just then I heard some loud shouts coming from Ren and Gaelion. I looked up just in time to see the massive Dragon Emperor crashing down in front of the fortress. Gaelion had his jaws lodged in the throat of the Dragon Emperor, while Ren had his sword in her forehead. The impact on the ground resonated all the way back up to us.

Gaelion gave a snarl through his mouthful of flesh.

“Y-you are joking! Give you my Dragon Emperor fragment?! How can a pathetic little fragment like you, who needed the help of a hero to defeat me, dare speak such words?!” The Dragon Emperor almost looked like she might start another rampage, but Ren pushed his sword in deeper, causing a mighty roar. The battle was over, that much was for sure. “You can kill me. I still won’t give it to you!”

Gaelion made a different sound, and I realized he had changed to father

Gaelion. During the battle he had likely switched between his two personalities multiple times while he cooperated with Ren. Now he had made a final declaration to the defeated Dragon Emperor.

A snapping sound rang out—the sound of Gaelion snapping the Dragon Emperor's neck. She gave a final gasp, twitched, and then died. Ren pulled his sword free and used the fortress walls to climb back up to where we were.

"You finished here?" he asked.

"Pretty much," I replied. What was Gaelion doing, anyway? Ah, it looked like he was enjoying a hearty meal. Amid fountains of blood, Gaelion was chomping his way through the corpse of the Dragon Emperor. I'd seen Filo eating wild monsters before, but this was even more grotesque. Ren looked over and then covered his mouth. He was clearly holding in his vomit.

"W-what's he doing?" Ren managed to ask.

"The enemy dragon was talking about Dragon Emperor fragments and calling him things like a pathetic fragment, right?" I said.

"Yeah," Ren replied.

"A Dragon Emperor ascends after thousands of scattered fragments are collected to form a single Dragon Emperor. Memories of the past and things like that, all coming together," I explained.

"I'm not sure what you're getting at, but it sounds like Gaelion has one of those fragments, and he's also trying to get some from that massive dragon?" Ren said.

"Looks like it. The enemy wouldn't hand them over, so he killed the dragon to take them," I said. For all his talk about their base nature, trying to come together to face down the danger to the world, I'd been surprised when no

dragons had shown up to fight Gaelion. It was likely that Takt's dragon had been mopping them up first.

Gaelion was chewing his way around the heart of the Dragon Emperor. I wondered if that was where the fragments were concentrated.

"I'm guessing that he learned the level-100-cap-breaking technique from the Dragon Emperor. If things go well, Gaelion should be able to provide the same service," I hypothesized.

"I see! Everyone from the village and the country can get stronger!" Ren said.

"Just a possibility at the moment," I replied. That was another reason why we couldn't kill Takt yet. If I couldn't find out from him how he had passed level 100, the future looked bleak indeed.

I looked up into the sky to see Filo still fighting the griffon.

"You're pretty good," the griffon said.

"I'm not losing to you!" Filo squawked back. I could tell at a glance which of them had the upper hand, however. Filo had the sharper moves. The griffon had been injured by her in numerous places, and the fight would soon be over.

"Now—" Filo yelled.

"It's over. Everything is ready," Shildina shouted.

"What?!" the griffon exclaimed.

"Waah!" Filo was blown back by a strong gust of wind and forced to take some distance. Then layers of wind appeared and surrounded the griffon. It was a magic cage Shildina cast down on the ground. The wind appeared to be . . . conducting electricity too.

"Oh my! My lightning," Sadeena commented.

“Bah! Stay out of this,” the griffon objected.

“I’ve always been in this,” Shildina retorted. “The bird god and I have been a pair from the start. You just lacked the perception to see it.”

“This cage of wind is no match for me! I’ll escape in a second!” the griffon blustered.

“No you won’t. Goodbye.” Shildina raised her hands toward the griffon and tightly closed her fists. The cage of wind started to gradually get smaller, closing in on the griffon. The flying creature gave a protracted roar of pain and was then sliced into tiny chunks, a brilliant red flower blossoming in the air.

“This is how the newest priestess of carnage handles her business. Well? More beautiful than Sadeena, I bet,” Shildina boasted, proudly standing with her hands on her hips while a rain of blood started falling behind her.

“Oh my!” Sadeena made another comment. The sliced-and-diced corpse of the griffon plunged down and landed right on top of the electricity-fried fish, piling the two of them up. It did make the colors more vivid, perhaps, but it didn’t look any more appetizing.

“That was nasty, Shildina!” Filo floated down and landed on top of Shildina. What a crazy combination attack that had been.

The only one left was the past Heavenly Emperor. I looked over at her avoiding a barrage of attacks from the fox woman, seemingly communicating with Raph-chan using her eyes.

“Raph! Raph, raph!” Raph-chan was gesturing at the sword in my hands, asking me to throw it over. I guess she wanted a bit more firepower. Raph-chan really was maturing. Very well, I’d join in this battle of illusions.

“Here you go!” I threw the Phoenix Sword to Raph-chan.

“Raph!” Raph-chan leapt into the air and caught the sword I threw.

“So you’re the real one!” the fox woman yelled and attacked again. But Raph-chan used her newly acquired sword to block the attack. The fox chuckled anyway. “You ugly raccoon! You think such petty illusions are enough to fool me—ugah?!” Just as the fox woman started smiling, the past Heavenly Emperor’s hammer came down on her from behind. She’d clearly been completely fooled—guess that proved the old Japanese debate about which was better at trickery, the fox or the tanuki.

“You’ve been completely fooled, eh,” said the past Heavenly Emperor.

“Raph!” Raph-chan agreed.

“Impossible . . . illusions that have physical form? But why does it even smell the same?!” the fox asked.

“Why would I reveal the secret to you? This is why you are tricked, eh,” the past Heavenly Emperor replied.

“That would explain how that ugly raccoon . . . used illusions to sneak past the Dragon Emperor and griffon . . .” the fox asked. It sounded like Takt’s people thought Raphtalia had used Sanctuary to escape. They’d been tricking the one who was strongest against illusions, so it made sense they thought Raphtalia was the same type. Raph-chan had been created using her DNA, and it sounded like she even smelled the same. Their voice and feel when touched were different though. I’d have to investigate more later.

“Bad luck for you. Here we go, eh,” the past Heavenly Emperor said.

“Raph,” said Raph-chan. Then the pair of them pinned the fox woman between them and launched further attacks from each side. One acted as a decoy while the other exploited an opening.

“Do keep up, eh. Let’s give her a proper beating,” the past Heavenly Emperor said.

“Raph!” Raph-chan agreed. The past Heavenly Emperor proceeded to deploy five balls, Raph-chan deployed five of her own corresponding balls, and then the two of them started to unleash a high-speed combination attack against the fox woman.

A strike, swipe, massive impact, kick, Five Practices Destiny Split, Wood Defeats Earth, Earth Defeats Water, Water Defeats Fire, Fire Defeats Metal, and Metal Defeats Wood were then all unleashed in sequence. All of them were techniques the past Heavenly Emperor had used against Raphtalia. Raph-chan performed the same moves, as though she was a reflection of the past Heavenly Emperor. It was like a famous special attack from a versus fighting game—the one performed by that sexy Scottish succubus. The two of them finished by slashing their swords from bottom to top before turning their backs on the fox woman and wiping the blood from their blades.

“Illusory Mirror!” the past Heavenly Emperor said.

“Raph!” With a popping sound, Raph-chan returned to tanuki mode.

“I’m not . . . defeated . . . yet,” the collapsed fox woman managed to say, though she was covered in blood. I thought for a moment that it certainly looked like she was defeated . . . and then the fox woman started to gradually change shape. It was like some sort of concealing transformation coming to an end: she proceeded to shift into a massive fox monster. They were probably going to need my help with this one.

Chapter Eleven: The Shield Hero Now Orders You

“Huh?” I turned back to look at Takt.

“I’m not . . . finished yet.” He had regained consciousness and was standing up. “I’ve not been defeated yet!” Standing on unsteady legs, he turned his hostile intent toward us. Looking around, he sent out a dark aura. I wondered if it was the power of the curse series. We had killed a whole bunch of his women as part of our revenge. It wouldn’t be surprising if he got infected by a curse.

“I’ll never forgive you for today! You’ve killed Ellie, Nelshen, Shate, Leludia, and Ashil! I am the ultimate hero . . . and I swear, I will end you!” Then Takt turned his attention to Ren. He was likely thinking that stealing the holy sword would give him a chance of winning. It might have been thanks to the seven star weapons that he was still capable of standing after taking such a beating. Or maybe there was some element of his own resilience involved. It was almost impressive, but it was also time for him to give up. Time for him to realize that he couldn’t hope to defeat us, no matter how hard he tried.

“You still want to continue this charade? Hero in name only, who can’t even defeat two regular guys. This is the end of the line for you!” I shouted.

“You’re joking! I’m telling you . . . I’m not defeated yet! So long as I have these seven star and this four holy weapon! If I need more power, I’ll just have to steal it!” he shouted.

“Takt! Hang in there!” The women started providing some enthusiastic support. If Takt was the good guy in this situation, things would probably be starting to look bleak for me. Some kind of miracle would happen, like his awakening to some brand-new superpower.

“I see, I see. Your awareness of yourself as the legendary hero is deeply rooted in the motivation for your actions,” I analyzed. This had been expected too. Which was why I was going to steal that final hope from him too. “I hate to say it, but you’re in no shape to defeat Ren at the moment.”

“I won’t know unless I try!” Takt changed to the claws and prepared to unleash Wahnsinn Claw toward Ren.

“Face the truth. The seven stars can’t defeat the four holies. Ren won’t allow it—indeed, I won’t allow it.” I placed my hand where the shield had been and focused my awareness. “The source of your power, a regular guy—and now the Shield Hero again—orders you.” Like the body and the soul were a pair, like the hero and his weapon were a pair, we had once been connected by a thread. I now passed a needle through that broken connection, using a stronger force than the normally impossible separation. This was a soul created for a body and a body created for a soul. “Reconsider the state of all things once more and return my shield to me.”

With a metallic sound, a ball of light left Takt and returned to my hands. A brilliant light enveloped our surroundings, dazzling everyone. Then the “shield” option appeared in my field of vision again. I almost got nostalgic. Just as before, my attack dropped almost to nothing, and all my other stats increased. My defense, in particular, saw an incomparable increase. When I thought about how my attacking abilities were all gone again now, it did get me down a bit. But Atla and Ost were drawing out plenty of additional power. There was no way this guy could beat me now. No way in hell.

“I-impossible!” Takt raged, changing the target of the Wahnsinn Claw to me. I raised my shield in order to take the attack head-on.

“Hah!” My shield deflected his favorite special attack skill, nullifying it

completely. My connection with the shield was now even stronger than before, meaning this barely rated as an attack. The return of my shield had also restored my status . . . indeed, to even higher levels than before. All apart from my attacking ability, of course.

“Well? What happened with your stealing ability?” I mocked.

“Impossible! Impossible! Impossible! How can you steal the shield back from me?!” Takt raged.

“Like I already said. You can’t defeat me. You’ve already hit a dead end,” I explained. Takt’s mouth opened and closed like a fish; he was simply unable to believe what he was seeing. And yet . . . he still seemed to want to fight. “I simply have to see your face painted with despair,” I told him.

“Brother, you look incredibly evil right now,” Fohl observed.

“You really like making that face, don’t you, Naofumi?” Ren added.

“That’s the appeal of little Naofumi,” Sadeena said. At her comment, Fohl and Ren looked away. Yeah, I could understand how they were feeling, although I wasn’t sure I really looked that evil.

“You think so? I think brother is more . . .” Fohl struggled to find the words.

“I don’t agree either. He’s actually very caring. Look at the slaves. Naofumi has such a hard time looking after them,” Ren said. He was still banging that drum, was he? Enough!

“You think? I like this little Naofumi. I really do.” All this noise from the peanut gallery! My good points didn’t matter at that moment.

“Now, the final hope left to you . . . I’m going to take that too.” I placed my hand over the shield and activated the final trump card that Atla and the Shield Spirit had told me about. Everything up until now had just been for my personal

enjoyment. If I'd done this from the start, there would have been no need to fight.

"The Shield Hero now orders you. Vassal weapon! Respond to my call, release the foolish binding on your power, and awaken!" The claws on Takt's hands started to give off a pale light. Confirming that phenomenon, I continued my words. "Now I strip you from your vassal status!" One, two, three, four, five, six, seven—not just the claws but all the seven star weapons started to glow.

"W-what now? What's going on? M-my strength is fading!" Takt was clearly unable to conceal his shock at this situation. It was a mistake for a single person to have multiple legendary weapons. The four holies and the seven stars weren't intended to allow that.

"Find new owners and join with them!" I commanded. Seven balls of light flowed out from Takt, rising high into the air, and then scattered apart. Just like certain wish-granting balls from that manga with the dragon.

Ah. One of the lights was flying this way. Of course, Fohl was the hero who had been selected by the gauntlets.

"You've . . . even stolen the seven stars from me? Just what's going on here?!" Takt was trembling in rage, but he looked pretty cheap and pathetic to me.

"What are you doing, stealing Takt's weapons?! Return them!" one of his remaining retinue demanded.

"Those weapons never belonged to your man, eh," said the past Heavenly Emperor, extending her hand into the air. "Huh?" She furrowed her brow as she watched the lights flying away. Then she smoothly avoided an attack from the fox woman, who had revealed her true nature.

"Divine Clash of the Five Practices!" the past Heavenly Emperor shouted. The

mighty attack with the hammer caused a ying-yang magic circle to appear, which proceeded to entrap the fox woman. She gave a terrible cry as the light from the magic circle flowed forth and bound her in place . . . and then the past Heavenly Emperor crushed her head with her hammer.

“Raph!” Raph-chan adopted a victory pose.

“Tulina!” Takt screamed. Nice. I wanted to hear more of just those kinds of screams. I knew I was being pretty malicious, but I was also sure I could be forgiven for all this.

“I’ve just been toying with you this entire time. What are you getting so worked up about now? You worthless punk,” I spat.

“Die!” he screamed. Still unable to accept reality, Takt came at me with his bare hands. A meaty sound rang out, but the attack didn’t hurt at all. It just left Takt gasping for breath.

“You aren’t a hero anymore. You aren’t anything,” I taunted him. “Come on. If you can do it, turn this situation around.” What this all meant was now Takt wasn’t a hero anymore. It wouldn’t have any effect on the world if he was executed. There were all sorts of remaining issues, of course, including his relationship with the heroes who had already been killed. “Do you see now?” I continued. “This is the difference between a true hero and a false one. The age of you and your transient power is over. Now you’ll pay with your body for your crimes of toying with this world! Shield Prison! Change Shield (attack)!” A cage made of shields appeared around Takt, and then shields with spikes on them from Change Shield stabbed into him.

He gasped, but he wasn’t dead yet. I was still holding back, making sure not to kill him. I really wanted to, but there were still reasons to hold back. I also needed him to tell us about whoever was pulling his strings. Then there was my

desire to catch Witch.

“Right, we’re finished here. Send the flare magic,” I commanded, just as Trash had planned. Sadeena raised her harpoon into the air and unleashed the magic. The staff would have made its way to Trash already, so he probably had a good idea of what was going on.

“Huh? Oh man—” I looked toward the battlefield and was stunned by what I saw. The smoke rising from the city didn’t bother me, especially as the fires looked like they were already out. The issue was closer to the fort.

There were mysterious scratches on the ground, big enough to divide the Faubrey forces in two.

“Naofumi.” Ren pointed beyond the battlefield. Trash’s operation had already wiped the enemy out. The Wisest King of Wisdom was clearly not to be messed around with.

It looked like those left alive were still putting up some resistance. It was likely Takt’s women. That would be over soon too, from the look of it. Half of the Faubrey forces were scattering like insects in this direction, while the others were surrendering. It looked like things were wrapping up. Maybe they could scrounge up a large enough force to take Takt back . . . but I had other things on my mind.

“Witch! You won’t get away from me this time,” I vowed. I needed to take Witch alive in Faubrey and then execute her. An evil smile rose on my face again.

Huh? There was something odd going on with Gaelion. He flew over to me in his baby dragon form. I shrank away a little, because he was still covered in blood and gore—although I had quite a lot of Takt’s blood on me already.

“Kwaa!” Gaelion cast some water magic and cleaned himself off. So he could use water magic. Then he landed on my shoulder and whispered in a small voice.

“I’ve obtained most of the fragments. It’s no exaggeration to say I’ve remembered pretty much everything,” he explained.

“I see. That includes breaking the cap?” I asked.

“Yeah. That’s no problem for me now. But there was something even more important in the Dragon Emperor fragments,” he continued.

“What? Something I don’t know about?” I queried.

“If I unleash the dragon I sealed—I mean, by the Dragon Emperor—and then sacrifice two-thirds of the estimated world’s population, the waves can be—” Gaelion started.

“No. It’s not time for that yet. Keep it to yourself for now,” I told him. It meant Gaelion could now sacrifice himself, like Ost had. I wasn’t going to let him do that.

“Anyway. This means the fighting has finally finished,” I confirmed, looking around.

“That’s right, brother. We can finally take revenge for Atla,” Fohl said.

“Although we need to get quite a lot of information out of him first,” I added. Then I looked over at the past Heavenly Emperor—who was actually Raph-chan II in disguise, in fact—who was standing there with a hammer in his hand. “You’re full of surprises, huh.”

“That’s my line, eh. The soul of this old soldier should have vanished from this world, but to make use of a fragment like this . . .” the past Heavenly Emperor marveled.

“That’s not my fault,” I said. Raph-chan puffed up her chest, looking pleased with herself. She’d certainly helped out . . . but it did feel a bit out of place.

“Oh my.” Shildina had a complex history with the past Heavenly Emperor and was keeping her distance.

“So you’re one of Raphtalia’s ancestors?” I confirmed.

“There are only fragments of my personality, meaning I’m more like a newly born entity. I don’t have many memories either. I can’t provide much aid, eh,” she said.

“Not sure I really understand,” I said.

“Also . . . it consumes a lot of energy to maintain this form, and I’m still not especially comfortable with it.” In that moment, the past Heavenly Emperor started to crackle and shake. “Holder of the Shield Spirit’s implement in this time, be aware, eh. The vassal weapon battle is not yet—dafu!” It looked like her time was up, because the past Heavenly Emperor proceeded to turn back into Raph-chan II in a puff of smoke, then sit down. It looked like it really did consume a lot of energy.

“Sure, sure, I hear you. The battle isn’t over, right?” Looked like I’d need to have a longer chat with her, when I had more time. “Well . . .” I turned to look at Takt and his cronies. “In any case, you’ll find the sin of toying around with this world carries a heavy price.” I proceeded to hold the fort until receiving the report of victory from Trash, spending the time thinking of exactly what I was going to do to Takt.

The fighting finished and we returned to the village.

“You guys all okay?” I called out.

“Yeah! We’re all fine!” Keel energetically replied.

“No problems here, I say!” added Motoyasu. He was joined by an eager shout from his filolials, so they were all in one piece. Then the Raph species started raphing, and it seemed we had all of them too.

Good. It looked like almost no one at all had died in the fighting this time—on our side, anyway. Faubrey had been run almost into the ground.

“Rishia, congratulations on becoming an official seven star hero,” Itsuki said.

“Fehhh! How many times have you congratulated me now, Master Itsuki?” she asked.

“I thought I had better say it in front of everyone,” Itsuki replied. He had been praising her since we came back. She had officially been selected as the Projectile Hero. Her weapons had previously been transparent because the real one had been held by Takt . . . most likely, anyway.

It seemed the seven star weapons were indeed vassal weapons, and when officially recognized by the four holies, they could be summoned along the axis of the four holy weapons. The vassal weapon had perceived desired qualities in Rishia through the bow, but being unable to completely escape from Takt’s control, it had ended up bonding with Rishia in that incomplete form.

“Congratulations, Rishia,” Ren also chimed in.

“Thank you all,” she said.

“Hmmm . . . now Rishia is a hero. Then I have even more I must learn from this battle. I must dedicate myself harder,” Eclair announced. Her rival having received a significant power boost, Eclair also sounded ready to buckle down and apply herself further.

“Rishia, sorry to rush you, but tell me the power-up method,” I said.

“O-okay. The help for my weapon talks about enhanced customization via payment of money!” she said, her voice trembling with excitement. She might have climbed her way up to become a vassal weapon hero, but she was just as excitable as ever.

It did concern me a bit, having her be the one looking after Itsuki. At least he was pretty calm and laid back.

“Which means what?” I asked.

“I’m . . . not really sure myself, but it seemed you have to spend money to enhance yourself. It also only seems to work when combined with other power-up methods,” she explained.

“So it’s a unique and general-purpose means of enhancement?” Itsuki confirmed.

“Hmmm, like a jack-of-all-trades,” I mused. Very much like Rishia herself. That made sense to me.

“That’s right," Itsuki agreed.

“Fehhh . . . why does that make sense to you all?” she asked.

Money, huh. It was true: I’d never put any money into the shield. It had seemed like a waste. I gingerly tried putting a bronze coin in now.

There was a jingling sound and 1G appeared in my field of vision.

“Looks like bronze coins are 1G,” I said. Next, I put in a silver coin. The same sound played and the amount increased to 101G. Then I searched around for what I could do . . . ah.

“Power-up protector? It looks like it cancels out a failure at refinement, another four holy power-up method,” I reported.

“Sounds like something you’d see in an online game,” Ren replied, seemingly breaking into a cold sweat.

“Yeah . . . this is a pretty messed-up power-up method. Feels like a joke or something,” I complained—although the amount of money required was no joke! Seriously? This was one just for the billionaires. I didn’t think this world had microtransactions!

That said, it was also pretty convenient.

“Can I ask something else? What do you think this is?” Rishia said. And with that, Rishia removed something that looked like a strap from the bottom of her projectile and showed it to me.

“Dafu?” Raph-chan II pointed at it. It was some kind of accessory Takt had attached. I touched it to try and check it out, but in that same instant, it made a sound and split apart.

“What just happened?” I’d felt something unpleasant the moment I touched it. I still couldn’t shake off a foreboding feeling. It felt like there was still something unresolved there.

“The staff has also returned to the king. He said he would like to talk with you later,” Eclair said.

“Okay. I’ve got a lot to talk about with Trash too. I’ll head over later,” I replied. We’d driven Faubrey off so completely . . . Takt’s elite warriors were like garbage before us. Just how great was the Wisest King of Wisdom? No wonder the queen had kept him around. I really understood now what Trash was capable of.

Chapter Twelve: The Execution

Before the news that Faubrey had been defeated in the war could reach their homeland, we sent out a false message that they had actually won and that Takt's harem was to gather in Melromarc. It worked like a charm, serving to lure out all of the other women in Faubrey with connections to Takt.

In regard to those women who had been forced into membership in his harem—the women who had been controlled by the fox woman's illusions—those illusions had come to an end with the death of their mistress. However, this strategy to sweep up the women from Takt's retinue had failed to catch one target—Witch.

She'd taken some other women with her from the building in which Takt's harem had been living and then upped and disappeared. That seemed proof that she'd known Takt had been defeated in the battle. There were reports of her walking away, looking flustered. Maybe she just had good instincts, and maybe she had placed something on Takt that allowed her to know what was going on.

It had also come to light that the reason Takt hadn't come after us right away when we tried to escape, after first encountering him, was because he had been helping Witch remove the high-level slave seal that had been placed on her. Doing so required the blood of the owner of the slaves—which had meant the queen. So they'd used her blood that had splashed onto the ground to break the seal.

The reason for removing the seal had been due to concerns about the master of the slave seal, as appointed by the queen, activating it and killing Witch.

It was all a bit much for me. We didn't know where the remaining four seven star weapons had flown off to either. I wondered where they might have gone. Of course, the staff had returned to Trash, and Rishia had officially become the projectile seven star hero.

I was with the other heroes, sitting with the royal party during the execution. Trash and Melty didn't look that happy about having to go through this. Melty was doing her best to avoid watching altogether, choosing to play around with Filo instead. When I'd suggested that maybe this wasn't something someone of Melty's age should be seeing, she'd replied that it was the duty of a member of the royal family.

"Come on! Spit it out! Who is the power behind you?" the executioner shouted.

"I-I can't . . ." Takt stammered.

"Do you know what will happen if you don't speak? Here's a taste!" The executioner put the boot in.

"S-stop it!" Takt screamed. The false hero, the one who had planned to take the world for his own plaything and overthrow it completely, was now facing public execution along with all of his allies. In order to maintain the authority of the heroes, not only the four holies but also those of the seven star heroes that we had among us were all in attendance for the execution. We'd let the coalition army and each nation know that the Zeltoble Dark Guild would be holding the executions. It was an organization well known for putting on a good show. Zeltoble had proposed the execution methods, and with the approval of each nation, it led to this execution.

I'd looked over the details myself, just to keep up to speed. The issue was how the executions were being performed.

First, after I defeated Takt, an hourglass had been used to reset his level, prior to his even regaining awareness. It happened to not just him, but all the women in his retinue. As a result, a group that had been at their lowest level of 250 were now a pathetic gaggle at level 1. It was almost painful to watch them. Some of them could barely move, although those who had been warriors were at least mobile.

I didn't even know how many we had gathered in the end. Motoyasu had been running around collecting the women up. His comment had been, "So many pigs out there. So filthy, I say." Quite different from his past self, when he'd been quick to flirt with anything in a skirt.

Back to the execution proposal that Zeltoble had made: Takt had his neck and hands placed inside wooden stocks, and then shackles were also placed on his feet, just to make sure he really couldn't move. Literally the only thing he could do was watch. It might have seemed like overkill, but with the weird powers he had exhibited so far, it was worth playing it safe.

Those powers were also part of why we were torturing Takt. We needed to know what other abilities he had and what else he might know. Basically, we were using his women as hostages against him . . . but Takt showed no sign of cracking. Perhaps his secrets were more important than the lives of his women.

He'd started by claiming he didn't know anything, but Sadeena and the Zeltoble torturer had quickly seen through those lies. He definitely had some kind of secret, but Takt also wasn't going to spit it up. He was watching a procession of his women dying in front of his eyes. There being a near-infinite number of women in the world, maybe he thought he could just cast these off without a second thought.

As it had turned out, anyway, most of these women were serious criminals.

Lifting the lid had revealed some real nasty stuff. They'd been using Takt's authority to give Witch a run for her money in terms of evil deeds.

Unable to move, Takt screamed as he watched the women killed, one after the other. That had been a grisly parade of gore since morning; starting with burning at the stake, the festivities had included water torture, hanging, the guillotine, the brazen bull, a firing squad, being run over by a cart, dragged around, magical executions using various types of magic, being forced to take poison, and being chewed apart by monsters.

Sadeena's and Shildina's magic executions had been really incredible. The two of them were practiced executioners, able to keep the women neither alive nor dead, punishing the sinners on a razor edge of pain. It was easy to tell the kind of work they had done in the past—but I wondered if they were really okay with it.

"If you two don't want to do this, you don't have to," I told them.

"I just want to get a bit more action. Looks like they're shorthanded too," Sadeena replied.

"Me too. Let us do this," Shildina added. Thus, the executioner sisters had both opted to join the fray. The two of them had used lightning magic to perform torture, keeping their victims neither alive nor dead, and wind magic to cause significant pain. The Zeltoble executioner had been quite taken with their skills.

These were the killers of Atla and the queen. When we started out, it had almost felt refreshing. As things proceeded, however, I'd started to have more complex feelings about the situation.

Takt's sins were especially extreme. He'd smeared mud not only on the

nation, but also the power of the church and the mythos of the heroes. Some of the people had thrown stones at Takt as he was brought in. I mean, he'd planned world domination, killed heroes, and then been proven a fake by the legendary weapons themselves. Finding out someone they had believed in was a fake was certainly going to collect some ire, here in a world were so many people worshipped the heroes.

Even rendered so completely powerless, Takt continued to struggle, shouting the names of the women one after another as they died. There was blood coming from where his neck, wrists, and legs were bound, and he shouted in rage.

"Stop it! If you're going to kill anyone, just kill me! Why are you killing them too?" he pleaded.

"Just confess and it will all be over! How did you obtain the power to steal the seven star weapons? What research have you been doing?" the executioner demanded. I already knew from Atla that Takt was somehow involved with the one behind the waves, but in order to confirm the situation, I really needed him to say that for himself.

"I can't . . . I can't tell you that . . ." Takt moaned feebly. I gave another depressed sigh, not my first one that day. The executioner keeping Takt under control made a further declaration.

"Don't make me repeat myself! Your sins are too great to be simply forgiven with your death!" Then he smashed Takt's face with a pole before casting healing magic on him. Torturing someone while using healing magic to keep them alive was a method unique to this kind of world, that was for sure. Really cruel and brutal—and that was coming from someone who had been using this tactic himself not so long before. Still, Atla's murderer or no, watching someone

else conducting such a brutal execution against them with a little distance from the action myself did bring some clarity to the proceedings.

If Takt had only had someone like Raphtalia or Yomogi among his retinue, perhaps his rampage wouldn't have gone this far. No, that still seemed unlikely. This was easy to understand by looking at the case of Yomogi, someone we met in Kizuna's world. We'd heard talk of there being women like her among Takt's followers. People who tried to show him a better path to take . . . and it seemed likely that basically the same thing as Kyo and Yomogi had happened. In other words . . . any of the women who tried to caution Takt ended up vanishing under mysterious circumstances, dying in accidents, or dying in battle. The lucky ones probably got away with just being exiled, like Rishia. That wasn't enough to get them marked for execution.

In any case, there was no saving him. I simply had no intention of listening to anything he had to say. In this case, Kyo and the women in his retinue had been better than this. He was the prime example of the endpoint of someone who had systematically eradicated anyone trying to stop his rampage—people like Raphtalia was to me. He really was just like Kyo, in every possible aspect.

I'd also been told that, just like Kyo, Takt was a vanguard for the waves. There were forces that existed behind him then. We still had no idea who was pulling the strings. We needed to make him talk.

"Still . . . I'm having trouble understanding this torture stuff," I commented.

"Me too," Ren agreed. We were both modern men, that was all. We didn't see executions as entertainment, and despite all we had been through, we also remained somewhat naïve.

"Still, we can't let him alone take responsibility for making the world into his plaything," I replied. Not only his parents—in this case his mother—but all of his

relatives were also to be put to death. His father was apparently already dead.

It had also come to light that Takt had killed almost all of the Faubrey royal family. That many people meant his hands really were covered with blood.

“Nana!” Takt suddenly shouted.

“Brother!” came the reply. His sister, I supposed. She looked pretty tough too. “Don’t let it go to your head, just because you beat me! Brother! Hurry up and kill these creeps, then make the Melromarc doll princess into my slave!” She should have been reset to level 1 too, but the soldiers escorting her were struggling to keep her under control.

I guess this sister didn’t have any idea of what kind of situation she was in. Or maybe she mistakenly thought her brother had got captured on purpose, as part of a plan to save her.

“His little sister was pretty brutal in battle,” Melty commented.

“Huh? You fought too, Mel-chan?” Filo asked.

“Yes. I’m the one who captured her,” Melty revealed, stroking Filo as she said it.

Hold on. What?

“You captured her?” I asked.

“Yes. I was fighting alongside my father when she suddenly came at me, going on about how she was level 130 and how she’d easily crush a weakling like me —as mocking as always.”

“Melty is the one who took Takt’s sister alive. I’d expect no less from the daughter of Mirellia and myself. She handled herself wonderfully, without leaving a single opening. My wife would have been thrilled,” Trash said, singing

Melty's praises. He always did dote on her. I knew Trash cared deeply for his family, that much was true.

"What's that 'doll princess' stuff about?" I asked.

"That's the nickname she called me by when she used to pick on me in Faubrey. She didn't have much time to deal with other people and so gave them all her own strange little names," Melty explained. Lack of interest meant they probably went in one ear and out the other . . . and she wanted to make Melty her slave! That was pretty crazy too. Publicly, Melty had only ever done what the queen had told her. She'd just been watching and learning.

"She just charged in at me, putting all of her faith into her high level. Pathetic, honestly," Melty opined.

"You've trained a lot with me, haven't you, Mel-chan?!" Filo said.

"I'm not on your level, Filo. But I've trained to be able to unleash magic whenever I need it, and I've honed specific techniques that don't rely on level," Melty explained. I did recall Fitoria say something about having increased Melty's potential—and Melty had then gone on to further raise her level with Filo. If her abilities were converted into an actual level, I could only guess just how strong she would be.

"Fehhhhh!" Rishia let out a surprised noise. She had been forced to come along as one of the heroes and was watching the executions alongside Itsuki.

"Hey, Rishia. Tell me, how strong was Melty on the battlefield?" I asked her.

"Fehhhhh!" Rishia just made the same noise again.

"Does everything have to surprise you? Get used to it! Or just don't look," I said.

"Rishia, you can't want to see this. You can go back to the room for a bit if you

want,” Itsuki soothed her.

“Fehhh!” With that, Rishia finally snapped back to herself. “The strength of Princess Melty? Well . . . I’d say she’s probably stronger than Eclair. On the battlefield, I heard her muttering to herself about how the princess was doing better than her, after all.”

“Hey, don’t say things like that,” Melty said.

“Wow,” I said. If Melty was superior in terms of both technique and strength, it might raise the question of what Eclair was even stationed with her for.

“That’s Hengen Muso Style, is it?” Melty continued. “I haven’t learned that technique. I’m just circulating magic through my system to enhance my abilities.” I mean, that sounded close enough to me. She was basically doing the same thing.

“I could teach you it later,” Filo offered. “I can kind of do it.”

“No need for that,” Melty replied. “I’m not meant to be fighting on the front lines!” Still, it sounded like I could now consider Melty to be pretty strong. When I thought about it, Trash and Melty were both royalty—important people—so it was a big help if they could look after themselves. Not that I was looking to transfer responsibility for failing to defend the queen.

“You can do whatever you like. I’m glad to hear how strong you are, Melty,” I said.

“Naofumi?” Melty asked, a little puzzled.

“I’ll do everything I can to protect you from anything that might happen. But if I can’t . . . you do everything you can and survive,” I told her.

“S-sure thing,” she said. As Melty and I had this conversation, Takt’s sister exploded into a rampage.

“Hey! Let go of me! My brother is the greatest hero in the world! You’re making a big mistake if you think you can get away with all of this!” Ignoring Takt’s cries, the sister continued her tirade. She was still going. She really didn’t understand the situation.

“Nana! Run for it! Hurry!” Takt shouted. She really was a feisty one. She was probably a match for everyday Melty, at least.

“You’ll pay for treating my brother like this!” she raged. “I’m going to kill every last one of you!”

“You’re the one who’s about to die! Don’t you understand your crimes?” the executioner retorted to Takt’s sister, but she didn’t back down a single step.

“Crimes? Just what is it you think we’ve done?!” she raged.

“You killed the seven star heroes, one after the other. Committed an unthinkable number of crimes in the past. You also killed the king and royal family of Faubrey, killed the queen of Melromarc, and caused untold chaos by declaring you were going to take over the world. You deserve death for all of these crimes!” the executioner replied. What a laundry list of evil. If she wasn’t getting executed, I wondered how many years in jail that would equal. Presupposing imprisonment for life, she’d be a major criminal with a four-digit sentence.

“Hah!” Yet the sister was still going. “All heroes other than my brother are trash, so it doesn’t matter if we killed them. Crimes? Nothing my brother does can possibly be evil! The world is wrong! The royal family? Who’s crying over the loss of that trash? Ending that Melromarc vixen was maybe the best thing he did!” Her mouth was like a machine gun. No room for anyone to get a word in edgewise. I looked over at Melty to see her staring at Takt’s sister with terrifying, completely emotionless eyes.

“Oh boy . . .” Even Filo was doing a double take.

While Takt continued to shout for his sister to run for it, shout from the bottom of his heart . . . the sister was paying no attention at all, raging to save Takt.

“Taking over the world? My brother was trying to save it! To just create a world for himself, by himself! He hasn’t done a single thing wrong!” This was hopeless. Even confronted with the deeds of her brother, she simply didn’t think he’d done anything wrong. She wasn’t someone words could reach. We had no obligation to take the time to explain things to her, and according to the materials prepared for me, she’d killed countless soldiers on the battlefield.

There was no reason to protect her. It was plain to see she was just going to keep fighting back.

“Hey! What are you doing? Brother, please?!” The executioner, understanding words weren’t going to get through to her, strapped Takt down.

“Nana!” Takt shouted.

“Save me, broth—” And then she was skewered alive. I couldn’t watch. Just her final scream made me feel nasty. I couldn’t understand why they would make a show of something like this, but there was a time in my own world where this kind of thing had gone on, so I also couldn’t be too hard on them.

More than anything else, quite aside from having no obligation to save them, we were on the opposing side to them.

With a moan, Takt stared over at me for perhaps the hundredth time that day, such hatred burning in his eyes. I stood up and moved over to him.

“Did you think we would handle our prisoners with more care than this?” I asked him.

“Of course! No hero would allow this! You’re a weapon-stealing fake!” he raged.

“That’s what you choose to come out with? Let me remind you of something. Among all of those you killed, the queen of Melromarc was the most important person. That means this war was all about revenge for Melromarc,” I explained.

“What are you talking about?” He really didn’t seem to get it, tilting his head as though I was making fun of him. I wondered if I should choose my words carefully but then just carried on.

“You and your cronies are hated enemies of Melromarc. Isn’t it normal for hated enemies to get horribly executed? All this hero stuff doesn’t matter. They aren’t going to treat you like a normal prisoner,” I told him. Melromarc wasn’t a republic; it was a kingdom—an organization shaped like a pyramid—and they’d killed the one at the top. Defeat in a war with such a nation meant the loser was clearly going to get their representatives and all their attendants killed. “Have you seriously forgotten everything you did on the way to Melromarc? To the people of the nations you defeated?” As he marched on Melromarc, Takt had done pretty much the same as this—killing those who wouldn’t obey and bringing those who would into his forces.

There might have been some nations willing to turn a blind eye, solely for the purposes of getting rid of Melromarc, but in the end, any such people had kept their mouths shut. Shieldfreeden had perhaps been the most suspicious, their representative actually belonging to Takt’s harem. But that nation was also currently in the middle of a power struggle and Takt and the former representative had been branded state criminals.

It was easy to imagine what became of such individuals.

“You truly believed you would be the one to liberate the world? And how

much blood has that selfish idea spilled? You've been running around thinking you can do whatever you like if it satisfies you, and now it's finally time to settle up. This is your punishment for so casually deciding to try and take over the world," I told him.

"I'll kill you! Even if I'm reduced to just a head! Even if I'm reduced to just a soul, I will curse and kill you!" Takt ranted.

"Let me tell you something a fictional detective said in my world: if you're shooting at people, you should be prepared to get shot. Just how many people have you killed with your own two hands? How many have the guns that you've made killed? What are you talking about, if you aren't ready to accept the burden of the lives you've taken?" I accused. If I'd lost this battle, then I would have surely lost everything—or almost everything. This particular fake hero would have likely kept the best-looking women from the village alive and then raped and brainwashed them. The kind of mass-slaughter we were currently going through would also have happened, just with different participants.

I fully understood all that and was ready to die all the same.

I'd made a vow, after all, to Atla and everyone from the village who had died. A vow that I would avenge them. I'd come this far, doing whatever it took, in order to fulfill that vow. I didn't know if this was what they would want, but that doubt still wasn't going to stop me. That was incredibly arrogant, yes . . . but I wasn't here alone.

If these horrible executions were to be my sin, then I'd go to hell or pay whatever other price was required after I was dead. One thing was for sure: I wouldn't be going to heaven.

"Your selfish crimes have led to your capture, that's all. Accept it. The victors get to write the history," I told him.

“You’re joking!” he shouted.

“Shut up!” I wondered just which of us was joking here. Takt’s eyes looked cloudy. He would probably start weeping tears of blood in a moment. No, in fact, his tears already looked a bit red. Something messed up was going on with his tear glands, probably.

I was getting sick of all the screaming behind me too.

“Come on. What secrets do you have that are more important than the lives of your allies? Just tell me. Unlike you, I keep my promises—at least to a bare minimum.” I tried to reason with him. After he’d suffered through all of this, there had to be something else keeping him from speaking. Maybe a slave seal with such a high level that even we couldn’t see through it had been placed on him along with his abilities. Hmmm. As I considered that and other alternatives, waiting for Takt to finally break, a few women came walking along. These executions weren’t having any effect on him, so it looked like the executioners had decided to change things up a bit.

The women walked up, all casual and in control. They definitely didn’t think they were going to get executed. They were all women exactly like Witch, so just looking at them turned my stomach. How great would it had been if Witch had actually been among them!

“Ladies!” Takt shouted.

“Huh? Faker, you look so sad with all your women getting killed,” one of them said.

“What?! Please! Just get out of here!” he pleaded with them.

“How dare you even talk to me?!” One of the women, giving off almost exactly the same kind of atmosphere as Witch, proceeded to kick Takt in the

face.

This whole thing had all been set up earlier in the day. A few hours before the executions, we had gathered Takt's women in one place and asked them a question: "You are all close friends with the false hero Takt, correct? Spill his secrets!"

It made sense that those most loyal would be closest to him, but they all swore they didn't know anything. Those who perhaps weren't quite so loyal gave less clear-cut answers. Not all of Takt's allies were blindly following him, after all.

"I wasn't close with him!" One of the bitches was quick to deny her relationship with him.

"You traitor!"

"Shameless whore!"

"This is how you'd repay his kindness?" These and similar shouts came from the other women. I had seen the whole thing too, of course. These women were slime, all of them.

"I see. In that case, during the execution, we need you to proclaim that you aren't the liar's ally. If it's the truth, we will let you live," the executioner said, exactly as he had been told to. The women had cursed the traitor to start with, but it was true that some of them had simply been trying to survive by using their own cuteness against Takt.

Takt grunted again now, "W-what are you doing?!"

"I've been through hell, thanks to you tricking me!" one woman screamed. Others were kicking Takt in the face, arms and feet, and even more tender areas. It really was a terrible sight to see. Whoever had thought this up was sick

in the head.

“I-I see! If you denounce me, you will be—” Takt started.

“I’m telling you to shut up! You filthy animal!” Takt was finally unable to conceal his confusion as the women laid into him at full tilt.

He had been right, too, with what he had started to say. At least half right.

“How dare you trick us like that?!”

“An imposter like you, putting on such airs!”

“All our friends went to their deaths, still believing in you! You murderer!”

“You pretended to be thinking about the world, but you were just thinking about yourself! You cold-hearted monster!”

“Pervert! Scumbag!”

“How many people do you think have died for you?” The women continued to take turns to berate him. I knew what was going to happen and I was still starting to feel sorry for him.

“You tricked us, nothing more. We haven’t done anything wrong. That’s why we’re doing this to you, to prove it.” The women from Takt’s retinue continued to laugh as they beat him. They continued to laugh as they snapped his fingers, one after the other, at the order of the executioner.

“You . . . devil . . .” he managed through his pain. Perhaps he’d finally realized that his women were truly enjoying causing him such pain, because his eyes died a second time. “I know . . . I know what this is now . . .”

A dream. He was about to say this was a dream. Then he glared at me and shouted.

“This can’t be real! There’s no way this could be happening to me! This is a

dream! If it isn't, then . . . hey! I know you're watching! I request a do-over! I swear to come back to life and make all of these scumbags pay! So come right now!" Takt made this loud declaration to all of the heroes attending the execution and in particular to me and Trash.

"I see. It very much sounds like you know something. Who is there operating behind you?" I asked. If anyone did show up to save him, we were going to have to fight them—the puppeteer pulling the strings.

Takt quickly shut his mouth, as though he was snapping back to himself. He was requesting to come back to life and having a do-over. Kyo's research suggested the one behind all this had some kind of system for spare bodies. There was also the fact that Witch had managed to escape. A cooperator with links to Kyo . . . I wondered if that was it.

They might have simply submerged again, preparing to cause more trouble.

Then there was the talk of him having defeated Kirin. I didn't know what he had done with that energy. These were just some of the questions that still lingered.

The Shield Spirit and the others had said the one behind all this wasn't an enemy on any level we could hope to defeat, but rather something that consumed worlds, and it was the role of the heroes to stop that being from getting into this world.

It sounded like little more than a clump of twisted evil. I wondered if it was some kind of uncertain enemy, like darkness or something like that—or something like a Demon King or devil. Hmmm.

It looked like there was nothing else we could do. If he wasn't going to confess things now, I'd have to ask something else.

“If you’re going to spill it, now’s the time. Witch . . . the woman you know as Malty. Tell me where she’s run off to. Do that, and I’ll settle for just killing you,” I demanded.

“You’re joking! Why do you think I’d know where Malty is? I’ve no idea!” It really sounded like he didn’t know. That did tell me one thing. Witch and the one behind the waves were two different forces.

“I see. So someone other than Witch is pulling your strings?” I said.

“I-I can’t . . .” He really was pigheaded. We were taking his precious women out in front of him, one after the other!

Maybe Takt’s women were all dumb too, but none of them knew where Witch was. The only way was to get Takt to spill it.

“I hate to say it, Takt, but you have to know there are punishments in this world worse than death,” I told him. It was time. I pointed down below to the execution stage.

An executioner appeared with a monster on a chain. The monster was a soul vaccumer. There were no soul eaters in this world, but there were monsters that ate souls apparently.

Externally . . . it looked like a massive blue-white worm. It was related to the dune monster I had in my village. I was borrowing some that had been raised close to Faubrey—we had a number of them here for the executions. They were literally monsters that sucked up souls.

“I told you when we were fighting, right? I had no intention of letting you off easily in death! I’m going to destroy even your soul!” I told him. All the soul vaccumers present had been given orders to eat the souls of those killed here. We had quite a few with stuffed bellies already.

“If you die and this monster eats your soul . . . do you think you’ll be coming back from that?” I asked him. Takt’s expression paled visibly. Of course it did.

He’d still been possessed of such naïve ideas of this all being a dream, that he could have a do-over or that someone was going to come and carry his soul away and bring him back to life.

I considered what would happen, then, when he learned that a monster was going to eat that soul.

He hadn’t been taking this seriously because he’d thought he was going to get another chance. He’d been thinking that if he was executed and the women survived, he’d have a chance to come and save them. That was why he’d been able to say all those stupid things.

“Well then,” I said.

“S-stop it!” Takt shouted. It was his turn. Finally, it was here.

“If you really want me to stop, this is your chance. Confess. Tell me everything,” I said.

“. . . Very well,” Takt said through his moans. “Just don’t hurt them anymore!”

“Are you giving me orders now?” I asked.

“The one who gave me this power was—” And then he suddenly started to scream, his head literally starting to change shape.

“What the hell is going on?!” I shouted. It was like some powerful seal just activated in order to shut Takt up. A moment later there was a nasty sound. Takt’s head exploded apart and his . . . soul . . . huh? His soul shredded into pieces and scattered too.

“Bye-bye. Treating people like objects, being so condescending, and having all

those fawning sicko women around you is what finished you off," one of the women snarled. It was like having Witch there with us.

That wasn't what I was concerned with in that moment, however.

It was Takt's sudden death and the scattering of his soul. I just didn't know who could set something like that up or just how powerful the one behind the waves was.

"Master Takt!" The women who were left and did still believe in him from the bottom of their hearts gave some pleading screams. If only that loyalty had taken a slightly different vector, one of them might have become a second Yomogi . . . That said, this whole execution left me with a nasty feeling in the back of my mind.

"There. We helped you dispose of the imposter. Now set us free!" Numerous women made the same prompt demand, their work here seemingly finished.

"Yes, it is time for your reward. Do it!" As the executioner gave this order, I quietly slipped away. Behind me, the Witch-like bitches got bombarded by a storm of magic and arrows. Their screams filled my ears.

"W-what's the meaning of this? You're breaking your promise?!" I didn't know anything about that. My business here was finished. It was so mentally draining I decided to leave all of this to the experts and move on to the next thing.

We'd have to just continue the investigation into the mysteries surrounding Takt.

Epilogue: Vanguard of the Waves

“We’re facing a wave soon. It’s important to be ready for battle . . . but we also really need to somehow bring Raphtalia back to this world,” I said. Takt’s execution was complete, and we were holding a discussion about what to do next in one of the resting rooms. The heroes, Rishia, Trash, Melty, and Eclair as a guard were all present.

It was a clear fact that, likely in order to save Raphtalia from torture, her katana vassal weapon had summoned her away to Kizuna’s world.

“We can hope that we are matched with Kizuna’s world in the upcoming wave,” I continued.

“Although I understand that it couldn’t be helped, this is still a bit of an issue, isn’t it, Hero Iwatani?” Trash interjected.

“Yeah. It’s not the best news I’ve ever had. With the wave about to happen, if we get lucky she may be able to reach us of her own accord,” I replied, perhaps a little too hopefully. Glass and L’Arc should be keeping Kizuna on the straight and narrow anyway. And they had promised we would have a full discussion prior to any potential fighting.

The scarier option was getting matched with a completely different world.

Eventually, I suspected we were going to have to fight the force with whom S’yne was opposed. But that likely wasn’t going to happen anytime soon. We also had to collect the remaining seven star weapons that had been scattered across this world. We still had plenty of issues left to resolve.

There was some good news. Having defeated Faubrey, we’d managed to bring most of the nations of the world under our umbrella. That was something, even

if we hadn't been exactly aiming for that result.

But we hadn't caught Witch yet, Itsuki's former underlings were still in the wind, and then there were S'yne's enemies lurking around too . . . It was all starting to make my head hurt.

To top it all off, Raphtalia was in a different world!

In that moment, I felt a familiar presence at my back.

"Master Naofumi. This is where you dig in and fight back harder."

Well said. Even though I couldn't see them, I had people watching over me at all times, lending me their strength. Thinking that made me feel I could make it through this after all.

"The longest journey starts with a single step. Let's tread carefully and carry on," I said.

"Then I shall succeed my dear wife and do all I can for the sake of this world," Trash said. Then he started to read from a document left behind by the queen.

Hmmm. With Trash and Rishia around, maybe we'd finally be able to read all the encrypted materials relating to the waves.

"Rishia, you picked up a book in Kizuna's world, right? Have you made any progress reading it?" I asked.

"Ah, well . . . I'm making some headway, but everything I've discovered so far is pretty much things you already know, Naofumi. I've got about half left to read. However, I've learned that our enemy is related to the vanishing materials and interference with the spirits," she continued.

"I see," I said. It seemed highly likely that folk like Makina were connected to the waves. The actions of the past Heavenly Emperor seemed to back that up

too.

“Trash, can I ask you to work with Rishia to read the writings from this world?” I requested.

“If you order it, Hero Iwatani, then I shall do all I can to aid you. Daughter of the house of Ivyred and Projectile Hero, please lend me your aid,” Trash asked formally.

“F-fehhhh!” That put Trash and Rishia onto focusing on the decryption of the ancient texts.

At that point a soldier came into the resting room.

“Shield Hero, I have a message for you from the village you command,” the man said.

“Huh? What is it?” I asked.

“A strange usapil with the ability to turn into a humanoid form has been discovered badly injured in your lands,” the man relayed.

“What?” A strange usapil with the ability to turn into a humanoid form? Among the people I knew, there was Ethnobalt, a rabbit-like monster who could turn into a humanoid form. That was about the only person who came to mind. When we traveled to a different world, Filo had transformed into a different type of monster. If Ethnobalt had come to our world, then . . . maybe he would turn into an usapil.

Ethnobalt was one of Kizuna’s companions, someone from a different world who we’d met there when we went to defeat Kyo. I wondered why he would be here. He should be in Kizuna’s world. The fact that he was badly injured was also a cause for concern. It might all have had something to do with the shaking of the anchor accessory I experienced prior to meeting Takt.

“Naofumi, do you have any idea who it might be?” Ren asked.

“Yeah. Let’s hurry back there,” I replied. We proceeded to the clinic in the village.

Arriving at the village clinic, Ethnobalt was lying on one of the beds. He was tall for an usapil. I checked later and discovered he was a type called a leshuant.

He was so badly injured he couldn’t even maintain his human form.

“I thought it was you, Ethnobalt. What’s going on?” I asked. On the way here, I’d explained to my companions about whom I thought it might have been. Now they all looked a little guarded, but also worried about Ethnobalt.

“Ah, Naofumi. I managed . . . to find you,” he said. His body was wrapped in bandages. He wasn’t as far gone as Atla had been. If healing magic was applied thoroughly to his wounds, he should recover.

I supported him as he struggled to sit up. This seemed like some kind of curse to delay the healing of his wounds. He’d got some nasty wounds and a curse too. Holy water had already been applied as an emergency measure. His life wasn’t in any danger, but he wouldn’t be running around anytime soon.

I concentrated on my shield and cast some healing magic.

“That feels better . . .” Ethnobalt breathed. A little at a time, the curse was melting away. With my awakening as a hero again, and as a side effect of the various new power-up methods, I could now remove curses faster than before.

“Ethnobalt, what happened? Why are you here in our world?” I asked.

“I managed to make it here . . . thanks to the accessory I gave you, Naofumi,” he explained. “So long as someone has that accessory, the ship vassal weapon

can cross to the world where the holder is, even without a wave.”

“I see,” I said.

“I had originally been hoping to use it to come here to aid you, Naofumi . . .” He trailed off. There was a barrier that completely closed us off from other worlds. There was no way to get to this world without a wave.



If that was the case though, he should have turned up when Takt first kicked our asses.

Maybe some issue had occurred that was keeping Kizuna and the others from coming to save us.

“The ship vassal weapon sent me here to seek aid from you in my time of crisis, Naofumi,” Ethnobalt continued.

“Of course!” I exclaimed. “What about Raphtalia?!” I pushed in closer to Ethnobalt and realized that something felt wrong. His ship vassal weapon was missing. A nasty feeling shivered up my spine.

“Ethnobalt, did you see Raphtalia?” I asked. “She should have been summoned across to your world.”

“I don’t know anything about that. It seems highly likely we crossed over around the same time. After I was sent here, I’ve been searching for you in my injured state for a while now . . .” he explained.

“I see,” I said, disappointed.

“Has something happened?” he asked. I proceeded to give him a quick rundown of the Takt situation.

“We were lucky enough to defeat him anyway, without losing any of the heroes,” I finished. That news seemed to put him at ease momentarily, but then he gave another tense breath and continued.

“We’re in a similar situation . . . if not a worse one, honestly,” he said. Considering the example set by Kyo, there was plenty of potential for someone else causing trouble relating to the vassal weapons. Kyo and the holder of the mirror vassal weapon had done nothing but cause issues since their selection—even if that had ultimately led to the weapons turning against them, preventing

them from drawing out their powers.

Takt in our world had been the same though, stealing the seven star weapons and eventually my shield. We had also already determined that Takt and Kyo were the vanguard for the one behind the waves. This might mean that a similar vanguard had appeared in Kizuna's world.

"A vassal weapon holder controlling his nation from behind the scenes, just like Kyo, refused to participate in negotiations for preparing for the waves and killed the four holy heroes apart from Kizuna." That sounded bad enough, but Ethnobalt wasn't done yet. "We formed a band from among our allies in each nation in order to defeat this evil vassal weapon holder, but one of those we recruited was a traitor with the ability to steal vassal weapons. L'Arc was caught by surprise, losing the scythe, and then Kizuna fell into the hands of the enemy." Shit. I'd been thinking things were bad here! In the past, I might have considered just giving up on them altogether, but I didn't want to make that choice now.

"We executed a plan to rescue Kizuna," Ethnobalt continued. There was more! "But we were attacked by a new, unknown force. After I was attacked and suffered these injuries, my vassal weapon was stolen, by the traitor, just like L'Arc."

"An unknown force?" More people with an ability like Takt's to steal weapons. The odds continued to stack up against us.

"I helped the others escape, and then I was sent here to you, Naofumi," he explained. Ethnobalt proceeded to bow his head low to me. "I know this is asking a lot. But please, lend us your aid!"

From what Ethnobalt had told me, in Kizuna's world Kizuna herself had been captured, and the other three holy heroes had been slain. Someone with the

ability like Kyo and Takt to steal weapons had also stolen L'Arc's weapon. There was even another unknown force at work.

"Is there any way we can get these?" I asked.

"Yes. If I use the accessory I gave you, imbued with power prior to losing my vassal weapon, we can cross over—although it will only be a one-way trip," Ethnobalt explained. Then he touched the anchor and transferred some magic to it. "It seems to still be connected to my world. I sense the presence of my captured vassal weapon. I think . . . everyone is still alive."

I looked at my shield. It sounded like I was very vaguely hearing the voices of Atla and Ost from the shield—their intent to leave everything to me.

Very well. We were just going to have to do this. In either case, we needed to go and fetch Raphtalia. It wasn't like Kizuna and the others were strangers to us either. Not to mention they were being attacked by a second Kyo. A second Takt, even.

Raphtalia had faced down Takt alone in order to let me escape. Now it was my turn to go and save her, regardless of the wish the shield would grant to allow me to take Raphtalia with me to my home world.

I pushed down my desire to set out as quickly as possible, knowing we needed to make all possible preparations. There was plenty of potential for issues to occur in this world while we were away helping Kizuna after all. I'd need to consider not just what members of the party to take, but also what weapons and gear to equip them with.

"Let's do this! We're going to take down anyone like Takt!" I announced.

With that, I decided to go and fetch Raphtalia and save Kizuna and the others.

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