“If there’s such a thing as destiny,
then I believe it is mine to put a stop to your ambitions!”

汚い海賊

Prologue
The Waves of Another World

ñPwaooooooo!ò

The inter-dimensional Ganesha Shadow roared and swung a weapon that looked like oversized Buddhist prayer beads at me.

ñHeh!ò I blocked the attack with my shield, then grabbed his prayer beads out of the air. His weapon immobilized, the monster raged and roared even louder than before.

ñThat was awesome! I guess thatôs why they call you the Shield Hero, eh Kiddo?ò LôArc grunted next to me while he fought another ganesha.

ñAwesome? Iôm the Shield Hero. If I couldnôt block an attack like that, what good would I be?ò

I didnôt feel like I had to explain myself to him, but it was true. Since I came to that new world, my main role in battle was to use my high defense rating to block the attacks of enemies. I guess I was sort of an exception.

I should mention that I was currently in yet another world, one that lay on the other side of the dimensional rifts that accompanied the waves of destruction.

ñDonôt let your guard down! Pay attention, will you, Boy?ò

ñHey Kiddo, you better stop calling me óBoyô!ò

ñIf you keep calling me óKiddo,ô Iôm going to keep calling you óBoyô!ò Just then I got an even better idea, based on what I knew about his background. ñMaybe I should call you óNobunagaô instead?ò

ñHey! How did you know that Kizuna used to call me that?!ò

I guess it fit pretty well. Iôd have to remember to compliment Kizuna on her nicknaming skills.

ñMr. Naofumi, maybe you should stop with all the nicknames.ò

ñAhaha!ò

ñDonôt just laugh it off!ò

ñThen let me be more clear about it. Arenôt I the one who named a king and princess óTrashô and óBitchô?ò

ñYouôre worse than I thought, Kiddo.ò

ñThis is why youôre so often misunderstood . . .ò

ñItôs true though, isnôt it?ò

ñBut you should tell him the circumstances around it, or he wonôt understand.ò

ñI know, Kiddo, well enough, to figure that they had it coming.ò

ñYou think you know everything!ò

If he was going to understand something about me, I wished heôd start with something else. It was kind of depressing. Why did we have to talk about things like this?

We were enemies up until a short while ago, but now we were on the same team and already acting like old friends.

But we were getting too comfortable, and I had to make sure we didnôt forget the reason we were here in the first place. Iôd better go over it all from the beginning.

My name is Naofumi Iwatani. I was a typical otaku, college student back in Japan. One day I went to the local library and found a book called *The Records of the Four Holy Weapons.* I started reading it, only to find myself actually summoned to the world it depicted, as one of the characters in the book: The Shield Hero.

The people that summoned me asked me to lend them my strength to help save the world.

And, well, a whole lot of stuff happened after that.

ñLôArc, you understand Mr. Naofumi so well!ò

ñI know all sorts of people, so right from the get-go I could tell that he wasnôt a bad guy.ò

ñIôm the worst kind of guy!ò

ñOh yeah, you think youôre really tough, donôt ya?ò

ñShut up!ò

What was WITH this guy?

By the way, the guy that was pretending to know all about me was LôArc. That was short for LôArc Berg. I still didnôt know his last name.

He was an experienced adventurer in his late twenties. Generally, he was a pretty charming guy. He knew how to get people on his side. Sometimes he was a little childish, but that was probably just part of his charm.

When we first met he was wearing a set of light armor, but when we met up again, in this new world, he was dressedð I donôt know why ð like a member of the Shinsengumi. The style suited him, but I wondered which one was his usual look.

After all, Glass wore a kimono, and Kizuna wore a haori over a lolita-style dress.

He probably chose the clothes based on their effects. Maybe the Shinsengumi clothes he had picked up while sneaking around in this world were actually better than the light armor.

Why did I care so much about his clothes anyway? Alright, enough of that. Moving on.

ñJust hurry up and kill the thing, will you? Iôm tired of holding it down.ò

Iôd kept my grip on the inter-dimensional Ganesha Shadow the entire time weôd been talking. It was one of the larger monsters in the area. It might have been a boss, but I wasnôt sure yet. Its attacks were intense, but nothing we couldnôt handle. The reason I was able to withstand its attacks so easily was related to the legendary shield Iôd held since the moment I was summoned to the new world.

I couldnôt take the shield off. It was like a curse. But I could absorb all sorts of items and materials into it, and doing so unlocked different versions of the shield. And those new versions all came with new abilities.

I became stronger by unlocking those abilities.

All of that was well and fine, but it came with a significant drawback: I wasnôt able to deal any damage on my own. So, I needed party members that could handle all the offensive duties in battle.

ñMr. Naofumi! Iôm going in!ò

ñThen I leave it to you.ò

ñOkay!ò

The girl that just rushed forward to attack the monster I was restraining was Raphtalia, a demi-human girl that used to be a slave. Demi-humans looked like humans, except they tended to have animal-like features, too. Raphtalia was a raccoon-type demi-human, and she had ears and a tail that looked like a raccoon, or maybe a tanuki.

She was also my most trusted companion. She was sort of like a daughter to me.

At the moment she was dressed in a miko outfit, and it looked great on her. LôArc had encouraged her to wear it. She looked so good in it, in fact, that I hoped she would keep wearing it after all the business in this world was behind us.

ñHya! Instant Blade: Mist!ò

Raphtalia flashed by the inter-dimensional Ganesha Shadow, her katana cutting deep into its flesh as she passed.

That was all it took to defeat the monster. It split into two pieces and disappeared.

ñAlright! On to the next one! This waveôs monsters seem stronger than normal!ò

ñI agree! They seem stronger than the monsters in our world, too.ò

Raphtalia was holding a special katana. Perhaps it was part of her mysterious destiny, but she had been chosen to wield the katana of the vassal weapons in the world on the other side of the waveôs dimensional rifts.

Iôll explain it all later, but it meant that she had become far more powerful than an ordinary person could ever hope to become.

ñWatch out, master! Another monster is coming!ò Filo called down from the sky above us.

She was a young monster-girl, and she loved to pull carriages. She used to also be a large, ostrich-like monster called a filolial. She had the ability to transform into a young girl with angel wings on her back, and she fought alongside með or rather, under my leadership.

She was actually extremely powerful on the battlefield. Anyone deceived by her appearance would quickly come to regret it.

But, after we came to this other world, her monster form had changed. She was no longer a filolial, and that meant that her fighting style had changed too. In this world she was a humming fairy, a type of monster that turned into dramatically different things as it matured.

There was one point in particular that was very different between filolials and humming fairiesð filolials canôt fly, but humming fairies can. So now that Filo could fly, she had taken to the skies to observe the movements of the battle.

Of course the waveôs monsters were throwing things at Filo and trying to hit her with magic, but she was very quick and had no trouble dodging whatever they threw at her.

ñLetôs do this!ò

ñFeh . . .ò

That was Rishia. She was running towards me with a horde of monsters in tow. That must have been what Filo was trying to warn me about. I thought Rishia went to join Glass and Kizuna.

Her full name was Rishia Ivyred, and she was a human girl. She came from a ruined noble family back in Melromarc. She used to be on the Bow Heroôs team. The Bow Hero was one of my fellow heroes, Itsuki Kawasumi. Then one day she did something in a wave battle that enraged him. Out of spite, he kicked her out of his party. Thatôs when I found her, in trouble. So, I put her in my party.

She was very timid, but she came from a good background and had received a good education. Had this been a game, Iôd say she was the sort of character whose status points had all been assigned to a stat that I couldnôt see yet.

ñAir Strike Shield!ò

I used a skill that caused a shield to appear in mid-air, blocking the attacks of the monsters that were bearing down on Rishia as she ran.

Skills were a special kind of technique that only heroes like myself could use.

ñRishia! Are you alright?!ò

ñFeh? Y . . . Yes!ò

ñI thought you were with Kizuna! What happened?!ò

ñKizuna and Glass are on the verge of being overrun by monsters, so they asked me to come get you!ò

ñOh. Well, they are on the front lines, so I guess they need some help.ò

Iõd sent Rishia to fight with them, because I thought it would be good experience for her. I guess sheõd been in a little over her head.

As for what Iõd been up to? My team had been focused on evacuating anyone caught in the monstersôpath.

The wave had arrived close to a village, so we were very busy trying to save as many people as we could. Come to think of it, the waves always seemed to occur near villages. But, then again, Iõd only fought in three waves so far. That probably wasnõt enough to start drawing conclusions.

Anyway, the other group of teammates on the front lines, at the moment, was led by Kizuna Kazayama, who was one of the four holy heroes of this worldð another world separate from the one that had summoned me.

She was called the Hunting Hero, which wasnõt one of the four heroes back in the world that had summoned me. She fought with a wide variety of tools and weapons, all of which were loosely related to hunting or fishing in some way. She could use a wide variety of weapons, but she was also subject to a strict limitation: she was only able to fight against monsters and animals. She was useless in a battle against other people. Like myself, she probably also had some way to deal damage to people when she really had to, but it wouldnõt be easy. It wasnõt something she could just make happen whenever she wanted.

She appeared to be a young girl who wore her hair pinned up on the side, and she wore a haori over a gothic, lolita-style dress. But she said that she was eighteen years old.

I met her just after we came to this new world. We chased our enemy, Kyo, through a dimensional rift, only to fall into his trap and find ourselves imprisoned in a never-ending labyrinth.

With Kizunaôs cooperation, we were eventually able to escape. After getting out of the labyrinth, we also found a way to sneak out of the enemy country that had imprisoned both of us in the labyrinth to begin with. Lots of things happened along the way.

It turned out that soul-healing water, a medicine that replenishes spent SP, didnôt exist in this world. So, we made some and sold it for a high price. We used the money to buy earth crystals, which were an ore that actually gave experience points to people from the world that summoned me. Finally, we ended up fighting and defeating an obnoxious guy that was trying to kill Raphtalia. He was trying to kill her because he didnôt like that the katana of the vassal weapons had chosen her over him.

Something about that guy had really reminded me of Kyo. He acted a lot like him. I guess this new world was full of jerks like that. No matter what world I found myself in, there was always trouble to deal with.

ñHey LôArc, think Kizuna is having trouble? Is she asking for help because she canôt attack?ò

ñHm... Good question. To be honest, I donôt really know.ò

The enemy had the word ñshadowò attached to their names, which made me think that they would still be considered monsters. But who knew if Kizunaôs weapons would agree with my judgement?

As for myself, it didnôt matter if I was attacking a person or a monster, because none of my attacks did any damage to begin with. I thought that I might be able to get around the issue by using a tool, so I once tried throwing a bomb at an enemy. It just bounced off of them and rolled harmlessly to the ground. And yet, I was able to use weed killer to kill a plant-type monster once, so the rules were sometimes confusing.

Kizuna had a similar problem. Her ability to deal damage to an enemy depended on whether or not it was considered a person or a monster, and sometimes that line was hard to distinguish.

ñLetôs go then, quickly, LôArc!ò

ñRight, Iôm worried about Kizuna, too. Therese, letôs finish this!ò

That was Therese Alexanderite who was fighting side by side with LôArc. She was a crystal-person, a Jewel. Jewels were a type of human that only existed in this new world on the other side of the waveôs dimensional rifts, which Iôm going to start calling ñKizunaôs worldò for the sake of brevity.

Jewels were a race of people that were born with a gemstone that served as a kind of magical core. They were skilled with magic, and were known for their dexterity. They were also known for being very sensitive, and based on the way that Therese had reacted to the bangle I made her, I agreed.

She had been hiding out with LôArc, so she was wearing hakama, too.

ñGreat power in these stones, hear my plea and show yourself. My name is Therese Alexanderite, and I am your friend. Give me the strength to annihilate them!ò

ñShining Stones: Ruby Flame!ò

ñFusion Technique! Ruby Disc!ò

A spinning wheel of ruby flame shot from LôArcôs scythe and slammed into the monsters that were chasing Rishia.

Skills could often be combined with the skills of other party members to make combo skills. Iôd used them a few times with Raphtalia and Filo.

ñCome on, Kiddo! Letôs go!ò

ñYou make all the decisions now, do you? Fine, letôs go!ò

ñAlthough if Kizuna and Glass are fighting together, Iôm pretty sure theyôll be just fine.ò

I should tell you about Glass next. She looked like a ghost, wore a kimono, and fought with folding fans. Her hair was jet black, and her skin was so white it was nearly transparent . . . it actually might have been a bit transparent.

Her fans were one of the vassal weapons.

Kizuna was close friends with Glass, and she was really upset when she found out that Glass had been trying to kill me. Glass was very cold and sharpð she looked like she could kill you just by looking at you. But, she was different around Kizuna. She relaxed, she smiled.

Because of Kizunaôs mediation, Glass and I now fought together.

LôArc and I ran to help Kizuna and Glass.

Monsters poured from the dimensional rifts in the wave. This time they looked like monsters straight out of Indian mythology. Wasnôt Ganesha basically an elephant-human hybrid?

There were also inter-dimensional ifrits, which looked like fire spirits. I saw some other monsters called inter-dimensonal nagaraja.

There were a lot of human-like monsters, too. They didnôt seem to understand language, so I figured they were probably monsters, not peopleð even accounting for the wide variety of human-like people in these other worlds. They were pretty powerful.

Most of the monsters were powerful, actually. This wave was quite a bit more difficult than any of the other waves Iôd fought in.

Over the past few days of training Iôd managed to get to level 75, and I had powered up my shields considerably, but the enemy still had attacks that nearly broke through my defenses. I still hadnôt recovered the sort of abilities Iôd had in the last world, the world that had summoned me. It was a bit like playing an away game.

LôArc had said the same thing.

ñYou donôt think someone with a vassal weapon came with this wave, do you? Like Glass did?ò

ñThatôs not funny, Kiddo!ò

ñI wasnôt joking!ò

We went on yelling back and forth as we held off the monsters. Eventually, the dimensional rifts closed.

High in the sky above our heads, an enormous ship hovered and was engaged in battle with flying monsters that looked like garudas. The battle was fierce.

A lot of people had joined us in our fight against the wave.

ñLooks like itôs pretty much over.ò

ñThere were tons of monsters this time. I guess it just took some time to get rid of them all.ò

ñKiddo, you really had me worried there for a minute.ò

ñWell, itôs what you were doing. Donôt forget that.ò

ñI havenôt forgotten, but it isnôt something to make light of.ò

Heôd crossed over to another world to kill its heroes, but now he was afraid to even think of the same thing happening to him.

ñHey!ò Kizuna shouted, running over to us. Glass was right behind her.

ñYou asked for help, but it doesnôt look like you needed it.ò

ñYeah, well, I asked Rishia to get you, and a bunch of the monsters followed her when she left. We ended up handling the leftovers ourselves.ò

I was impressed that Rishia had done as well as she had, especially considering how weak she was. Her stats never seemed to match her level, but at least sheôd managed to stay alive this whole time.

ñWe were going to help her, but we had too many monsters to deal with ourselves. Besides, Rishia took off screaming and running.ò ñYeah, yeah.ò

I could picture it easily enough. What monster wouldnôt be drawn to that pathetic ñfehhhhò of hers?ò

ñRafu!ò

ñFeh?!ò

The little creature sitting on Rishiaôs shoulder was Raph-chan. Raph-chan was my shikigami; we made her out of Raphtaliaôs hair. She was cute, a small little creature that looked something like a mix between a tanuki and a raccoon.

She looked like Raphtaliað if Raphtalia were turned into an animal.

She was a happy, energetic little creature. For some reason, she was currently riding on Rishiaôs back.

ñDid you protect Rishia?ò

ñRafu!ò she barked and nodded.

Raph-chan was able to use the same illusion magic as Raphtalia.

When Raph-chan cast illusion magic on monsters, they werenôt able to land any attacks on Rishia.

ñGood work, Raph-chan.ò

ñRafu!ò

ñPen!ò chirped Chris. Chris was a penguin, and was Kizuna and Glassôs shikigami. It really looked exactly like a penguin. Chris has been around for longer than Raph-chan.

ñYou too, Chris. Thanks for protecting Rishia,ò said Kizuna.

ñYou did an excellent job,ò added Glass.

Raph-chan was the one who had really helped thoughð I made a point of rubbing her head in a way that everyone could see.

ñMr. Naofumi, what are you acting so competitive for? We have more important things to discuss,ò Raphtalia said, grabbing my shoulder. Raphtalia didnôt seem to be very fond of Raph-chan.

ñKizuna, were you able to fight most of those monsters?ò

ñMost of them. I was a little concerned about the ones named after gods, but as it turns out, they were all just normal monsters.ò

Ganesha, ifrits, the snake-like nagas, the half-snake-half-human nagarajas . . . there were plenty of different monsters.

ñWhat was the boss monster like?ò

ñIt was an inter-dimensional girimekhala, but there was a mode-change halfway through and it became an airavata.ò

The boss was an elephant? How boring! I only knew what it was because I was such an otaku.

ñLetôs absorb as many materials as we can, then head back to the castle.ò

Kizuna called to Ethnobalt, who was waiting in the sky above us. He was from Kizunaôs world, and used the ship of the vassal weapons. When he came to battle, he usually hung back and offered support from a distance.

Apparently he didnôt like fighting.

He was a young boy that dressed like a wizard . . . or at least thatôs how he appeared at first glance. His true form was a monster, like Filo. I knew that he was some kind of rabbit, but I didnôt know any more than that.

He was a skilled fortune teller, and he was the one that created Raph-chan for me. Judging from how useful Raph-chan had proven in the hunt for Raphtalia, Ethnobaltôs abilities were the real deal.

ñBut seriouslyð Why do I have to come all the way to this world and fight in *your* waves?ò

ñYouôre asking that *now*?ò

ñHey, I didnôt come here because I wanted to fight in more waves. Iôm just helping out on the side, while Iôve got the time.ò

ñYeah I know. And thank you for fighting on behalf of our world.ò

ñYeah, yeah . . . Letôs head back and get ready for the next step.ñ

What did people in this world think the waves were? They happened all over the world, so it was hard to come up with one explanation that fit everything. Waves . . .

Back in the last world, the one that summoned me, Iôd thought of them as a natural disaster. Now I knew that wasnôt quite right. Iôd finally learned what they really were, and Iôd never have known if I hadnôt crossed over to Kizunaôs world.

The waves were, supposedly, a phenomenon that happened when worlds fused together. I say ñsupposedlyò because this was all just something Iôd heard. I didnôt have proof one way or the other. In Kizunaôs world there were records of fusions that had happened in the distant past.

If the worlds fused any more than they already had, they would be destroyed . . . or so they said. According to the legend, the way to save your world from destruction was to cross over to another world during a wave event and kill the four holy heroes (the people who hold the holy weapons) of the other world. If you did that, then their world would be destroyed and the life of your own world would be extended.

That was why Glass had crossed over into our world and tried to kill me . . . or so she said.

When Kizuna learned what had happen she was livid. She resolved to find another way to save her world.

Furthermore, back in the other world there was a monster called the Spirit Tortoise, and it sacrificed people and used their souls to produce a magic barrier that would prevent waves from happening.

As you might have guessed, there were monsters in Kizunaôs world that could do the same thing.

Some of them had already been dealt with, like the White Tiger, but there were four holy beasts here. Iôd also heard them called the Four Symbols.

There was a so-called genius scientist here, who I liked to call Trash #2, and he had found a way to make replicas of the defeated White Tiger, turning those copies into weapons of war.

ñWe canôt spend all our time thinking about the waves. Thereôs a limit to how much time we can stay here.ò

ñI know that! Iôm doing all I can to help you,ò Kizuna said.

We had our own mission to accomplish. We had to punish Kyo for what heôd done to our world, for what heôd done to Ost. We had to bring the Spirit Tortoiseôs energy back to our world.

There was no time to waste.

Chapter One

Otherworldly Techniques

ñAlright then . . .ò

I went back to what I had been doing before the wave came.

LôArc was a king . . . or *boy*, and had a castle. I worked in a small workshop in the surrounding town for a few days. The culture there was interesting, a kind of a reflection of LôArc himself. It was a near perfect mix of east and west.

People wore Japanese-style kimonos, but with Western sets of armor over them. No one thought it was strange. The neighboring countries were very Japan-like, and Iôd heard that the eastern influence came in over the borders.

I was borrowing Romina the blacksmithôs workshop to craft some accessories. Romina had made everyoneôs equipment.

It was a good place to work. I could quickly respond to questions or requests that Romina had, and I could get to the castle easily if anything important came up. Going to Kizunaôs house every night was a little annoying because of the trek to the next town, so I was pretty content to borrow the workshop for a few days.

Raphtalia, Rishia, and Filo were all at the castle, training with LôArc.

Raph-chan and Therese were both fascinated by my accessory crafting, so they stayed behind to watch me work. They were always interrupting me with stupid questions, so I did all that I could to ignore them. I couldnôt help but feel like we were getting a bit too comfortable, but it was all we could do at the moment..

ñSo letôs make a plan . . .ò Kizuna said, walking in with Glass. She leaned on the counter and showed Romina the materials sheôd gotten from the wave monsters, then asked for new equipment to be made.

They looked like they wanted to talk to me about strategy when they finished placing their equipment orders.

ñHey, thereôs something I wanted to ask you about.ò

ñWhat?ò

ñIf the waves occur so frequently, how do you deal with them all?ò

ñYou should ask Glass about that.ò

ñIndeed, we are very careful about such things.ò

ñSo? What do you do?ò

ñRomina, do you have one of those things here?ò

ñYes. I get a lot of orders for them,ò Romina said, producing a necklace from behind the counter. There was a large gemstone hanging from it.

There were a number of different designs from what I could tell, but they all incorporated a large gemstone.

Was it a crystal? The stone shone with a faint light.

ñThis is a special tool that instantly transports its user to the site of a wave occurrence.ò

ñHey, thatôs pretty impressive.ò

The people in Kizunaôs world had apparently done quite a bit of research into the different functions of the heroesô weapons. They invented ways to mimic the drop item functionality of them, which was impossible in the world that I came from. It required a special machine and the use of the dragon hourglass, but the technology was still very impressive.

ñYeah. The Jewels were the first people to make them.ò ñHm . . . And?ò

ñSo our friends all have these, and they are posted around the world to battle the waves whenever and wherever they occur.ò

ñYou certainly seem to know a lot of good people.ò

Kizuna had been summoned to this world before the waves started coming, and after going on a number of adventures, she ended up being thrown into an inescapable labyrinth. Before that she had met quite a lot of people.

ñThe ones I know of are on sale in the marketplace. They sell them to normal adventurers who want to battle in the waves.ò

ñJust for the good of the world? There are so many noble people around here!ò

Too bad there wasnôt anyone like that in the world that Iôd come from. Some adventurers had actually volunteered to help during the wave on the Cal Mira islands, but we never would have won that battle had it not been for the heroes.

ñA lot of people show up to battle in the waves. Turns out they are mostly after the rare materials they can get from the monsters.ò

ñAh . . . Yeah, I guess that makes sense.ò

If they had the opportunity to get their hands on rare items and technologies, then a lot of people would probably show upð even if they had to put themselves at considerable risk. That must have been why some of the adventurers Iôd met seemed to be used to handling themselves on the battlefield.

ñIôm kind of jealous.ò

Deep knowledge of the waves was very uncommon in the world that had summoned me, and perhaps because of that, it was very rare to get any help from anyone when the waves came. Granted, a few adventurers here and there would get caught up in a wave if it happened to occur where they were, but they didnôt help out very much when it came time to battle.

There were times when the waves would end even if the heroes didn't come to battle, but now I wondered if that was because someone in the other world was closing the dimensional rifts from their side.

Theoretically, there was a way to confirm my suspicion, but I couldn't think of a way to talk to whoever was on the other side of the rifts. There was also no way to know what sort of person we'd end up running into. What if they just attacked us? It was probably better to just leave them alone.

Back to the topic at hand—if there was an item that would automatically allow its user to participate in a wave battle, I wanted to get my hands on it. I figured it would prove useful once we finished up in this world and went back to the one that had summoned me.

Not only would it make my job as a hero easier, but I could probably make money if I found a way to mass produce it.

"I'd really like one of those."

Kizuna and Romina nodded as if they understood exactly what I was thinking.

"Naofumi, you love that kind of thing, don't you?"

"Alto makes that same face."

They had figured that I wanted to sell the necklaces back in the previous world. I must have really gotten a reputation as a penny-pincher.

"I'm just not sure that anyone back in my world is serious about fighting the waves. Not even the seven star heroes or the four holy heroes."

The other heroes, aside from myself, showed up in that world already knowing how things worked there. They used it to get ahead—but then they accused me of cheating when they realized my leveling and strength had outpaced them. They acted like everything was a game, even the waves. They werenôt serious about anything at all.

Besides, when the second wave came, they were barely able to survive the fight with the boss. Any wave that came now would be much more powerful than that, so I wasnôt sure how much I could count on them. A lot of the waves were left to Fitoria, the legendary filolial, to deal with. She was apparently very busy running around the world taking care of waves wherever they popped up.

I wonder how they were holding up without me.

Iôd heard there were other heroes called the seven star heroes, but Iôd never even met them. I didnôt know who they were, but it was best to prepare for the worst. If these necklaces would help me do that, then I wanted them.

ñOh, I almost forgot! I figured something out after speaking with Glass.ò

ñWhat?ò

ñShe says that since I participated in the wave battle this time, the next wave will take longer to come to this area.ò

ñOh yeah?ò

Kizuna mentioned something about that beforeð sheôd said that there was a reason the four holy heroes needed to battle against the waves.

There was a legend in her world that said the lifespan of the world itself could be extended if the four holy heroes of another world were killed. But even though Kizuna was a holy hero, she wasnôt able to do any damage to human opponents, which meant that she had practically nothing to gain from participating in the wave battles.

She could either change the way she was registered in the party, or . . . at the very worst, she could avoid the waves by making sure she was in an inescapable labyrinth when they came. At least one of these inconsistencies was cleared up now. If the four holy heroes helped battle the waves, it would increase the time until the next wave came . . .at least according to Glass.

That was certainly a good hypothesis. We'd just have to try it a few more times to confirm that it was true.

"If there are a lot of adventurers helping battle the waves when they come, are they pretty easy to deal with in this world?"

Just then a person ducked into the workshop and blurted out, "Not exactly."

I turned to see who it was, and found myself looking at a person with blond hair, a man I think. His hair was pulled into a ponytail that hung over one of his shoulders. He reminded me a bit of Motoyasu Kitamura, only he didn't look Japanese and seemed a lot more relaxed, nicer.

Maybe he was some kind of new and improved spear hero of this world?

Motoyasu only thought of women. They were all he talked about. This guy didn't seem to have that obnoxious tendency. Was he an acquaintance of Kizuna? Kizuna was pretty attractive herself, but apparently so were all of her friends.

Judging from the way he dressed, I guessed he might be a merchant of some kind. His clothes were plain, but high quality.

"Alto!" Kizuna said, rushing over to hug the man.

So his name was "Alto." I wasn't sure if that was his real name or if it was a nickname.

"I heard from the guild that you were back. I walked away from a negotiation to come see you!"

"It's been so long! How have you been?"

"There's no point in asking that of a merchant."

He was vague. That was how merchants were. They never let on to how much they were making, I guess. If they did, it was like a get-rich scheme or something. But, I always held that if you were doing well, just show people, and thatôs how you attract more customers.

ñWell, well. I heard a rumor that a holy hero from another world was here and also a savvy businessman. Guess it was true after all!ò

He looked over at me and I met his gaze. Sparks were flying!

I suddenly realized that I could trust him as a businessman, but I probably couldnôt trust him as a person. He looked like the kind of person that would betray you when the timing suited him. But wherever profit was involved, he could be trusted to act in its best interest.

I suddenly realized that Iôd heard his name before.

ñHis name is Altorese. We call him Alto for short. Heôs a friend of mine. We used to run a shop together.ò

ñI deal in anything thereôs a market for. Lately information has been fetching the highest price.ò

Iôd been worried that he was going to be like the slave trader back in Melromarc, but he seemed like the sort of guy I could at least see eye to eye with. That is, if he was the sort of person that he seemed to be.

ñThis is a holy hero of another world, the Shield Hero. His name is Naofumi Iwatani.ò

He seemed a little soft-spoken, actually. That kind of reminded me of Itsuki. I wondered what he was really likeð on the inside. If he was the merchant that everyone made him out to be, he probably wouldnôt have an obsession with championing justice everywhere he went.

If he understood money, then at least weôd have that much in common.

ñWhy do you look so relieved?ò

ñYouôre the first person to ever look relieved at meeting Alto.ò

Glass and Kizuna were apparently perplexed by my reaction, they cocked their heads in confusion. What was so strange?

ñHe seems like an alright guy. He doesnôt seem like some of the nasty merchants back where I come from.ò

ñYou really think so? Alto can be pretty ruthless when it comes to business.ò

ñIt we arenôt judging from appearances, then maybe Iôm wrong. But, let me show you how merchants look where Iôm from.ò

I narrowed my eyes and glared at him, challenging him. Depending on the person, some people probably even saw light flashing in my eyes when I did that.

Alto looked almost worried! He immediately turned away.

He was good, sureð but it didnôt look like heôd learned how to put on an act so that other people wouldnôt be able to figure out how you really felt. And yet, if his timidity was actually an act, heôd really be impressive.

ñSo what was this? I thought waves would be easier with adventurers helping out, but you didnôt seem to agree.ò

ñOh yeah, thatôs right. There are a lot of people willing to show you how brave they are, but arenôt really strong enough to do anything.ò

ñYeah, I figured as much. Adventurers usually canôt be as powerful as people with vassal weapons or the legendary heroes.ò

ñBut thatôs not what I meant. I mean thereôs the country . . . and other people too.ò

What was he talking about? There wasnôt enough information to even guess. Even Kizuna looked confused. Luckily, Glass looked like she knew what was going on.

I was starting to figure it out too. Glass and Kizuna and the others were serious about fighting the waves, but what about that Trash #2 guy we recently defeated, Kyo, the holder of the book vassal weapon, and others like them? They certainly didnôt seem to care about anything but themselves.

ñThe vassal weapons holders in enemy lands donôt care about the waves, do they?ò

ñExactlyð good instincts. Actually most people donôt seem to care, aside from the four holy heroes and the holders of vassal weapons that have aligned with them.ò

ñYou mean there are holders of holy weapons besides me?!ò

ñYes, they were summoned quite a while ago.ò

Glass looked more pale than normal. Something must have gone wrong. If there were problems with the other heroes, I had plenty of sympathy. Just the idea of trying to convince the other stupid heroes of all this when I got back to the world Iôd come from was exhausting.

ñIôve met them, just one time. However . . .ò

ñWhat were they like?ò

ñThey werenôt very serious about helping fight the wave. They made all kinds of excuses, something about óuppingô or ódates.ôò

ñThey probably meant óupdate.ô Itôs a word people use for patches to online games. If theyôre Japanese people, like me, then thatôs probably what it meant. It all sounds a bit familiar . . . do all these worlds work the same way?ò

ñI was about to ask the same thing, Naofumi.ò

I suddenly felt a great deal of sympathy for Glass.

Kizuna was the only hero in this world that had her act together. In a way, I was probably pretty lucky to have met her.

ñWhatôs with you guys, you look like youôre agreeing on something?ò

ñDo you understand that word too, Kizuna?ò

ñóUpdate?ôYeah, itôs a very game-like way of thinking, even though this is all a matter of life and death.ò

ñYeah, but considering all the stats and power-ups, I can understand why people might think all of this is a game.ò

Oftentimes the world really did seem like a game, but that didnôt mean I could treat the battles like one. If I did, the consequences would be dire. If you werenôt serious about mastering your skills and stats, then you would lose.

ñThe heroes back in my world are the same way.ò They probably actually thought they were in a game. The way that they went to attack the Spirit Tortoise without waiting for me made it clear that they didn't take their responsibilities seriously.

ñIn the end they refused to do their duty, claiming they didnôt want to be controlled, and ran off to do their own thing. I donôt know where they are now.ò

ñYou didnôt try to force them?ò I asked Glass.

ñThey were from a country with whom we have poor diplomatic relations. Any attempt to force their hand would have caused a crisis, so there was nothing we could do.ò

ñI have a good idea where they are, but that doesnôt mean I can just head on over and interfere in their business. It wouldnôt be wise to get in a fight with the four holy heroes,ò Alto whined, waving his hands.

Every world I went to seemed to have the same kind of problems. People came to new worlds and treated them like games. In some ways, the world that had summoned me might have been better. At least the queen of Melromarc was a skilled negotiator and diplomat. Thinking back on what she'd accomplished, I was even more impressed now than I had been then. Not only did she get all of the four holy heroes on her side, but she managed to avoid international conflict at the same time.

"From the way you describe them, Naofumi, it sounds like the heroes in your world need to learn to work together. You can't let them die."

"Yeah. We all have our problems to deal with."

Fitoria was the one who had first explained the gravity of the situation to me. I had since explained it all to Kizuna. From what I could tell, the same rules were in effect in Kizuna's world too, so it was safe to assume that we were dealing with the same threats.

For the time being I was busy in Kizuna's world, so the plan was on hold, but when I got back to Melromarc, I still had to find a way to get the four holy heroes to join forces. It would be hard. Those three were stupid beyond belief—stupid enough to get captured by Kyo in the first place.

"The other problem with the vassal weapons holders is that they are always in competition with each other to command the rest of the fighting forces."

Ah . . . yeah, that would be a problem. Even if there were a lot of adventurers that volunteered to fight, even if it was so they could get their hands on rare materials, they would still need to be organized and led by someone. If the heroes and holders of the vassal weapons weren't serious about their battle strategy then they wouldn't be much help anyway.

And if they didn't share what they knew about powering up with each other, then they wouldn't be very powerful either . . . although Kyo had certainly managed to get strong.

Maybe he was just very highly leveled, so he could get around the power up methods, or maybe he powered up in some other way. Whatever he'd done, he was powerful enough that Glass and L'Arc werenôt able to defeat him.

ñFor now, Kizunaôs friends have gone off to all corners of the world, and they are recruiting and training adventurers there. Other countries think that they are already dealing with the waves sufficiently, and therefore, arenôt very worried about them.ò

So the leaders of other counties, most of the holders of the vassal weapons, and most of the holy heroes, were treating the waves as if they werenôt a significant problem.

ñBut the monsters are getting stronger and they are giving more experience when defeated,ò Kizuna said.

ñThe countries just see that as a chance to gain more military power, they see profit in it for them. As far as they are concerned, all this talk of the end of the world is nothing but a fairy-tale,ò Alto explained.

ñSo anyway,ò Kizuna clipped. ñCan I ask why you ran over to see me, Alto?ò

ñYou donôt think I just wanted to see your face?ò

ñI doubt it. That doesnôt sound like the Alto I know.ò

So she didnôt totally trust him. I could understand why. I didnôt trust the slave trader either.

ñTo tell you the truth, I heard a rumor that there was an adventurer selling something called ósoul-healing waterô in a nearby country. I couldnôt suppress my fascination with this supposed item, so I came to see if I couldnôt find out more about it.ò

Word travelled fast.

So he heard that someone was selling soul-healing water, figured out who it must have been, and came to meet us. If he were up against someone else, he might have had a chanceð but against me? If he thought he was going to get knowledge, tools, or ingredients from me, he had another thing coming.

ñSo is it safe to assume that the person selling this soul-healing water was none other than Naofumi?ò

ñYeah, but that doesnôt mean Iôm going to give you anyð or teach you how to make it.ò

I learned how to make it from a book, so I was confident in my methodology. I was sure I could find the necessary tools and ingredients here if I needed them too. Still, I normally had my shield make it for me, so it had been a long time since Iôd tried to make any from scratch.

ñI guess Iôm on my own then! Itôs been a while since someone has been so upfront with me.ò

ñI enjoy negotiation. Iôd teach you if you were willing to provide me with something of equal value.ò

ñNaofumi, you better be careful. Alto would do anything for money.ò

ñMaybe so, but you two seem to be friendly enough.ò

ñThereôs still value in my relationship with Kizuna. It would cost me more to betray her.ò

His response was surprisingly frank.

I was most comfortable around guys like him. I wanted to see how much control I could exercise over him. I wanted him in the palm of my hand.

Hey look at thatð Alto looked like he had goosebumps. I could tell his intuition was sharp.

ñBesides, if youôre the sort of guy that would do anything for money, Iôd be doing myself a real disservice by teaching you how to make soul-healing water.ò

Soul-healing water, by the way, was a medicine that had an incredible effect on Spirit people like Glassð it rapidly and massively raised all of their stats. A Spiritôs stats were all tied to their energy level, which was like other humansô levels, except that it always fluctuated.

Soul-healing water had a different effect on heroes and holders of vassal weaponsð it restored our SP. But when used on a Spirit, it restored their energy levels.

If medicine like that was released to the public and made common throughout the world, the Spirit people would become immeasurably powerful. It would probably lead to war. I wasnôt going to just hand out such important information, not without getting something equally valuable in return.

I looked over at Kizuna and tried to communicate all my thoughts with a glance. She must have understood, because she nodded.

ñI guess youôre right. I bet I can get it out of LôArc or Glass.ò

ñThey wonôt tell you!ò

ñEven though it would lead to a renaissance of skill development? We could make even more concentrated soul-healing water.ò

ñWe still wonôt tell you.ò

What did he think he was trying to do anyway? I guess that was all he could do.

ñGlass, you might want to get stronger, but donôt you dare tell him anything.ò

Glass nodded. Iôd have to keep an eye on her. I hadnôt known her for very long, and Iôd always found her insufferably serious.

ñAlto, do you think you could sell a bottle of soul-healing water for four and a half kinhan? Naofumi was able to do it, with a little bit of trickery, of course.ò

ñYou think I canôt?ò

ñYou shouldnôt challenge a real capitalist that way. If he says he canôt, then heôll lose face.ò

Kizuna liked to be involved with sales too, but she wasnôt an actual merchant, and there were things about it that she didnôt understand.

A real capitalist would use whatever tricks they had at their disposal to raise their profits. Theyôd tell their customers that they could do things they couldnôt really doð theyôd do anything to affect the way that they were perceived. He had no choice but to answer a question like that in the affirmative.

ñIf you really want to see whoôs best, we should get Romina to make us something and then start a price war over it.ò

ñDonôt you dare! This is MY workshop!ò Romina snapped.

She was a blacksmith, after all. She probably knew all about how troublesome merchants could be. If I really got into bargaining, I could seriously drop the price of a product.

The old guy back at the weapon shop had realized long ago that heôd have to work for very low wages on any projects I requested.

ñOkay, okay. I actually had another reason for coming over. Kizuna, I heard that you stopped the development of tools that could be used to identify heroes from other worlds. Do you really hope to protect the world without such things?ò Alto asked Kizuna. His tone was slowly growing more reproachful.

They were trying to make a tool that could positively identify heroes? If they had actually managed to make it, the other three heroes back in my world would have been killed a long time ago.

ñThatôs right. I think itôs terrible. Iôm going to find another way around it.ò

ñI understand why you feel that way, but youôre the only hero around that seems to care about anything at all. At this rate, our world is as good as destroyed. How do you plan to save it?ò ñIôm not going to complain about how unfair the whole system sounds to me, but at the very least, I think itôs worth investigating other options.ò

ñI see. You havenôt changed a bit, Kizuna.ò

ñYou look like youôve got something to add.ò

ñAnd youôre as perceptive as ever. I doð itôs the reason I came to see you,ò Alto said, pulling out a number of books and showing them to us. They seemed to contain the same information, as if theyôd been copied from one another.

ñI found this in the ancient labyrinth library.ò

I looked at the book he was indicating. It included occasional illustrations, and many of them appeared to depict the waves. One of them showed two worlds intersecting, and the people at the intersection were bathed in the light of the legendary and vassal weapons.

There were also strange creatures in the picture, like genies, angels, and a monster that looked like a filolial.

There was a person that seemed to be made of light too. They were shining so brightly that I couldnôt make out their faces, but I could see that their hands were outstretched toward the world.

I had no idea what to make of it. It seemed to depict two worlds at war, but then, at a certain point, the heroes on either side appeared to be shaking hands instead of fighting. It likely depicted exactly what Kizuna was searching for.

ñThe illustration is very old, and it undoubtedly contains coded information that will require time and effort to uncover. Iôve brought this as a present for you and your friends.ò

ñOh!ò

ñYou have some impressive friends, donôt you?ò ñI just found this book recently. Had Kizuna not returned when she did, I probably would have put it in storage.ò

ñIf we can figure out what it means, it will probably be really useful.ò

ñI hope so. So? What did you want to do about the war?ò

ñIôd like to avoid it if possible, but I also donôt plan on bowing down. It seems likely now.ò

Thatôs right, we were currently in the middle of preparations to go to war with the country that Kyo belonged to.

Kizuna and LôArc implored the country to turn him over, but they refused to comply. And it turns out that Kyoôs country had also managed to absorb several neighboring lands while my friends and I were split up. I heard they captured the country that Trash #2 was from and the country of the holder of the mirror of the vassal weapons just at about the time we escaped.

Diplomacy had failed, and the current situation was tense. We had no choice but to prepare for war, and so we did. It felt like war might break out at any moment.

We thought about a sneaking across the border with a small party to take Kyo out in secret, but the border was very secure and it was unlikely that weôd get through it.

We didnôt know exactly where Kyo was either. So even if we did manage to sneak in, weôd have to find him without being found ourselves, which would be difficult. That left us with open war as our best option, so we were preparing for it.

If only we knew where Kyo was! We could have ended this so quickly!

ñNaofumi-san! Itôs rude to give these precious things anything less than your full attention!ò

ñRafu?!ò