

風波しのぎ
Kazanami Shinogi

THE NEW
ザ・ニュー・ゲート
GATE

07.瘴魔の胎動

THE NEW GATE

- Volume 7 -

UPRISING OF DEMONS

AUTHOR:

KAZANAMI Shinogi

ARTIST:

Hell's Resident

[Translated by: Shin Translations]

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Illustration:魔界の住民



Wilhelm Avis
22 years old Lord.
Adventurer proficient with the spear.
Unlike what his appearance and tone might suggest, he possesses a strong sense of justice.

Tiera Lucent
157 years old. Elf.
A salesclerk of "General Store Tsuki no Hokora"
Her hair is mostly black due to the effects of a powerful curse.

Schnee Raizar
521 years old. High Elf.
Shin's support character since the game era.
She waited for Shin for 500 years.

Shibaid Etraku
521 years old High Dragnil.
Shin's support character since the game era. First king of the Kilmont dragon empire.

Hermie Schultz
16 year old Human. Possesses the ability to peer into the future.
Venerated as "Holy Woman".

Milt
89 years old High Pixie.
Former player characterized by her petite size but ample chest. She was famous for her mad passion for battling.

Shin
Main character of this story.
21 years old. High Human.
Strongest player who was renown in the online game.
After clearing the death game, he was transported to the game world 500 years in the future.

Filma Tolmeya
521 years old High Lord.
Shin's support character since the game era. She was thought to be lost for hundreds of years.

Elnia Continent

Sea

Sigurd

Dragon Empire
Kilmont

Falnido Beast
Alliance

Sacred Place Kalkia

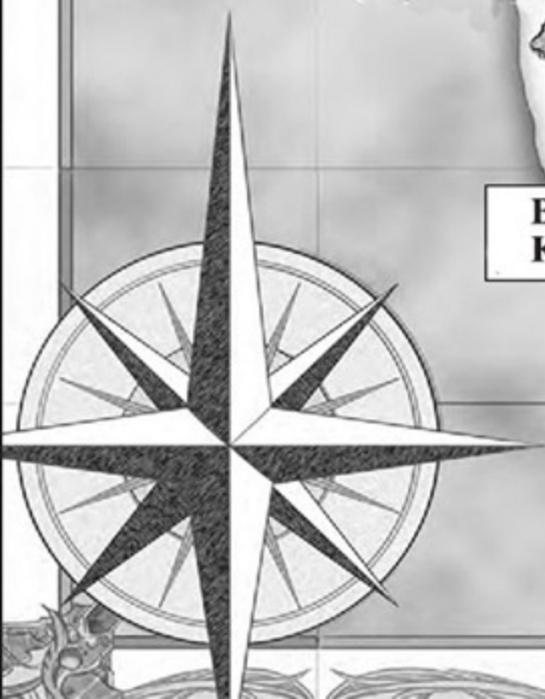
Larua Grand
Woods

Beirun

Barmel

Wraith Plains

Bayreuth
Kingdom



THE NEW GATE

C h a p t e r 1

手掛かりを求めて

THE NEW
GATE

CHAPTER 1

In order to save Millie, the group rode the Elder Dragons to the Church's headquarters.

There they met Lilishila, cardinal of the Church. She requested Shin to capture Bulk, a fanatic follower of the "Summit Faction".

Bulk had not only kidnapped Millie, but also imprisoned Hermie, a girl bearing the name of "Holy Woman".

Shin's party, acting alongside Lilishila, assaulted Palmirack -the facility serving as the Church's headquarters- and successfully rescued both Millie and Hermie...

"...what will I do now, you ask?"

"Yes. We could save Lady Hermie thanks to you all. Once this information spreads, all the others who had to endure Bulk's arrogance will want to thank you."

About 30 minutes had passed since Hermie and Lilishila had reunited.

It was already well into the night.

The guard knights ran off to convey the word of the Holy Woman's rescue, while Hermie and Millie were resting in another room, guarded by Wilhelm.

Shin sent a message to Tiera, asking her to come to Palmirack.

Shibaid, guided by a knight, headed to Bulk's room to collect any remaining submission items, like the "Submission Collars".

Shin, Schnee, and Lilishila were discussing the rewards in the room assigned to the female cardinal.

Shin didn't wish for any reward; instead, he wanted to be considered a "mysterious

helper”, but Lilishila wouldn’t agree. She strongly argued that the others wouldn’t agree either.

Concerning the efforts spent on this operation, at that point in time the date had changed, thus it was 3 days in total. The only money spent was on lodging fees at the inn. There was no particular expense to be refunded.

What Shin’s party had done was simply infiltrate Palmirack and take down Eline and Bulk.

Shin understood that it was the most important part, but for him it had been an easy feat; that’s why there was such a difference of opinions between him and Lilishila.

Even if they were to receive a reward, something too generous would, on the contrary, make it difficult for them to accept it.

Shin’s name had already begun spreading because of the Balmel defense battle. If he was grandly awarded by the Church here, it would only invite greater trouble their way.

It was too late to say things like “I don’t want to stand out”, but his honest desire was to avoid as many problematic situations as possible.

“I would really appreciate it if you kept my name hidden.”

“Your name? But to me this seems to be a great chance to gain recognition.”

“Our reason for coming here was to save Millie, the rescue of milady Holy Woman was...pardon my bluntness, but it just happened along the way. Besides, after knowing about what Bulk was doing, I’m sure that anyone would have tried to do something, no matter what they could or couldn’t do, without concern for what could be gained or lost...don’t you agree?”

Any proper human being would have been disgusted at Bulk’s actions.

It was the same for Shin’s party, which also happened to have the power to stop Bulk. That’s all there was to it.

“At the very least, is there anything you need? I have asked for your help saying that I would give anything in return. After everything you have done for me, letting you go empty-handed would brand me as ungrateful.”

“Aaah, well, I didn’t mean to say we wouldn’t need anything, so please calm down.”

Shin moved a step back from the slightly too close Lilishila and laughed wryly.

Shin understood well enough that from the standpoint of someone who had been saved, not being able to express gratitude would be hard to bear. Shin was thus thinking about what to ask for as a reward.

“Is there something you need?”

“Yes. There are 3 things we would like to request. First, we would like to collect any remaining collars like the ones used by Bulk. I would like to do so before they pass onto others’ hands, to examine their structure and effects. We would then dispose of them ourselves, and if we can come up with an item to nullify their effects we will offer it to you too, of course.”

Leaving behind items that grant the power to control others would eventually give birth to other Bulks. History itself tells how even holy men and women can succumb to desire.

In addition, there was the necessity to research a method to nullify their effects, other than Shin’s ability. In order to build and test a collar removal item, having the collar themselves was a prerequisite.

The request to hand over items that instantly force others to obey one’s will, would likely be a difficult decision for Lilishila, thus Shin considered it a fitting reward.

“I see, even we are not immune to temptation after all. I shall entrust them to you, Shin-sama. Considering your actions until now, I am positive that you will never use them as Bulk did.”

Contrary to Shin’s expectations, Lilishila accepted his request with ease.

According to Lilishila, Bulk supposedly had other allies within the Church; candidates

for the position of “next Bulk” were not scarce. Rather than risk keeping the items, letting a trusted person have them would be better.

Lilishila’s trust towards Shin was deeper than he thought.

“I would truly appreciate it if you get in touch with us, the moment you succeed in creating a collar removal item.”

“It’s quite a problem if I’m the only one able to do something about them, after all.”

Will it be possible to make them? How much time will it take? There were still too many unknowns in the equation, so the topic was closed by agreeing to communicate whenever the desired effect was created.

“What is the second request, then?”

“The second is information. We would like you to tell us everything you know about the Sacred Place. If possible, we would be grateful if you contacted us whenever you learned something new in the future.”

The Sacred Place still hadn’t been researched enough, but if anything had been discovered already, Shin wanted to know in advance. The Church had a great number of believers, so in this head church of Sigurd there was likely a great concentration of information as well.

Information about the Sacred Place was known only to the top members of the guilds; survey missions of its interior sometimes claim the lives of an entire expedition teams. It was that dangerous a location. Information about it was more than worthy to be requested as a reward.

“We have documents with collected information about the Sacred Place. I shall have someone bring them to you. As long as it is within my capabilities, if any new information comes up, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Thank you very much. Our third request concerns the “Summit Faction”. We would like to ask you to find out more about the ritual site Bulk spoke of. It would be great to know where the faction’s base is, but we are more worried about the ritual right now.

Because there may be others other than Bulk bringing sacrifices there. ”

The first priority for Shin’s party was to investigate the Summit Faction, as the disappearance of Shin’s support character Filma had not been resolved yet.

It was Shin’s 3rd request, but higher than anything else in priority.

“These are the rewards I am thinking about.”

“Are these three requests really enough? For us they would barely suffice to claim we have repaid you...”

“Well, I thought they were rather large requests, honestly. You don’t need to feel so much obligation, you know?”

Lilishila was serious, yet somehow felt under pressure, so Shin tried to pacify her.

“No, that will not do.”

Lilishila, however, clearly expressed that Shin’s words had not convinced her.

“Please listen. This rescue operation, if it wasn’t for you and your party’s cooperation, would have had no chance of success. If we embarked in it by ourselves, most, if not all of us, would have been killed, Hermie and Millie would have been sacrificed, while I and the other women would have probably become their playthings.”

Lilishila spoke clearly and firmly. If Shin’s party had not joined their struggle, that future would have been almost certainly inevitable.

Wilhelm alone too, would not have been able to enter Sigurd before Bulk’s entourage left the city.

There would have been no one able to subdue Konig or Eline; in addition, with Hermie equipped with the submission collar, there was no possible way for Lilishila to emerge victorious.

There was even the possibility for the whole Church to fall under Bulk’s control.

Because of all this, Shin's appearance was a true miracle for Lilishila; it wasn't strange that they saw it as a message from god.

"When I said I would give you anything, I included my own self. And this is why."

"I see...however..."

"I said those words because I was ready for anything. Please understand."

"Oh, I see, so that's what you meant..."

Shin fretted, expecting a phrase like "I give my own body to you" to come out, but was relieved when it didn't.

You saved my life, thus now I am yours. A common occurrence in some fantasy fictional works.

Shin, however, was not the type of person to happily accept an offer like that.

"Allow us to ask for your help when something happens, then. We aren't omnipotent, after all. The first request can probably be taken care of easily, so for the time being we would be grateful if you could focus on locating the Summit Faction's base of operations and the ritual site Bulk talked about."

"Understood, we will gather all the information we can. Whenever you may need our help, please say so without hesitation."

Shin told the enthusiastic Lilishila to contact the Golden Company if they learned something. Lilishila was surprised at Shin's connection to the Golden Company, but immediately nodded with a serious expression.

"I think that's all for now."

"If that is really all, it would be no problem if you desired me too."

"Er, I'm not sure why we are going back to that topic...I will not, of course?"

As the phrase he thought he had dodged came out of Lilishila's lips, Shin's face muscles

stiffened.

“The women alongside you are an Elf and a High Elf. Female Elves never join parties with men, unless they deeply trust and are comfortable around them...and it seems they are with you, Shin-sama, so I thought you had that kind of relationship. You like elves don't you? I'm an elf too, you know.”

“You've got it all wrong!! Aaahhhhhhhh!!!!”

So screamed Shin in the depths of his heart.

Shin had no idea about the difficulties of female elves in joining parties with males. Knowing that someone aware of it would think he made himself an elf harem was a small shock.

“Anyway! As far as men are concerned, there's Shibaid too! Why do you pair only me with those two?”

“Just a maiden's intuition. Although, it is more than clear to whom Lady Yuki's affections are directed.”

Lilishila stated with confidence and a smile.

Shin was quite troubled by her sudden change in personality. Lilishila probably thought that continuing to discuss the rewards would have inconvenienced him. In other words, the serious discussions were over.

“I-Is that so...er, Yuki, why are you sticking so close to me...?”

“I'm keeping watch.”

“You don't say...”

Yuki - the disguised Schnee - had slipped very close to Shin, no one knew when. It wasn't clear if her answer to Shin's question was serious or in jest.

“Hehe, you two get along so well. I'm envious.”

Lilishila's expression while speaking to them was of someone enjoying a heart warming scene.

Lilishila's warm look, so different than before, made Shin feel slightly uncomfortable.

Only one thought came across his mind: "What the heck is this situation?"



While Shin and company were discussing "rewards", Wilhelm was guarding Hermie, Millie and Konig, who were recently released from the submission type item, in the neighbouring room.

Bulk was detained, however, he wasn't the only dangerous individual within the Church. There was no guarantee that individuals, who operate in a dishonest fashion, wouldn't move and take advantage of this situation.

"You should be able to go home soon, right?"

"Since Will-nii and Shin-nii is here, everything will be alright!"

Millie was in high spirits: she was lying down, her head resting on Hermie's lap, who was petting her softly.

Everyone was safe and there was someone she could trust among those who came to her rescue.

That someone, Wilhelm, was right next to her even now, so she had no reason to be worried.

"....."

Wilhelm was looking intently at Millie, without speaking a word. He was observing her to find out if there was anything strange remains, while making sure she didn't notice and was unsettled by his observations.

After all, Millie had been manipulated by Eline and stabbed Wilhelm. It wouldn't be strange for her heart to bear a deep wound because of it.

However, asking Millie about Wilhelm and Eline's battle revealed that her memories stopped at the beginning of the fighting. It could be said to be rather fortunate.

Eline had probably made preparations to use Millie whenever needed. This one time, that actually led to a positive result.

"Are you concerned?"

"...well, yeah."

The question to Wilhelm came from Konig.

Once Shin removed his collar, nothing restrained his actions. He thus returned to his original duty, Hermie's protection.

His armor had been rendered unusable by Shibaid's attack, but his beloved blade, the Legend-grade magical sword Haufer, rested at his side.

Konig didn't know that the manipulated Millie had stabbed Wilhelm, but knew that the collar had been equipped on her. He assumed that, like him, something had happened while she was under control.

Wilhelm then inquired back.

"By the way, do you feel like your memories have been altered? It looks like memories while being manipulated remain differently from person to person."

"I remember very well. The collar's power was not used too often on me, even when I was being manipulated I felt as if I was dreaming, everything was hazy."

Bulk often used Hermie to force Konig to do his bidding, apparently.

Konig suggested that it was because when manipulating others via the collar, it was not possible to give concrete, detailed orders.

"I see. The lack of consciousness also means that only simple actions can be taken."

"It's just an assumption, though. However, it is rather useful during battle. An order

like “strike with all your strength” will be executed even if it ends up costing your arms. During the battle with sir Shibaid, I performed a powerful blow I normally couldn’t. It’s also possible to order suicide attacks, the attacker has no regards for his own life.”

“The more I hear about that time, the more it makes me sick”

Wilhelm’s expression was distorted by disgust.

“Some of those items leaked outside. Fortunately only a few did, but I’d want them dealt with before they’re used for ill intents.”

“There’s something I was wondering, though. If the person equipped with it dies, can the item be used on someone else?”

If such a repeated use was possible, the usefulness of the item would increase even more...in the worst way possible. Wilhelm then asked Konig, as the latter was in the position to know.

“I have never heard about it being re-used. However, the number of items Bulk obtained and the number of times he used them do not match. This is just an assumption too, but repeated use after death could be possible.”

According to Konig, the number of women Bulk had submitted to his will was higher than the number of collars.

Konig had learned the number of collars from Bulk himself. Bulk could have let down his guard, as Konig was under his control.

“A sack of shit through and through, I see.”

“I must agree. If only I wasn’t controlled by that collar, I would have cut him down on the spot.”

Konig was a knight firmly believing in the Church doctrine of protecting the weak.

His strong sense of justice not only made him despise Bulk, but probably made him even unwilling to recognize his existence.

“However...I might have been manipulated, but I have slain others with my own hands.”

“...you’re feeling guilty? If you worry about that you’re going to die soon too”.

Wilhelm spoke rather bluntly to the tormented Konig.

“You say I shouldn’t care about them?”

“I’m saying that nothing changes even if you do.”

Konig’s tone had grown fiercer. Wilhelm, however, continued talking without losing his composure.

“Regret all you want, but the dead won’t come back to life. In the end, it all depends on the feelings of the ones still alive. If you worry about that and end up dying, the people you should protect will die too.”

Hermie could be targeted again because of her abilities, as it had just happened. At such a time, were his sword dulled by doubts, it would spell death not only for Konig but for others as well.

The loved ones of the people he killed might want revenge. He might be demanded to atone for his sins.

However, those are natural consequences for his actions. There was nothing to do about it.

The flow of time does not reverse; the dead do not come back.

That is this world’s rule.

In the world before the “Dusk of the Majesty”, it is rumored that a potion of resurrection existed. But that world is no more.

(Maybe he could...no, this isn’t something to think about)

In Wilhelm’s mind the silhouettes of a certain High Human and his two followers appeared.

Shin and Schnee might know of a way to create such a potion, or even have one already in their possessions.

He won't say a word about it, though. He had no proof, and even if such a thing was possible, Wilhelm doubted that Shin and Schnee would revive the people Konig killed.

Resurrection of the dead. That was a heretical practice never to be attempted, it was burned within Wilhelm's consciousness.

Wilhelm knew of someone who had attempted such practices, and how they brought destruction upon themselves.

That is why he stopped thinking about it. Even in the Church, research concerning resurrection of the dead was a taboo among taboos. It was a completely lost miracle.

After a long silence, Konig spoke again.

"That would be a problem."

"You just have to find your answer fast, then. Most of the time, things like that happen whether you like it or not, after all."

"Are you speaking from experience?"

"Who knows."

Wilhelm dodged Konig's question and fell into silence.

Konig, suspicious of such behavior, followed Wilhelm's line of sight and found a peacefully sleeping Millie.

"I see, so this is the man they call the "Demonic Spear"?"

"Hmph."

Wilhelm scoffed lightly. His silhouette was, much like a knight's, one of a protector.



“So this is Bulk’s residence.”

“Yes. Access was restricted, so I do not know what’s inside.”

After listening to the knight’s reply, Shibaid turned his eyes to the closed door.

Priests are assigned private rooms, which was an ideal place to act in secrecy, with no risk of being seen by others.

Infiltrating an empty room seemed possible, but this room was inside Palmirack; it was no simple feat.

The rooms were surrounded in Chimeradite, which made slipping past its walls, or unlocking its doors, extremely difficult.

For that reason, even chosen ones could not easily enter the room and discover Bulk’s secrets.

“I’m opening it.”

Shibaid laid a hand on the door.

He had received Shin’s permission to unlock all doors; for a limited time, he could enter almost every room located inside Palmirack.

Shibaid concentrated on his hand and the door opened with almost no resistance.

“!! Stand back, everybody!”

Shibaid stepped in front of the knights.

Intense miasma emanated from beyond the door.

“Th-this is...”

“Don’t come near! You may lose your sanity!”

Shibaid had the sickly-looking knights move away from the door and stepped inside the room.

Shibaid was now equipping his original weapon, the giant halberd “Placid Moon”. The light shining from its blade completely purified the miasma coming from the room.

After being upgraded by Shin, the weapons wielded by Shin’s support character gained the ability to purify miasma.

“The miasma has been purified. You can go inside now.”

After Shibaid’s words reached them, the knights entered the room with wary steps. They were knights of the church, but that did not mean that they had high resistance to miasma.

The miasma emanating from the room was so dense that simply looking at it caused a visceral sensation of impending danger. Not even upper class chosen ones would have been able to withstand such a level of miasma.

It was not something that knights, even if trained, could endure.

“Bulk was continuously immersed in that concentrated miasma? Yet.. it looks like it hadn’t caused any mental deterioration...”

Doubt arose in Shibaid’s mind.

Such a high concentration of miasma would undoubtedly lead to insanity. Despite that, Bulk had not shown the symptoms typical of those infected by miasma.

What could it possibly mean?

“I see there’s another room in the back.”

Shibaid left the current room to the knights and headed to the room in the back. There he found scattered magic tomes, items and weapons with ceremonial decorations.

Probably because of long-term exposure to miasma, they were all partially corroded or cursed; nothing was left in proper condition.

In a corner of the room was a metal box equipped with heavy locks.

Shibaid's appraisal skill let him see through the trap protecting the box.

“【High-Poison】 and 【High-Confusion】 , is it. Quite a nasty little device.”

Shibaid let out a sigh and touched the box.

The trap activated and powerful status abnormalities reached towards Shibaid, to invade his body. Shibaid's equipment, however, made him immune to status abnormalities; he wasn't the least bit fazed by the trap's effects.

Shibaid then crushed the box's lock, nothing more than a decoration compared to the trap, and opened it. Inside it he found 4 black collars.

“Not enough.”

Compared to the information Shin obtained from Bulk through torture under the name of interrogation, the number of collars were too low. Shibaid took the collars inside the box, turned them into cards and stored them in his item box.

“There should be another one somewhere...”

Having confessed under the effects of Shin's skill, it was not possible for Bulk to have lied. The only possibility was that the last collar was hidden somewhere near by.

“It has to be inside this room.”

With the knights' help, Shibaid searched every nook and cranny.

Much like Lilishila's, Bulk's residence too was equipped with a secret room. Shibaid, thinking that it was the ideal place to hide something, operated the walls.

A door opened with a dull sound, and at the same time a rotten smell was released.

It was a stench strong enough to force the knights behind Shibaid to hold their noses. Even knights such as them, used to the smell of blood and guts permeating the many battlefields they experienced, grimaced at this stench.

“Sir Shibaid, this is...”

“I can’t say I have a good feeling about this. We already know that there’s a trap inside. I can go alone, but what will the rest of you do?”

“Please take me and one of my subordinates with you. To cower before a mere stench would be utterly shameful for a knight. I shall have the others check the room again for anything we might have missed.”

The two knights with the highest level followed Shibaid. Advancing through the corridor caused the foul stench to gradually increase in intensity.

At the end of the corridor they found a door. Opening it revealed a young girl, collapsed on the floor.

As Shibaid drew closer, he noticed long, slender ears poking out from her hair. Her HP had not decreased very much, but she was affected by several status abnormalities.

The girl appeared to be unconscious as she did not move an inch.

“She’s still breathing. Let’s bring this girl outside first.”

“Roger that”

Following Shibaid’s decision, the knights ran out first, to call a healing specialist.

Meanwhile, Shibaid materialized an elixir from his item box and poured it into the girl’s mouth.

After making sure that the girl had swallowed the golden liquid, Shibaid stood up.

He contacted Shin via Mind Chat, then left the room while carrying the girl in his arms.

The two met up and moved to a room with a bed.

“First of all, let’s remove it.”

Shin touched the neck of the girl, now lying on the bed. As it happened with Millie and

Hermie, the black collar shattered away.

The girl, however, did not open her eyes.

“How horrible.”

“I can’t fully diagnose her situation. Could you explain?”

Shin nodded to Shibaid’s request. The weakening of the spirit due to miasma was highly likely to be the same as during the game era.

“I suppose this is a good occasion. Listen up, everyone. This girl was exposed to dense miasma and is now in a comatose state. I think she’ll continue sleeping for at least 1 or 2 weeks...maybe even months.”

“What in the world happened to her?”

“When exposed to dense miasma, unless one has high resistance or regularly drinks potions to raise resistance, the spirit is weakened before the body. If nothing is done in time, there’s a risk of never waking up.”

Shin answered Lilishila’s question, recalling his knowledge from the game era.

Miasma possesses negative effects other than the status abnormality and MP consumption. NPC’s other than those belonging to the players become unable to act.

In case of players or support characters, they are affected by negative status and stats reduction.

In a game event Shin had experienced, where a miasma infection broke out in a city setting, the city’s NPC shops, adventurers’ guild, etcetera all stopped functioning.

The scenario had them fall in a coma because of the miasma’s mind infection.

Thanks to that, all miasma-related events were always instantly cleared by players who were already too powerful for guilds, before the situation became too dire. If that setting was still active, this girl too was probably in that situation.

Shin had heard from Shibaid about the dense miasma concentrated in Bulk's room.

Based on his knowledge of the game and the state of the room, that was the only likely explanation.

"Will this girl be alright?"

"Yes. Luckily, it seems she wasn't exposed to miasma for a long time. The body changes color when it's too late, so you just need a glance to know."

During the game era, the NPCs beyond salvation turned black and were replaced by another NPC the day after. That likely meant that they would never wake up again.

"Does anyone know this girl?"

Everyone surrounding Shin shook their heads at his question.

Schnee and Shibaid obviously didn't know her, nor did Lilishila or the man who guided Wilhelm inside Palmirack.

"She was probably kidnapped, just like Millie. I will take care of her until she wakes up. Please leave it to me."

Lilishila volunteered to help the girl, as she couldn't just leave an elf that was just like her.

Freed from the shackles represented by Bulk, for the cardinal Lilishila, taking care of one young girl was an easy task.

No one could predict when the girl would wake from her slumber, so Shin's party heartily welcomed her proposal.

"I apologize for the inconvenience, but please take care of her."

After deciding to entrust the girl to Lilishila, the group returned to her room. There was no reason for a large group of people to stay in a sick person's room.

"Here are the collars I've collected"

After leaving the room, Shibaid hands the collected collars to Shin in item card form.

Since they could not proceed or even begin to examine the collars here, Shin casually gazed at the collar's design before putting it away in the item box.

"Was there anything else?"

"Nothing stood out to me. But this kind of research is best done by Shin or Yuki."

"That's right. I'll go search the room once Tiera joins us."

They asked Lilishila to not allow anyone near Bulk's room, just in case. It was possible to physically separate it from the others, but as it would invite needless suspicion, they decided to leave things to her.

Only Rokuten members and their subordinates can use Palmirack's functions. The support characters' faces and names were known, so spreading information about their usage privileges would end up revealing Shin's true identity.

"Oh, so it's really over?"

As Shin was talking with Shibaid, Tiera made her entrance, escorted by the knights. In her shadow, dwelt Kagerou, while Yuzuha was attached to her arm.

"Yes, the rescue somehow ended in success. However, we don't know the location of the ritual site. Anything happened on your end?"

"Nothing happened to me directly, but there is something that concerns me.

"Yes? What's that?"

"I saw a shadow fly away from the Church. Just to confirm, was there anyone with wings among the people you fought?"

Tiera's words made Shin cock his head and think. Having wings meant that the species had to be Beast, Dragnil, Lord or Pixie.

“No, I haven’t seen anyone like that. Have you, Shibaid?”

“I haven’t seen anyone like that either. To begin with, everyone we fought has been captured. I do not think anyone escaped us.”

Shibaid, who had moved separately from Shin, gave the same answer.

“Well, what I saw was a human-like shape with 4 wings. 2 bird-like and 2 insect-like. It was night so I couldn’t see their face very well, but I had Yuzuha attach a mark to track where it was headed. Yuzuha?”

“Kuu!”

Yuzuha answered Tiera’s question energetically. Shin received a “I know!” message via telepathy. A truly unexpected hint had been found.

“Well done!! The more clues we have, the better!”

“I’m relieved to know I could be of help. I haven’t been of much use at all this time.”

Tiera spoke with a slightly somber tone.

She was uneasy about the fact that since she had been targeted at the beginning, she hadn’t contributed to Millie’s rescue.

Shin and Schnee’s infiltration operation, Shibaid’s defense operation...not her ability, but her stats made her somewhat lacking for both categories.

Kagerou could have been useful in defense, but Tiera was still inexperienced as a tamer and could not use its abilities to the fullest yet. She could not have dealt with the situation as swiftly as Shibaid.

“Asking you to keep watch was the right choice.”

Elves are quite apt at scouting jobs such as hunter or shinobi. Furthermore, the tamer job covered several roles, production, battle, scouting, etcetera; this depended on the tamed monster.

Tiera's monster, Kagerou, was of considerable high level and also proficient in detection and infiltration abilities.

As tamers are affected by the monsters they command, Tiera's detection ability was now boosted for a limited time.

It was a preparation done as a mere precaution, but it yielded an unexpectedly great result.

Kagerou and Yuzuha's detection abilities were also fairly high, of course, and could be expected to be very useful.

"They said a messenger would come, what shall we do about that?"

"Let's think about how to deal with the messenger first. In the end, we can chase down the target marked by Yuzuha whenever we want. We know that it flew away from the Church, but we don't know if it's going to the ritual site. If it's Bulk's messenger, it's certain to lead us there."

Shin answered Schnee's question basing himself on the information obtained from Bulk.

"The messenger was supposed to come "pick up" Bulk, so they would surely head to the ritual site later. If we can catch it we can learn the location of the ritual."

Alongside with a lot of other information.

"(The messenger is supposed to come 2 days from now. As long as there is a possibility that they captured Filma exists, we cannot take this lightly. We'll use mind-type skills.)"

"(Understood. What shall we do with Lilishila?)"

"(If I say that I'll morph into Bulk with an illusion-type skill, she won't come with us.)"

Shin communicated the plan to Schnee and Shibaid via Mind Chat.

The great sword supposed to be in Filma's possession, Exvaine, was here.

Consequently, it was more likely that Filma was not captured, but instead being manipulated. Even now at an unknown place, she could be doing others' bidding.

This event had been caused by Bulk's and a few others' lust for power. That is why Shin decided not to dispose of the other people of the Church. However, the "Summit Faction" was different.

Those who hurt innocent people and treat life as a tool do not deserve any pity.

(The world might have changed, but these kinds of people don't learn new tricks, do they?)

What Shin had remembered was the battle against players called PK's.

There were no benefits. It was a war. A massacre, where lives were expendable as if they were disposable items.

It was a battlefield filled with grief, hatred and insanity.

The sensation Shin felt now was familiar.

"(What should we do if the enemies equip items that make them immune to status effects?)"

"(Nothing to worry. I can bypass the "Age of Gods Earring"'s defense now.)"

Shin answered Shibaid's question with confidence.

The effectiveness of mind-type skills depends on the user's INT.

The mind-type skills used by Shin, who had surpassed the limit, were now capable of penetrating the defenses of even items which granted immunity to status effects.

The only situation where they could fail was if the target equipped multiple accessories of the highest rank, such as the ones Shin and Schnee had.

"Ehm, Shin..."

“Hm? What’s wrong?”

As he was speaking through Mind Chat, a faint voice reached Shin’s ears. He turned in Schnee’s direction.

His eyes found her holding the right sleeve of his clothes, a worried look on her face.

“Is everything alright?”

“Er, what....?”

“Shin, your face just now...was kind of scary.”

“Ah...was it showing on my face that much?”

“Yes.”

Shin touched his own face and felt that it was indeed pretty stiff.

Shin knew from experience that if he wasn’t careful, thinking about the PK’s would cause his emotions to become visible on his expression.

He was not thinking about things that Schnee should worry about, but Shin regretted having saddened her. Shin knew what worried Schnee the most.

“I wasn’t thinking of things you need to worry about, Yuki. It’s alright.”

“If so, I’m glad.”

Shin replied with a cheerful tone, to dispel Schnee’s worries. Shin’s smile wasn’t forced, so Schnee, relieved, let go of his sleeve.

On the other hand, Shibaid and Tiera motionlessly watched the scene that had just transpired.

“It’s pretty hard to join the conversation when you two fly in your own world all of a sudden, you know.”

“Hmm. I understand Yuki’s worries, but I would prefer you would save such gestures for when you’re alone together.”

Tiera was almost rolling her eyes at the couple, while it was not clear if Shibaid was reproaching them or giving advice.

Shin and Schnee had come back to the real world because of their words, only to be struck by another unexpected ambush.

“(Kuu! Scent of peaches! Kiss her? Kiss her?)”

“Peach-colored atmosphere” was a truly fitting description. Yuzuha had talked all of a sudden, fortunately not via words but Mind Chat.

“Hahaha, no, I’m sorry. And no Yuzuha, no kissing!”

“.....”

Shin, however, replied through his normal voice.

Hearing these words, Schnee could guess what Yuzuha had said, and her whole face was stained red.

“(Shin, what in the world is wrong with you?)”

“(Yuzuha asked me if I was going to “kiss her” via telepathy! Ah, darn, I spoke out loud...)”

Shin explained what happened to Shibaid via Mind Chat. The latter then understood the situation, but behind him stood Lilishila’s group, who was unable to use Mind Chat.

Shin’s sudden “no kisses” declaration attracted their glares towards him.

“Excuse me, Shin-sama? You said something about kissing...?”

“Hahaha, of course not. I did say “missing” though, maybe you heard wrong?” (T/N: 治癒 Chiyu: Healing, but the words are omitted thus changed to missing. And ちゅーChiyu: Kissing, they are said the same way in japanese.)

“But just now, I’m sure that...”

“Surely just your imagination, milady.”

Shin tried desperately to change the subject.

Kissing and missing, it would be pretty hard to mistake words like these, but not impossible. They did come out of the blue, though.

Shibaid whispered a word of advice to Yuzuha.

“Yuzuha. Please save such words for when there is no one else around. Timing is an important factor as well.”

“Kuu?”

Yuzuha cocked her head to one side, apparently finding it a concept difficult to grasp.

“Shibaid! Hey! What kind of advice is that!?”

“You see, such things should be allowed to proceed while they can.”

“...where’s the serious atmosphere from a few moments ago...?”

Their serious discussion had been blown away by Yuzuha’s one line.

“How can I say it, Shin’s comrades are all pretty peculiar.”

Tiera spoke with a small wry laugh, while looking at Shin and his party.

Having lived together with Schnee, Tiera knew more than the average person about Rokuten and its members. She felt that the other members she hadn’t met yet would surely be out of the ordinary.

“Not exactly, Ms. Tiera. Remember that you too are one of those comrades.”

“Eh?”

Shin pointed out that Tiera seemed to consider herself as not included in the “peculiar” group.

A remark that painted a shocked expression on Tiera’s face.

When Shin asked Tiera to act on her own, they explained to Lilishila that Kagerou was a monster that possessed abilities on the same level as an upper class chosen one. There was no way for Tiera, the mistress of such a monster, to be a normal person.

From Lilishila’s party’s standpoint, Shin and Tiera were in the same category.

“That...can’t be...”

“Why are you that shocked?”

“I can’t be expected to be on the same level as you. A normal person might think I’m incredible, but Shin, you guys are on a whole different level.”

From someone at level 1, both level 150 and 255 appear equally high-level.

Yet from Tiera’s standpoint, who had barely reached level 150 without reincarnation, a level 255 with reincarnation bonuses possessed power far beyond hers.

In addition, Tiera was a high-level user thanks to Kagerou. To be considered on the same level as Shin, who could take down Kagerou by himself, isn’t something she could simply agree with.

From Shin’s standpoint, however, Tiera was incredible enough; she had tamed the divine beast Gruefago without fighting, after all.

“You would make us lose face, if you were able to match us so easily. But you are still growing, in more ways than one. You’ll become much stronger.”

“I do think that I grew a little stronger, but I honestly can’t imagine matching you all in strength. All this time I’ve been admiring master and Shin, but I can’t even jest and say ‘I’ll be as strong as you one day’”

Tiera replied with a sigh to Shin’s comment concerning her future growth.

“Well, let’s continue this conversation another time. First, let’s do everything we can till the messenger arrives. Yuki and I will go search Bulk’s residence. Shibaid, go help Lilishila. Tiera, please keep an eye on Millie. ”

Shin stopped the conversation for the time being and gave orders to Shibaid and the others.

Lilishila was now going to arrest the people who had colluded with Bulk, so Shibaid would act as her escort. He asked Tiera to look after Millie because he felt it would not be good to have Hermie, the one venerated as Holy Woman, continue to act as caretaker.

The two nodded to Shin’s proposal.

““Understood.””

Lilishila, who had been listening too, nodded in agreement.

With Shibaid on her side, even if the opponent was an upper class chosen one there would be no trouble. Her confidence was reinforced by having witnessed his fighting prowess not long ago.

“I’ll have Millie sent to Vizzy later. Can you relay this to Wilhelm too?”

Shin whispered to Tiera as to avoid being heard by Lilishila.

He wanted to send Millie back as soon as possible, also to soothe Rashia’s worries, who was waiting in Bayreuth. However, if it was at all possible, he wanted to keep the fact that they rode Elder Dragons to Sigurd a secret.

Vizzy, support character of Rokuten member Cashmere, had tamed the Elder Dragons, and Shin could use it freely. If this information spread, trouble was very likely to arise.

That is why he whispered to Tiera the message to be relayed.

“Understood. Don’t worry about it... Anyways, you be careful too, Shin.”

“We’ll go perform our search now. If we find anything, we’ll report later.”

“Thank you very much. We shall go remove all the infection festering within the Church.”

Lilishila had already investigated before hand, in order to stand against Bulk; her eyes now burned with red-hot flames.

This was expected. Not too long ago they were not able to deliver a crushing blow to the other party. Now, they are able to pass judgement on those people.

There was no reason not to be fired up!

Shin caught himself thinking that Lilishila’s smile was almost scary.



“Here we are.”

Shin and Schnee parted ways with Lilishila and were now in Bulk’s residence.

Shibaid had already purified all the miasma, so it looked like any other room.

Shin and Schnee’s honed detection-type abilities, however, revealed the presence of miasma-emitting items -miasma stones- scattered throughout the room.

“I see, all these miasma stones explain why Bulk was like that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Bulk’s body was actually in a really nasty state. The miasma’s corruption had entered its final stage.”

During Bulk’s interrogation, Shin found out that more than half of his body had already turned black. If this was still the game era, he would have been far beyond salvation.

“In a state as advanced as that, I bet he barely felt pain anymore. Looks like he himself hadn’t realized it, though.”

That time, Bulk wasn’t paying the slightest attention to his own body. Even seeing its

blackened appearance solicited no reaction in him.

It appears that another effect of miasma contamination is the loss of the ability to perceive such abnormalities.

It would be impossible for anyone to not notice the oppressing miasma leaking out every time the room's doors opened.

"These are all the ones in this room, then."

"Adding the other room and the hidden room, it's become a considerable amount, hasn't it?"

Schnee spoke while looking at the small mountain of miasma stones in the center of the room.

The stones, each half the size of a fist, were 11 in total. A large number for just one room.

According to Shin, even just one stone would have been enough to fill the room with miasma.

"With so many stones, even if Palmirack's functions worked, purification would be pretty difficult."

"That could have been their goal."

Even if Palmirack was not fully functional, the miasma accumulated near its core was a very small quantity. That influenced the purification mechanisms Palmirack was equipped with.

The walls of Chimeradite composing Palmirack are a combination of several different structures.

The walls of all rooms and corridors are made in Adamantine mixed with Chimeradite. In certain locations the walls were built by also using Mithril, which can easily transmit the effects of magic. If it detects the presence of miasma, it will automatically perform a purification on the miasma.

The Orichalcum used to coat the walls also possessed the ability to purify miasma, thus Palmirack itself made it difficult for miasma to accumulate within its walls.

However, if a large quantity of miasma was created in one spot, like this time, purification would be difficult even if all functions were alive. Schnee's prediction had fully hit the mark.

"There's nothing else worthy of note here. Let's go to the next room."

After completing their investigation of the first room, Shin and Schnee moved to the next.

Roughly the same number of miasma stones had been placed in the adjacent room as well. They could imagine how the room must have looked dark and stagnant because of the miasma.

"By the way, could you gather any information from Bulk?"

"He believed himself to be completely sane, but his memories were full of holes. He remembered about the ritual and the sacrifices, but he couldn't say anything specific about the headquarters or the other central members. He remembered that a woman with blonde hair was supposed to come for him, but couldn't even remember her name."

Shin had used a mind-type skill while interrogating Bulk. He could force him to confess the information he knew, but in the end what he could gather was not much.

Shin didn't know if it was because of the miasma's effects or some other factor, but it appeared as if he had made preparations not to leak any information in case something happened to him.

There was not, however, the possibility that he had been controlled via an item or skill.

The reason being that he was talking about his ridiculous desires fluently. Maybe it had to be expected, but he had solid foundations for his current state.

"The man who was with him...Eline, was it? It didn't seem like he had been subjected to the miasma."

“He was an upper-class chosen one after all, I guess he had high resistance? He had decent items too, and his weapon was [Exvaine] after all. I do think he was subjected to other things, though.”

It might not have been Filma’s original weapon, but [Exvaine] was a powerful sword. Compared to other weapons of lower level, it might have helped resist the miasma’s effects.

Thinking about how perverse Eline’s personality was, however, suggested that it might have been formed by the explosive combination of Bulk’s education and the miasma’s corruption.

“Alright, we’ve checked this room too. For a leading member of the Faction, there isn’t anything of value here.”

Bulk’s residence was impregnated with miasma, yet nothing of importance was found except the miasma stones.

Considering that things related to the Faction were not hidden, but simply not there, one could start doubting that Bulk’s assertion of being one of the Faction’s central members.

“Maybe he was simply deluded that he was a lead member, or it was an illusion induced by the miasma.”

“That’s possible. He was just a kidnapper after all.”

Bulk was a pawn, used for gathering sacrifices through his position as priest. That was Shin and Schnee’s theory. But even if it was the truth, Bulk’s acts forbade any pity.

“Next is the hidden room, then.”

“If anything is to be found, I suppose it will be there.”

Shin activated the room’s controls and opened the doorway to the room.

He then grimaced at the foul stench emanating from it, much as Shibaid had done.

“...this is far beyond being just “stinky”.”

“What an awful smell.”

Shin and Schnee proceeded through the corridor, enduring the nauseous odor. After reaching its end they opened the door without hesitation.

“Splattered blood doesn’t go away, does it.”

“So it seems.”

When they visited the assassin several days before, Lilishila told Shin about how corpses disappear. He thought that their blood would vanish as well, but one look at the horrible state of the room made him change his mind.

The floor, the walls, even the ceiling were stained with what appears to be blood.

“But even so, Schnee...does this look like a drawing to you too?”

“It’s quite disturbing that it was drawn with blood.”

Shin and Schnee were looking at the drawing of a snake coiled around a half-broken mask, which occupied an entire wall.

Maybe because it had been painted with blood, the impression it gave to the viewer was a gruesome scene.

“I feel like I have seen this before...”

“This is the emblem of a dark guild. If I remember correctly, it was quite a large organization.”

Shin, his head cocked to one side, was trying to grasp an elusive memory. Schnee answered with confidence.

The ominous drawing before their eyes was not a completely new sight.

“Do you know the name of the guild?”

“The guild is called “Ouroboros’ Hollow”. It’s famous for accepting any request if the reward is adequate. On one hand, they undertake even criminal acts such as assassination and thievery, on another, they will take down other dark guilds or catch criminals if rewarded amply enough; in a way, they can be useful to society. That’s why all countries have a difficult time dealing with them.”

“I see, a true jack of all trades. I feel I heard that name somewhere before.”

“...that’s because it stems from a PK guild from the game era. It was formed by members of guilds you crushed, Shin.”

“That explains it.”

Schnee had pronounced the last sentence with a slightly stiff expression, but Shin’s answer was short. Compared to Schnee, his tone of voice was much more casual.

The actual problem was that, looking at the picture, Shin simply thought that he had seen it somewhere before. The reason for this was he didn’t feel it was worth remembering PKs after cutting them down.

PKs simply caused damage to other players, without a reason or a cause. Shin spared the least amount possible of his resources for such people.

He hated them. He resented them. But he never thought of keeping in mind the PKs he killed or the PK guilds he destroyed.

Even if he were questioned about feeling remorse after taking people’s lives, or how he could forget about people he killed, Shin would not care in the slightest.

There were some players who felt guilty about killing PKs, but Shin could not understand that sentiment.

“Even if they were offered heaps of money, gathering sacrifices would be too much even for them, don’t you think?”

“It is said that if the reward is enough, they will undertake any mission, no matter the content. Rather, there is the possibility that they are actively involved. Those who share a connection with players can cause the spread of miasma, and there were also

quests where if the player didn't stop it in time a Demon would appear. On the contrary, it is also possible to lead things to failure. In the past, I have participated in an expedition to bring down a group who tried to do just that, so I don't think it's impossible."

"That really happened? Well, the ones I crushed were all players, so there's no doubt that are support characters such as you exist. If there is game era knowledge, it's possible I suppose."

Quest disruption by PKs happened during the game era too. Causing the birth of powerful Demons was possible.

There was the impression of a slight discrepancy with the Summit Faction's goals, but considering the miasma found in Bulk's quarters, it could be concluded that the organization had its share of internal conflict.

"I suppose Bulk must have acted on his own too, for his personal agenda. A reason to conclude as such, was that he was secretly connected with the underground guild "Immoral Sacrifice" too, after all."

"That guild could be no more now. After all, "Ouroboros' Hollow" does not tolerate multiple contracts with other guilds."

Schnee had heard that in the past, someone who had a contract with Ouroboros' Hollow had bound a contract with another dark guild, thus causing that guild's annihilation.

For Ouroboros' Hollow, contracting another guild means that its own strength was being doubted. Needless to say, the contractor had been targeted too.

"As expected of a major organization. That's some grand scale planning."

Shin spoke with a sigh. There was nothing to laugh about.

"So there aren't any clues here either?"

"What we have now is only the shadow Tiera saw and the messenger Bulk talked about, I suppose."

“Better than nothing, I guess. Let’s focus on the day after tomorrow first.”

Shin decided to make preparations in order to gather as many clues as possible.



Shin and Schnee completed their investigation of Bulk’s residence and returned to Lilishila’s room.

Shin thought he would find someone inside, but maybe because their search ended rather quickly, no one was there yet.

Shin ran a search using Palmirack’s functions and found that Tiera, Wilhelm and Millie were in the same room.

Lilishila and Shibaid were on the verge of breaking into one of the rooms in the residential section. It looked like they had already captured several rooms. They were likely fighting against Bulk’s allies.

“Looks like everyone’s doing fine for now.”

“Shibaid is with Lilishila too, so I doubt anything bad could happen.”

Shin nodded in agreement to Schnee’s words and headed to where Tiera and the others were.

As Shin and Schnee entered the room, Millie noticed and ran up to them.

“Shin-nii!!”

“Hey there, good morning. How are you feeling?”

“All good!”

Shin caught Millie as she jumped to him and checked her status. Her HP and MP were completely recovered and she did not appear to have any status conditions.

The status screen can not show everything, but at the very least she had no visible

aftereffects.

“Have you heard from Tiera?”

“Yes.”

Millie nodded, smiling. Tiera, walking behind Millie, nodded too after meeting Shin’s eyes.

“There’s no time to lose then. After all, Rashia and Thoria must be worried sick.”

Shin spoke while patting Millie’s head.

They had previously contacted Vizzy to let her make preparations, so they could leave right away.

They asked Vizzy to protect Millie until Shin’s party had stopped the ritual.

Wilhelm with his powered-up equipment, Vizzy and the Elder Dragons she had gained control of, even if enemy hands approached them again, they would not go down easily.

“Are you departing?”

“Yes, there are people worried about Millie. They deeply regretted not being able to protect her, you see.”

“I understand. It is best to hurry, then.”

Hermie showed a relieved smile after speaking. Hermie had been used in the past for the abilities granted by her title, so she was glad to know that Millie, who shared the same title, was cherished.

“We have already made the necessary preparations. We were thinking of leaving now, actually.”

“Understood.”

Shin nodded at Hermie's words and faced towards Wilhelm.

Wilhelm too could use the item box, so he could leave right away without needing time to prepare. Millie had been kidnapped with only the clothes she had on, so she obviously had no luggage to speak of.

They decided to wait for Shibaid to come back and leave once they were all together.

Shin's party left Sigurd momentarily, to see Millie and the others off.

The carriage they rode on blazed through a wasteland heading to the meeting point with Vizzy at a slightly ridiculous speed due to the power of Kagerou's pulling.

Normally the carriage would be shaking violently, but the shock absorbing mechanism equipped on the carriage's cabin worked perfectly, preventing the passengers - especially Millie- from feeling sick.

"Will, Will!! Look outside! It's like we're flying!"

"Easy now, or you'll fall from your seat."

Millie's eyes were sparkling looking at the scenery breezing past them much faster than in a normal carriage, and Wilhelm cautioned her. She was not being careful about her foothold, so a stronger shock could have sent her flying out of her seat.

"Some things don't change no matter where you go, huh."

Shin felt as if he was looking at a kid excited to be riding a train and let that remark slip. Even when he had gotten used to the game world, he would sometimes remember the real world.

"Did you recall something about your homeland?"

"Eh?"

Tiera asked the question as Shin was gently looking at Millie.

“You looked like you were thinking about something far away. Usually people think of their homeland when they look like that, no?”

“I really looked like that?”

“Well, that doesn’t apply to everyone, but...I get the feeling I was right this time, wasn’t I?”

“Well, not too far from the truth, let’s say.”

Tiera asked for confirmation and Shin replied after some thought, his head cocked to one side.

One could say it was his homeland, but strictly speaking it really wasn’t. Since it was in another world.

“I was thinking of the past though, that’s for sure. I was thinking that kids act the same everywhere, you see. I’ve seen children act the same way as Millie, so...”

“I see, there was a time when “things like these” were normal, then.”

Tiera assumed that Shin was talking about the world before the “Dusk of the Majesty”. She imagined that there once were carriages this fast running through city streets.

“Children don’t change, no matter the times we’re in. Yes, I can see that.”

“The things we do are pretty much the same, after all. Hunt monsters, forge weapons or armor, create buildings, do research, go on adventures, or do battle. Some people play dirty, others work diligently. We’re all living beings, there aren’t many differences.”

In THE NEW GATE, the playstyles...the ways to live were too many to count. All players had a different one, and this world was no different.

“A world packed with High Humans like you, right? I don’t even want to think about it.”

“Hey now, there weren’t many at my level. Including me, there were only 6.”

“It’s insane that there were even 6! I’m really glad I wasn’t born in that era, for sure!”

Wilhelm says so light-heartedly with his legs crossed and back leaning on the carriage’s wooden partition.

The carriage was protected from outside noise via magic, making its interior quiet; everyone could hear the others talk.

Almost all members knew that Shin was a High Human, so they could talk without reserve.

The only person who wasn’t told this information was Millie. However, she said that she realized it the first time she met Shin, surprising the whole party.

“Shin is, kinda, amazing.”

“That’s a whole other level of ambiguity. Come to think of it, you told Schnee that I would be back soon. Did you see that in the future?”

“You see, I saw Schnee hugging someone, all happy. I felt all warm in my chest, so it had to be something good.”

Millie had predicted that after Schnee told her that she was waiting for her master, apparently.

Her ability at the time was still unstable, but for some reason that time she felt a strange confidence, so she told Schnee about it.

Everyone nodded at Millie’s words. Starting from Wilhelm, however, all members reacted to a different part of her recollection.

“So that’s what happened...but still, hugging, huh...?”

“I heard something similar too...so she hugged him, is that so.”

“What a mysterious ability...master, you really hugged him?”

“(Kuu! Schnee likes Shin very very much!)”

Wilhelm grinned, Shibaid nodded, Tiera inquired seriously. It was a side of Schnee they had some difficulty imagining, so their interest shifted away from Mille's ability.

The only salvation was that Yuzuha's telepathy had reached only Shin.

"W-what is it with you all? That's not the part that needs to be talked about here!"

This agitated response came from Schnee, who was holding the carriage's reins and could not participate in the conversation.

Only Yuzuha knew that when Shin and Schnee had met again, she had hugged him without thinking, but now the truth had been revealed to all.

It was quite a surprise for everyone that the usually straight-laced Schnee they knew had been so forward.

"We're talking of a noble High Elf who never had romantic rumors about her, after all. A passionate hug, is it? Truly forward indeed."

"I see, I wasn't aware but you didn't miss your chances to act. Very good, very good I'd say."

Looking at Schnee abandon her coachman role and unusually panicked, Wilhelm and Shibaid's expressions became sympathetic.

Even though they had just met, the two poked fun at Schnee just communicating through their eyes and facial expressions.



“She doesn’t deny it, so...it’s true?”

Tiera’s reaction was slightly different. She understood from Schnee’s reaction that what Millie said was true, and at the same time she felt a certain uneasiness in her chest.

Tiera didn’t know of the “bed sharing incident” or the “moonlight encounter”, so she couldn’t decide if Schnee’s feelings towards Shin were born from loyalty or affection...or rather, she purposefully put off such a decision, but the present situation made things very clear.

But what was the feeling of uneasiness in her heart? Tiera couldn’t understand.

She had been exiled from her village before ever experiencing such feelings and lived at the Tsuki no Hokora since then; she did not have a name for what she was feeling right now.

“You better go easy on Schnee, or she’ll make you regret it later, you know?”

“To be able to poke some fun at Tsuki no Hokora’s very own Schnee Raizar is something that will happen only this once in my lifetime. I can’t let this chance go.”

“I was certainly not poking fun at her. I simply found all this heartwarming.”

“You two are going to pay for this...!”

Behind Shin, who was sitting with his back to the coachman seat, Schnee uttered these words with a menacing tone. Her embarrassment was so strong that even her long ears were all red.

Wilhelm and Shibaid’s grins widened even more.

Shin, on the other hand, was unsure about what to do. Tiera was slightly annoyed.

Crying “kuu, kuu” and “gruu, gruu”, the two divine beasts adjusted the carriage’s course, which had lost its coachman’s control, and brought it forward to its destination. Inside the carriage, however, confusion reigned supreme.



“Here, we’ve arrived. Come down quickly, everybody.”

The chaotic atmosphere had to be endured for a few minutes. Thanks to Yuzuha and Kagerou, they arrived at the meeting point without trouble.

In order to wipe away that awkward atmosphere, Shin urged the passengers to go down quickly.

Both Wilhelm and Shibaid knew when to stop, so they promptly obeyed.

“Fufu, fufufu. You will be repaid for this favor very soon.”

Behind Shin, the still flushed Schnee had made her decision.

Having had little to no experience of being made fun of in the past, the damage she sustained seemed to be quite high.

“Go easy on them, OK? Besides, well... even embarrassed like that, you were pretty cute, you know?”

“EH!? Ah, er, thank you...very much...”

Shin tried to console her with words he wasn’t used to saying, and the effects were greater than he expected.

Seeing Schnee go all red, he was struck by her cuteness again.

“Er, aren’t you...used to hearing things like this?”

“It depends on who says them...if it’s the person I l... I like, of course... of course I’d be happy...”

Schnee glared at Shin while her voice trailed off to a whisper. Another cute expression, and Shin couldn’t help but pat her head gently.

“!!...umm....*cute noise*.....”

That sudden gesture made Schnee let out a little cry. Shin's hands stroked her hair gently, expressing the master's feelings to his companion.

"Ah....I'm sorry."

Shin realized what he was doing and pulled back his hand with a surprised expression. The warm emotion that had sprung forth in his heart had guided his hand.

A feeling that Shin had once experienced, but then lost. The feeling of deep affection towards someone else.

Shin himself was a bit surprised by his own heart's transformation.

There were, however, other things to make sure first.

He stole a quick glance at Schnee's expression, and found it frozen in what seemed like ecstasy.

Shin sighed with relief that, at least, she wasn't in a bad mood.

"Ah....er, Schnee?"

"Y-yes!?! What is it!?"

"Well, er, nothing. My hand kind of moved by itself..."

"No, well, I didn't dislike it, so..."

Are you a teen again!?! Is what Shin wanted to say to himself right now. That's how awkward their conversation was. Not that he didn't enjoy it, though.

Shin felt clearly how his emotions were changing.

"Shin-nii, Schnee-nee, do you have the hots?"

"!?!"

Shin and Schnee were still lost in their own world when a childish voice called to them.

They looked at the source of the voice and found Millie staring at them.

“The hots?”

“Eeeheh!? Ah, yeah, Millie, didn’t you go on ahead with the others?”

“They told me to come call you, since you’re so late.”

“I see. We’re coming, so go on ahead.”

“Okay....but you have the hots?”

“Enough about that!”

Shin tried to change the topic, but it didn’t work on Millie.

Millie’s face as she was running back to Wilhelm, as expected, had a big grin.

“...it looks like we should hurry ahead.”

“Indeed. But please, wait just 20 seconds.”

Schnee felt that she was still red, so she and Shin got down from the carriage after she had calmed down a little.

“My my? There’s something interesting going on here, isn’t there?”

Shin and Schnee joined the others, only to find Vizzy also looking at them with sympathetic eyes.

Among those present, only Tiera -who was carrying Yuzuha- looked at the two latecomers with different eyes.

Shin had almost reached the limits of his patience and darted a look at everyone present.

“Guys, if you don’t cut it out already you’ll make me angry, all right?”

“Alright, let’s stop the jokes for now. We’ll have to be sharp and focused for what’s coming, after all.”

“Yes, though we can say that there’s less pressure on our shoulders now.”

A state of prolonged emotional tension often invites unwanted accidents.

Shibaid and Wilhelm know that from experience; their poking fun at Schnee served to ease the whole party’s tension too.

Of course, they couldn’t deny that there were other reasons too.

“Agh, you people are just... anyway. We will deal with our mission as soon as we can, so please take care of Millie in the meanwhile.”

“You just leave it to us! We’ll do our very best!”

“We’re not going to let them have their way again.”

Vizzy stood proudly, while Wilhelm expressed his strong conviction. With the Elder Dragons’ assistance on their side too, they couldn’t be defeated easily.

Vizzy called the Elder Dragons, and as Wilhelm turned away from Shin’s party, Millie suddenly stopped.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Millie?”

Shin called to the Millie, still not moving an inch, but received no response.

Shin was looking at Millie with suspicion, when suddenly her body was covered in a faint light. Millie’s magic power was astir.

“What’s going on?”

Shibaid too, like Shin, noticed Millie’s unusual state. Schnee reacted by analyzing the young girl.

“I suppose this is the “Star Reader” title’s activation.”

“The title, you say?”

Tiera, not being able to understand the situation, did not know what to do.

“It’s all right, it’ll be over soon.”

Only Wilhelm seemed to know what was happening to Millie, thus he told Shin’s party not to worry. True to his words, Millie returned to her normal self in less than a minute.

“...Will-nii.”

“What did you see?”

“A woman with red and purple hair and the man who kidnapped me.”

“What!?”

Wilhelm’s expression turned sour at Millie’s words.

“Millie, you mean Eline?”

“Yes, but...he was strange.”

“In what way was he strange?”

“He was the same, but...different.”

The whole party contemplated Millie’s riddle-like words.

Shin further asked what she meant, but Millie couldn’t explain well and would simply repeat how “He was the same, but...different.”

“Will-nii.”

“What?”

“Will-nii, you should go with Shin-nii. I think it’s better that way.”

“You won’t be in danger?”

No one doubted Millie's -a Star Reader's- words.

But it would be meaningless if Millie was in danger because of that. That's what spurred Wilhelm's question.

"I'm all right now."

"..Got it. I'll do as you say then."

Wilhelm, as if he had lost to Millie's insistent look, agreed to her request.

There would be less protection for Millie and the church, but he decided to trust Vizzy and the Elder Dragons with that.

According to this world's common sense, 5 Elder Dragons -albeit small- counted as a small army already, so there would be nothing to worry in most cases.

"We'll be waiting for your message then~"

"Do your best, everyone!"

With the ones carrying Vizzy and Millie leading the rest, the 5 Elder Dragons flew off in the sky. Shin and the others waited until they couldn't see them anymore, then returned to the city of Sigurd.

"Well, we have some time to kill, and the first thing we should make sure that the news of the fall of Bulk's faction don't spread."

As they crossed the gate into Palmirack, Shin contacted Lilishila and used an illusion magic.

If word of Bulk's defeat spread, the messenger wouldn't appear.

Lilishila too was cooperating as not to allow any information leak, but the disappearance of the priests colluding with Bulk would certainly cause suspicion.

For that reason, Shin re-created the figures of Bulk and his allies via illusions, to show them leading their normal everyday lives.

Bulk's clique wasn't one to appear in public often, so Lilishila agreed too that the trick would work for a few days.

"In any case, I didn't think it would be so difficult to gather information."

"That's right. Not even one of the priests allied with Bulk knew anything..."

Shin sighed after interrogating the last captured priest. Schnee, who had accompanied him, was impressed by the enemy's information management.

They had questioned the priests about the messenger who was supposed to come meet Bulk, but most of them had never even seen her. It couldn't have been a cognitive impairment caused by the miasma; the messenger had surely used some form of camouflage.

"With things as they are, we have no choice but to leave the matter to chance."

"It also depends on who we have to deal with...but there seems to be no other way."

Neither Shin nor Schnee believed that the messenger could have been an honest person. Also considering what Tiera had witnessed, there was a high probability that the messenger was not a human, but a demon.

Fooling humans using High Humans as lure...it was not beyond the scope of what a Demon would do.

"Everyone's here, I see. Let's decide our roles for the day."

Shin and Schnee returned to the room assigned to them within Palmirack and begun their discussion with Shibaid, Wilhelm and Tiera, who were waiting for them.

The result was that, using illusion magic, Shin would take Bulk's role, Schnee Hermie's and Tiera Millie's. Wilhelm and Shibaid would standby, ready to stop the messenger in case she tried to flee.

Kagerou, as usual, would be in Tiera's shadow.

Yuzuha would not participate in the fighting, in order to continue tracking the target.

“All right. Then all that’s left is see what our opponent does.”

Shin’s party thus started the operation to rescue Filma.

C h a p t e r 2

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THE NEW
GATE

CHAPTER 2

“Someone’s coming.”

It was two nights after they saved Millie.

Shin, muttered something under his breath, while confirming that someone was approaching Palmirack using the map function.

It was clear the individual, most likely the messenger, was airborne, based on the angle and the speed at which they were approaching. Either they were riding a monster that could fly, or they had the ability to fly on their own.

Shin hid himself on the roof of Palmirack, keeping his line of sight pointed in the direction the messenger was coming from.

Eventually, Shin could make out a dark shadow. Luckily, there were no clouds that night, and the moon and stars kept the area visible.

The shadow which was a speck gradually grew larger, and within a few minutes became clearly distinguishable.

“(I can see a shadow of a person, I think it’s the messenger. They’ve come solo on a bug-type monster. Since the messenger is wearing a mantle with a hood, I can’t confirm their appearance.)”

Shin shared this information with Schnee and Shibaid through Mind Chat. This was passed onto Wilhelm and Tiera as well.

However, a few minutes later.

Something unexpected was displayed on Shin’s map.

“It’s possible to claim that these are related...”

Over 100 red markers were approaching from the rear of the messenger’s marker. You

could say that it is impossible to conclude that this had nothing to do with the current situation.

Shin relayed this information to Shibaid. He responded with “I shall intercept them.”

Truth be told they could intercept them with a wide-range magical attack, however, that would surely cause tremendous amount of noise and vibrations to occur. Considering how late in the night it was, this would potentially cause citizens in Palmirack to panic.

Shibaid could probably handle the monsters, by drawing them in the same way Shin once did at Balmel.

It could get out of hand, thus, it had been decided that Wilhelm would accompany him.

Just in case, Lilishila’s aids would also act as backup.

“This isn’t an average messenger” Shin mumbled this when he saw the figures become clearer as they approached.

After some preparations for battle were made, the messenger landed on the roof of Palmirack.

“Welcome. We were expecting you.”

Due to an disguise technique, Shin altered his voice, and spoke to the messenger. Both his voice and appearance are identical to Bulk’s. When seen by another person, they should not see anything but Bulk.

The messenger seems to have been fooled and thought Bulk had come to greet them. She flipped her hood off and revealed her face.

“Greetings, I seem to have troubled you. They are the sacrifices?”

A blonde-haired woman replied in a somewhat unnatural voice while straddling the bug-type monster, “Megrade”. A bug-type monster with 6 thin wings and a body

similar to a centipede. It's level on average is 700.

No one would object calling her a "Beauty", she is a woman who possesses such an appearance. However, her expression was blank. It was as if she was looking at Schnee and Tiera, but at the same time not at all.

"We are ready for you. Please come in."

"It's not necessary. We're moving immediately."

"At least have a drink."

"No. Hurry up."

She didn't show any behavioural thoughts, the woman urged instead. She didn't seem to want to waste her time at all.

Shin signaled to Schnee and Tiera to head towards the woman. Schnee was approaching slowly with Tiera.

Appearing to be manipulated, they were walking at a slow pace, they were good at acting.

However, when the distance between the woman and Schnee's group was less than 20 meters, the silence was suddenly broken.

"!!"

Words could not express the shrieking of the Meggrade, who jerked its neck like a snake. On Shin's map, the marker showing the Meggrade turned red representing a foe.

The Meggrade stopped shrieking, and without any hesitation, turned towards the direction of Tiera and ejected a purple liquid out of its mouth.

"It's time to take action!"

"Roger!"

The moment the Megrade had turned towards Tiera, Schnee understood its intentions and immediately picked her up and moved from their current location.

Within seconds, the location that the two had been was covered in the purple liquid, and this initiated Palmirack's defense mechanism.

"I don't know how we were exposed, however, it looks like we have no choice but to fight. Hey, you over there!! Either surrender quietly or fight, make a decision now"

"Did Bulk fall. How pitiful. You guys will be sacrificed by yours truly!!"

While the woman shouted that, she gestured at the excited Megrade. In that moment, it was hard to believe that the Megrade had become docile given its previous actions.

According to Shin's analysis, the woman's name was Amre Zig. She was a level 181 tamer. However, there was also information listed that would normally not be associated with a human's status.

"Do it!!"

The Megrade moved based on Amre's command.

The monster raised half of its 7 mels body, perpendicular to the ground. By doing so it can determine its prey.

The Megrade that Amre rode was twice as small as the one Shin was used to. It was also a lower level than the full-grown monster, at only 504.

Even then, the giant fangs attached to its head and its legs, which has a blade-like tip, holds enough power to tear through a person.

Even a seasoned warrior's body would be paralyzed, faced with this poison-spitting beast.

However, that didn't apply to Shin's party.

"Oraa!!" *battle cry*

The Megrade intends to trample on anything that approaches it from the front, and Shin chose to attack the Megrade head-on.

He held the materialized [Kakura] in both hands, and by swinging the sword towards the heavens, it skims the surface of the earth.

Shin was going to be swallowed whole. But, along with the sound of carapace bursting open, the Megrade's head was sent flying into the sky after one blow from [Kakura].

Half of the Megrade's face had blown off, but bug-type monsters tend to have very good regenerating skills. It didn't die immediately.

While it made an intermittent odd cry, it tried to stab Shin with the remaining fangs.

"As one would expect, its tenacious."

Shin swung [Kakura] as he dodged the monster's fangs.

[Kakura] was clad in the skill **【Dust Bomb】**, a combat skill from the hammer arts system. When it made contact with the torso that was on the ground, a 1 mel wide explosion occurred, centered around it.

The Megrade was split in half, and it still wouldn't die, shriveling with a yelp.

"Tch*smacks lips*, Megrade, do what you're told!!"

The Megrade had taken on a considerable amount of damage. It did not accept Amre's orders and with half of its body, it swayed back and forth. The half with the face turned towards Tiera.

It stopped only for a moment, before the monster shook off Amre and headed straight towards Tiera.

"Grrrrrrrrraaaaaarrrwww!!!"

Schnee and Tiera raised their weapons in preparation, but someone else had reacted quicker. It was Kagerou, jumping out of Tiera's shadow, in his true form, giving the Megrade a one-sided beating.

Kagerou's ruthlessness was laid bare for everyone to see. He thrust the claws on his right foreleg into the remaining portion of the Megrade's head.

The claws only penetrated through the shell, and because of this the Megrade was writhing in pain. Kagerou then poured an electrical attack through the monster's wounds, burning it from the inside.

Sparks were almost leaking out of the monster, and you could see the Megrade's HP going down.

The Megrade struggled, but unable to escape Kagerou's other leg holding it down, the monster was pegged. Within a minute, the HP had gone down to 0 points.

"Is it over?"

As Kagerou took down the Megrade, Schnee had cut off its other half into pieces and submerged it in ice. Tiera used her arrows to take down the escaping Amre, following that Shin restrained her.

Amre herself did not have high combative capabilities, thus, she did not put up much of a resistance.

"Let me go!!"

"That is not up for discussion. Without fail, we will get you to confess information about the faction!"

An interrogation wasn't necessary for Shin. However, the moment he tried to invoke a skill from the mind system, miasma began to pour out of Amre's body.

"What!?"

"HAHAHAHAHAHA this way I too, will..."

Moving faster than Shin could purify, the miasma was able to draw itself closer to Megrade's corpse.

With a blink of an eye, the miasma made contact with the corpse and permeated its

interior. This brought about a transformation.

“Gruu!?”

Kagerou had sensed danger and jumped backwards. A few seconds after jumping backwards, the Megrade's body, that should have been a corpse, started to move.

As the head was regenerating, it made a vicious beating sound, *thump* *thump*. At the same time the dismembered body starts to piece itself together. And the ice covering the surroundings gradually starts to develop cracks.

“!!”

A strange noise echoed throughout the surroundings.

The monster molted out of its shell, as a larger, stronger looking shell emerged.

“Could that be the skill ‘Invade’?”

The monster’s fate had been altered by the miasma.

Shin had known that the skill had a similar effect on golem-type monsters such as gargoyles. However, it seems to affect even the corpses in this world.

It is a phenomenon not seen in the game era. Normally monsters’ corpses transform into drop items.

After molting, the figure of the Megrade had become somewhat ferocious. From Shin’s memory, the Megrade in front of him was still smaller than a matured one. However, looking at it gave one the impression of a rather intimidating monster.

“So this one’s a mummy. You know, I doubted it when I glanced over the status. Alas...”

Shin sighs after observing the pinned down Amre, who was a mere shadow of her former self.

Amre’s status. Her name, her level, and her occupation were listed. It didn’t look too different from ordinary humans. But the name field was slightly different.

According to **【Analyze】** , the name listed was “Ghoul Invade”. With that appended to the name column, it was definite proof of a monster afflicted with miasma.

“So in this world, even people turn into monsters, huh?”

Undead monsters, such as ghouls, aren’t rare in THE NEW GATE.

There are a few strong undead monsters, but often times even newbies can take said monster down.

Apparently, according to the game’s explanatory text, the undead were originally human bodies buried after being killed by monsters. They were exposed to miasma, and started to move on their own.

Shin couldn’t grasp how Amre had ended up that way, nor how she had retained her own will after her death.

One thing was for sure. If Amre was an abomination caused by man, that meant that the Summit Faction was seriously out of line.

“Shin! How the hell is it stronger! What is that!!”

“It’s the miasma! Kagerou! Make sure Tiera stays away from it!”

At the same time Tiera shouted, the revived Megrade began to move. It was still split in two, but the half with the head, like last time, was focused in the direction of Tiera.

Following Shin’s orders Kagerou wedged himself between Tiera and the Megrade.

Being obstructed twice, the Megrade loathed Kagerou. It howled, and in response to this Kagerou growled with no intentions of backing down. Kagerou’s horn lit up as power starts to accumulate inside. Shin understood his intentions.

“I entrust Tiera to you!”

Shin didn’t feel like waiting for the opponent to make its move.

Using his movement skill **【Ground Shrink】** , he headed straight towards the Megrade

who was facing Kagerou and Tiera.

There's no need to go easy on a monster afflicted with miasma.

Like an afterimage, Shin arrived at the Megrade and didn't even give it time to 'defend,' as he drew [Kakura].



He unleashed his combat composite skill, 【Shining Roar】 , a combination of hammer arts and light magic.

[Kakura] absorbed all of the light, and grew to twice its thickness.

With one stroke against the Megrade, the light surrounding [Kakura] invaded the Megrade's body. A second later, [Kakura] itself crushed the shell.

The Megrade's shell started to form cracks, with ripples originating from where the blade made contact. Within a minute, the whole body was soaked in light inside and out.

“!!!”

The light from the combination skill was a high-level purification light for cleansing demons.

Ordinary monsters aren't affected and it is useless in personal battles, but they were up against a transformed monster that had afflicted with miasma. This was a fatal attack.

There is also additional damage due to using [Kakura]. And no matter how much a monster is strengthened by miasma, it wouldn't be able to withstand [Kakura]'s blow.

The Megrade's body quivered as if it was paralyzed. Any immobile giant monster is a sight to behold.

Shin lowered [Kakura] one last time at the Megrade's head, and because of the purifying light, the body turned to ashes and dust.

“Is Schnee the only one left...yep, she's finished too”

The other half of the body trapped in ice was going rampant.

That alone should have been intimidating, but Schnee was simply following Shin's lead- keeping the monster immobile before giving it its final blow.

A lower half of the body noodling about was nothing for Schnee. Shin didn't need to

help at all.

“Is it over?”

“Yeah. We got nothing out of it though”

Shin had remembered how Amre was before the skirmish. She didn't act like the party had gained any new information.

If anything, the Megrade should offer some hints and clues.

Recalling the memory of when Schnee and Tiera had approached the Megrade, the Megrade had acted terrified.

Perhaps just as Kagerou used to be skeptical of Shin and Schnee, the Megrade must have sensed the imminent power of Schnee.

Then, why did it go after Tiera?

(Is there a something we are not aware of?)

There are certain occupations that are more susceptible to attacks from monsters afflicted by miasma. Tiera had once admitted how she was hiding something from us. Maybe it's relevant.

Shin didn't want to force it out of her. Eventually, Tiera would tell them. There was no need to get her to talk.

Even if it was a naive thing to do.

“...How's Shibaid doing”

Shin decided to check on him via Mind Chat.



“We should start our battle soon”

Shibaid having been informed by Shin of the approaching enemy presences, Wilhelm and himself started to mobilize. In his hand, you could see his weapon [Placid Moon] glisten from the moonlight.

Shibaid also had a map of his own, sparkling red with enemy markers. There must have been at least 200 foes.

Shibaid decided to analyze the monsters in his periphery.

The majority of the monsters were undead, such as Ghouls or Rupt Raptors.

The monsters' levels ranged, from high level monsters at around 500 to some as low as 50.

About 40 monsters were above level 400. There were other monsters in the 300s range. Many of the monsters were under level 100.

“First, let's have the monster's focus their attention on me.”

At less than 300 mels between Shibaid and the monsters, Shibaid activated 【Shura's Madness】 an aggro skill. *(T/N: Aggro Skill, it is to lure monster by getting them to focus on user using the skill.)*

An invisible wave overwhelmed the monsters, as their cloudy eyes were all forced to land on Shibaid and the monsters faced his direction.

“arsa...sk!! -daggd!?”

The monsters were being taken over, as they twisted and turned, grunting and groaning, all together a surge of rumbling noises rushed towards Shibaid.

Even in the gaming world, few heroes can stand in front of a group of monsters, much less in front of a hoard with several over level 100. The survival instincts in people are triggered, when they are in front of a large number of physically larger beings, all

making noise so loud that you want to cover your ears.

Even in the gaming world, it's easy to be scared. So in this world, where this was a reality, your fear should be just as real.

Even a Chosen One would stand down.

However, the one confronting these enemies is a subordinate of the Dark Blacksmith, Shibaid Etraku.

Unless they were up against this number, their auras were very oppressive. On top of that, as if responding to the challenge, Shibaid's aura was intensifying.

“? ? ?”

At that moment, the intensifying aura heavily affected the monsters' momentum.

The front row of Rupt Raptors and Ace Jackals, the faster monsters, all went limp, taking down other monsters behind them.

The larger monsters with the charging abilities were not able to avoid the medium sized monsters in their way. They were also trampling over the smaller monsters.

Many monsters were trying to run away, frightened of the effects and overwhelmed by Shibaid's aura. The lower-level monsters were heavily affected, while the higher level monsters were all agitated.

“That should have thinned the crowd out”

After confirming that 30 of the low-level monsters had disappeared, Shibaid took off in a sprint.

He's much slower than Schnee or Girard, but that was a matter of battle style. Shibaid did not have to rely on speed.

“Haaaaa....”

He breathed out, charging at the array of monsters, waving [Placid Moon]fiercely. The

tip of the spear was channeling a white flame, which blew out 5 mels wide.

A combat composite skill 【White Haze】 , the mixture of flame magic and spear arts.

The fire encased the axe portion of the halberd, the blade width easily exceeded 30 cemels.

Shibaid dodged all long-distance attacks against him, and encroached closer and closer to the monsters.

“Ngrrr!”

With all the momentum put into one step, the ground starts to fissure. At around the same time he let out a battle cry, the holy halberd’s blade encased in flame drew an arc in the air.

The flame’s heat and cleansing powers compounded its damaging effects, turning all of the monsters within its reach into ash.

For undead monsters, flame attacks are one of their weaknesses, with holy and light being the most effective.

On top of that, Shibaid had used a skill comparable to that of Shin’s, which cleansed the undead.

The aggro skill lures the monsters, and as they draw near they are burned to ashes. The undead monsters didn’t stand a chance against Shibaid’s physical strength, combined with a superior weapon, and effective skill.

“Ha!!”

With one swing, two, then three.

Moonlight illuminates the black canvas of the night, while a white flame draws arcs.

The smaller and medium-sized monsters were reduced to ashes with a single blow, now only the larger monsters remain.

Even the larger monsters with higher endurance had just barely survived fatal blows, with their limbs burned off after one strike. Following that their head would fly off after the next strike.

Shibaid had smartened up, knowing that the larger bodies couldn't stand the repeated attacks from underneath. The undead were being sliced into bits with a swing from Shibaid's [Placid Moon].

However, he couldn't keep assaulting the monsters on the ground, as there was a shadow that was floating in mid-air.

A rotting pumpkin, a Jumpkin, floated above.

“Yhallhoooll!”

The hole of the monster's mouth released a soprano voice, giving us the impression of a young boy.

Listening to the pitch of the voice gave off an off putting feeling, and yet nothing seemed to be out of place. On top of that the Jumpkin looked like a Halloween pumpkin.

“Now its flying types, eh?”

Shibaid mumbled to himself, as several other flying monsters approaching from the rear of the Jumpkin.

There were undead monsters immune to physical combat, such as a Ghosts, spectre-type monsters.

These monsters often attack using black magic skills that give status abnormalities, and by default they are always flying. This made it difficult to land a hit on these monsters, and the players hated it.

About 30 monsters were afloat.

The issue wasn't fending them off, but rather how they were going to take up more time in comparison to monsters bound to the earth.

“Ha!!”

Dodging the magic raining from above, Shibaid jumped up. Underneath, you could see the ground he leapt from was caved in. The magical attacks against him were wide range, but Shibaid was used to acting as the party’s shield. This was a piece of cake.

A blue wall of flame is spread out in front of him, despite this, Shibaid thrusts his flame encased weapon into the crowd of monsters.

There were no other monsters left in the sky, after the white flame engulfed the surrounding.

Shibaid made use of the force from swinging [Placid Moon] to adjust his position in mid-air. What awaited him below was claws and fangs on land, but what awaited them too was a halberd clad in flames.

The blade’s first round of attacks burned and split a giant-type undead cyclops. The heat caught up and burned what was left of the body.

The monsters didn’t seem to care that one of their kind was burning to the side. They came after Shibaid with murder in their eyes.

“Hm?”

As Shibaid prepared for combat in the air and on the ground, in the corner of his eyes, the ghosts in the sky were being pierced by a ray of light that looked like a spear.

Shibaid instantly knew that the ray of light was caused by a composite skill using spear arts and light magic, **【Shooting Star】** .

It was a highly effective skill against the undead, and had two uses. It could be either thrown like a javelin or made to radiate the light to the surroundings for use in close combat.

At the end of Shibaid’s gaze, he caught a glimpse of Wilhelm holding his weapon [Beinot] proudly.

But Wilhelm also knew, that time was of the essence.



“I suppose there’s no need to waste time”

While carefully surveying his surroundings, Wilhelm watched the monsters disappear as they are pierced using the skill from earlier.

There really wasn’t a reason for concern, but it would be catastrophic if these monsters were to breach Sigurd.

Not just that, but spending too much time here was not a good idea either. In reality it was more for the peace of mind.

Shibaid could take on the larger groups of monsters, while Wilhelm concentrates on surveying the surrounding area for any remaining enemy presences.

Sigurd was once an area plagued by war. Places like those, tend to be breeding grounds for the undead.

It’s entirely possible that more undead would rise, due to such large numbers of undead concentrated in one location.

In the time it took Wilhelm to get rid of one monster, Shibaid had already taken on more than 10 ghouls and skull faces.

However, they were reviving themselves at an alarming rate, even for Wilhelm he had never experienced such a thing. On top of that the strength of the individual monsters were on a whole different level.

“This is out of the norm. The undead are rising too quickly”

At the corner of Wilhelm’s eyes, he saw the tempest like destruction that Shibaid created. As he witnessed this, he started to run.

Even for a land that was war torn for a long period of time, it was unusual for so many undead to be awakened.

By all accounts, and Wilhelm’s experience, something was very wrong. There were

monsters that were tamed by riders, as well as monsters that were following suit.

Considering this kind of man power was at Bulk and company's disposal, it was clear that the interior of Sigurd was stained with blood.

"What? What is that presence?"

Wilhelm could sense a little bit of a distance away, beyond 30 or so monsters in a cluster, something in the shrubs.

Something was lurking.

He felt it, and knew it.

He had to go there.

He couldn't explain himself, but Wilhelm was encroaching closer and closer towards this presence within the forest, slaying one monster at a time that was in his way.

The forest was dim; there weren't many places the moonlight could reach.

A silhouette in the shape of a man was being lit by the moonlight.

"You..."

"Long time no see. It's been a few days right"

Wilhelm was on guard, as he saw Eline Sperizer's face. He was supposed to be dead.

Eline smiled. There was no mistaking him.

It was the man that Wilhelm had once fought.

"What luck. Meeting again in a place like this"

"....."

He smiled, not even holding a weapon. It was as if he wasn't even aware of the epic

battle happening a few feet away from the shrubs and greenery.

It was odd, and anyone would vouch by that statement. Even now, Wilhelm could hear the echoes of battle.

“You’re awfully quiet. What is the matter?”

“Who are you?”

“Oh, have you forgotten me already? But of course, I’m——”

“No. You’re not Eline”

Wilhelm cut him off.

Even if they had only had one encounter, Wilhelm had fought with every strength of his body. A skilled warrior like Wilhelm would never forget or misinterpret a presence like that, one he had fought against for his own life.

“I’ll ask again. Who are you?”

He readjusted his weapon [Beinot] in his hand.

“Eline” silently looked at Wilhelm, before bursting out with laughter.

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

His voice was eventually louder and louder, and within seconds he was showing signs of a maniac.

“I really shouldn’t attempt to do things I’m not used to. I was outwitted in seconds!”

“Yeah. Don’t even try”

“But honestly, I thought I did a decent job. Just to be clear though, tell me what I did wrong.”

The man that stood there was still a mystery, despite just being outed.

“He was rotten, but unlike you he could not use his body to emit miasma.”

“Ah, of course. I guess my precision was not accurate enough. I am not there yet for sure”

“.....”

Wilhelm was silent in front of the laughing mad man.

This man was clearly delusional and abnormal, but Wilhelm couldn't just let him go either. He was waiting for a chance to strike, but he couldn't.

The miasma from this man was stinging Wilhelm's skin.

He had a similar aura to the Skull Face Lord, which he had once seen.

“Don't be so sullen. I came to see you specifically.”

“I have no idea who you are though.”

“That's cold. Well, to be honest, I came to pick you up. It doesn't matter how you feel about me.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Pick you up. It was the kind of wording you'd use to express camaraderie. Even then, Wilhelm hadn't a clue.

The problem wasn't even there - the problem was how there was no way that this kind of company could elicit welcome.

“We're out of manpower. We need what we can use”

He grinned, and continued.

“You came to me because you felt like you were being called on, right?”

“.....”

“Me too. I was the same, and I think you’re also considering listening to what I tell you to do, right?”

Wilhelm listened without saying anything. On any other occasion, he’d have a mouthful of words to throw back.

The man was right. Despite what his mind told him, his heart disagreed.

“Gr!!”

Wilhelm tried to fight his own will from within, when a pain surged through him.

It was painful from the hip down. It was exactly where Millie had struck him with the short sword.

“What...”

The pain was becoming worse. In proportion to the rising impulse boiling within his body, Wilhelm’s consciousness was fading.

A black powerful fog was gaining control from the waist, spreading through the rest of the body slowly with pain and terror.

“Yes. Stay as you are and WHOA!”

As Wilhelm was ready to succumb, his weapon [Beinot] suddenly started to beam with light.

The spear that had been improved by a High Human was no joke. The fog was almost magnetically being repelled by the holy light of the divine spear.

“What! [Beinot] can do this!?”

Even divine weapons didn’t possess such special abilities.

At least, as far as his knowledge goes, only [Beinot] can do such a thing. Even if they could mildly deter darkness, it just meant that the weapon was ‘fairly strong’. Not like this.

“Ugh! Man, nothing goes my way!”

The man had encountered a technical issue, and he had to also bear in mind the weapon in Wilhelm’s right hand.

Moments later, the same mist that had shrouded Wilhelm was sprouting out of Wilhelm’s hand; the hand that held [Beinot].

[Beinot]’s light defused at least half of that darkness. But it was not enough for the other half to cling tightly onto Wilhelm.

As the darkness did its job, the man reached into his pockets for a single item card. He threw it at Wilhelm, but more at his weapon.

“I can’t believe I’m using an item!”

The card was thrown with enough might, that while in the air the card materialized a long thin cloth. This cloth landed on [Beinot], wrapping around it, absorbing the weapon and covering it completely.

The man had thrown a ‘cloth of weapon binding’. This item weakened the effects of a weapon. It targeted all weapons unconditionally, even divine weapons.

If the owner of the weapon was aware, he or she could remove the cloth from the weapon. The situation was less than ideal as Wilhelm was unconscious. [Beinot] lost its glow with each wrap around it.

“Jeez, that was close...”

The man grew a little tired, taking [Beinot] away from a helpless Wilhelm. The man smiled at the lackluster and dull [Beinot], about 70% of it covered in cloth.

“Wow, I mean. Aside from how it looks this is barely a [Beinot]. No wonder the light it produced was strange. Well this is a cool find.”

For the man’s safety, he had to expended a reasonable amount of miasma, his source of power, when dealing with [Beinot]. And yet, knowing that, he still poured an equal amount of miasma into [Beinot].

The inscription on [Beinot]'s surface melted and burned the man's hands heavily. He seemed at lost at what to do, yet he continued pouring miasma.

The silver glow of the spear turned a vivid onyx. The inscription on the surface had also turned into a bloody crimson.

It was the hell spear [Vakira].

Even among the darkest weapons, this one was more powerful, and one of the few that were clad in miasma.

The man spun the spear in his hands once, and the cloth around it faded away before hitting the ground.

Wilhelm remained standing silently in the background, covered in dust and dirt.

“Well they should be done kidnapping the Holy Woman by now, right? So, I should head home... wow, I almost thought that that was the Dark Blacksmith. But, it seems the rumors differ reality.”

Based on the clothing and the armament, he was inferring that Shin was a High Human. He had also thought Shin was the Dark Blacksmith based on his features.

However, his behaviours at the time differed from what he heard from his comrades.

Accordingly, NPCs outside of players were treated as mere objects. That, and there was no hesitation killing people. The Blacksmith's eyes were ice-cold. He also had murderous intentions with every action. None of this was like Shin today.

If Shin was the person the man heard about, no one would survive in Palmirack except the Rokuten and their subordinates.

“So are you the ‘Blue Trickster’ or the ‘Golden Merchant’? Well, I doubt that you're always wearing that but...”

The names were derived from the colors that the Rokuten's members were clad in, but that was not necessarily a rule of thumb.

Thus, the man made the second mistake of thinking Shin is Cain or any other member of Rokuten.

Either way, all evidence pointed to how at least one of the Rokuten members had come back. It made no difference who.

Just one of the Rokuten could decide the victor of a war.

After discerning the location of the Megrade, the man and Wilhelm vanished without a trace, unbeknownst to everyone.



Clack, clack, clack.

Someone's heels echoed through the quiet church halls.

A smaller figure masked in a hood was walking down a path.

This figure eventually stopped in front of one of several similarly shaped doors. This was the room that Hermie rested in.

The door was open, and a man wearing armor was lying face down on the floor. He was unconscious.

"Pardon my intrusion."

The voice of a young boy echoed. Or a young girl with a low voice. The voice's gender couldn't be identified just from listening to it.

There was a casualness to the hooded figure's gait, as if one were walking into the room of a close friend. Inside of the room, several others were unconscious, with no outside wounds. They were breathing with a stable rhythm, much like being in a deep sleep.

"Are you resting? I guess you're resting? Then off I go."

The hooded figure confirmed that everyone in the room was asleep. They headed

further in, to see another door inside. This door was opened, and a young girl was asleep next to two soldiers.

“Found you.”

The figure made sure that the girl sleeping near the bed was Hermie. As a hand reached out from the cloak towards Hermie, the sound of a gust of wind could be heard.

“Whoops.”

The cloaked figure grabbed the flying dagger between their fingers, without even glancing at it.

“Now now, color me surprised. You are still awake?”

“Who... are you?”

The knight who stood up while uttering these words was Konig.

He had forced his unstable body to stand, just barely. Blood was dripping from his mouth because he had bitten his lips to maintain his consciousness.

“Oh yes, I didn’t introduce myself, did I. Good evening, sir. My name is Milt, I’m a member of “Ouroboros’ Hollow”. I have come here to borrow Milady Hermie. Any resistance is futile, so it will be easier for you to stay quiet, you know?”

“Enough mockery!!”

Milt’s introduction barely finished when Konig unsheathed his blade and attacked. The upper-class chosen one stepped in forcefully, with speed unimaginable for the heavy armor he equipped.

Milt’s speed however, exceeded his. The intruder’s body appeared to lean just slightly, yet Konig’s strike was avoided with ease.

Konig’s sword slashed repeatedly through the small room, yet he didn’t even manage to lay a finger on Milt, almost as if the unwanted visitor was but an illusion.

“Impressive attacks, as expected from an upper-class chosen one.”

Milt commented with nonchalance while avoiding Konig’s attacks. Even against an upper-class chosen one such as Konig, his opponent did not show the slightest agitation.

“Kh...”

Konig was swinging his sword despite drowsiness and powerlessness -of unknown origins- that were attempting to take over his body, while Milt seemed completely unaffected.

Who would emerge victorious was painfully clear.

“Yet, it’s a shame. This isn’t quite enough to stimulate my appetite. I don’t have much time to waste either, so I’ll be taking my leave soon.”

After speaking, Milt suddenly vanished from Konig’s sight; the invader had sneaked closer to Konig’s chest, to deliver a blow that the drowsy Konig had no hope of parrying.

Milt’s palm strike struck squarely against Konig’s armor, and the resulting shock burst throughout the knight’s body.

“Gwah...gh...”

Konig’s breathing was momentarily stopped by the impact that propagated through his armor. The knight then collapsed to the ground and would not stand up again soon.

It was not a blow that would have normally defeated him, but the abnormal statuses that crippled Konig prevented him from defending against it.

“Okay then, now that there’s no one in my way, I can get back to work.”

Milt made sure that Konig was out of commission and lifted the sleeping Hermie.

After setting up a certain mechanism, Milt left the room and headed towards Palmirack’s entrance.

While walking through the empty corridors, Milt talked out loud.

“This was even too easy...since this place was reactivated it means one of the Rokuten came back, so why was it so easy?”

For an infiltrator, nothing is more welcome than a lax security. Milt, however, seemed to be nothing but dissatisfied.

“The only member of the Rokuten involved in the Death Game should have been Shin, but I can’t imagine he’d let normal people inside Palmirack without doing anything...but there’s no way one of the other 5 came. And if Shin had come here, it’d mean that he died...but I just can’t accept that someone killed him...”

Milt kept walking on, while voicing complaint after complaint.

The present Palmirack had lowered security, in order to prevent danger for the people of the Church. Thanks to that, nothing would happen even if Milt simply walked out like this.

Milt had not actually “infiltrated” Palmirack either. The Ouroboros’ Hollow member had just walked through the front door, undisturbed.

“Aah, I want to meet Shin...if only he was here, I would be fulfilled even without having to do stuff like this...”

Milt’s words sounded like those of a maiden in love, or a boy dreaming about his hero, but hid something close to obsession within them.

Milt kept walking on towards the main entrance.

Listening to the sound of explosions in the distance, the intruder disappeared in the darkness once again.



Shibaid was the first to notice the anomaly.

After exterminating the undead monsters headed towards Sigurd, he searched the nearby presences and realized that Wilhelm's was nowhere to be found.

Shibaid's perception radius was smaller than Shin's or Schnee's, but still much wider than an average chosen one. Despite that, he couldn't find any trace of Wilhelm's presence, no matter how much he searched.

He went to the location where Wilhelm was supposed to be, but could not find any clue.

Something must have happened to him...it was just a matter of time before Shibaid reached this conclusion.

“(Things are taken care of on our end. How's the situation there?)”

“(The monsters have been exterminated. But something strange is going on.)”

Through the well-timed Mind Chat, Shibaid informed Shin about Wilhelm's disappearance.

Thanks in part to the improvement of his weapons, Wilhelm's power had increased further after meeting Shin. He was a warrior who had survived many deadly battles, he couldn't have been defeated by monsters of this level.

After taking care of the consequences of their battle in the surroundings, Shin and Schnee joined Shibaid and investigated the surroundings.

Yet no matter how much they sharpened their focus, there was no trace of Wilhelm in their field of perception. They too headed to the place where Wilhelm was supposed to be, which Shibaid had already inspected, but could not find any traces of their comrade either.

“No sign of major fighting...can we then exclude the possibility that he fought someone and was taken away?”

“If the opponent was from the Summit Faction, it is possible that Wilhelm was prevented from resisting by means of a hostage. Alternatively, a Mind-type spell could have been used on him.”

With information as scarce as it was, speculating had its limits. The group was then joined by Tiera and Kagerou, who did not possess perception abilities as strong as Shin and Schnee and had gone looking for clues by foot.

“Have you found anything?”

“Nothing, there’s no presence in the surroundings after all. What about you?”

“...I couldn’t find anything decisive, but there is one intriguing place.”

“An intriguing place?”

Tiera responded to Shin’s question with a brief silence. After letting out a small sigh, she answered.

“Follow my lead, I’ll take you there.”

Tiera said just that and proceeded to give orders to Kagerou. The place they headed to, at a speed matched to Shibaid, the slowest member of the party, was an apparently ordinary grove.

From Shin’s standpoint, he couldn’t sense anything unusual within the surroundings. It was the same with Schnee and Shibaid, in fact, their eyes gave off an expression of being utterly confused.

“It’s here.”

Tiera descended from Kagerou and walked towards the center of the woods. Kagerou grew smaller and walked near Tiera’s feet.

A few steps behind Tiera and Kagerou, Shin’s party too entered the woods.

After walking for several minutes, they reached a clearing. Tiera stopped just one step before entering it.

“Is this the place?”

“Yes. You might find it hard to believe, there was an extremely powerful Demon here until moments ago.”

“A Demon?”

Shin’s expression turned sour after hearing Tiera’s words. Schnee and Shibaid reacted the same way, especially the latter; his battlefield had been the closest, after all.

However, no matter how high Shibaid’s level and stats were, his enemy detection radius was not as wide as Shin or Schnee’s. If the enemy had used skills such as 【Hiding】 , it wouldn’t have been strange for Shibaid not to notice anything.

“Could this Demon, have done something to Wilhelm?”

“If so, it must have been a considerably high-ranked individual. Possibly even a Named One.”

“Yes, in that case it could have infiltrated here unnoticed.”

Among the Demons with high rank, there were some that could match Schnee and Shibaid.

That considered, it wasn’t improbable that Wilhelm had been taken away with little or no resistance.

“Er, do you really believe me?”

Looking at Shin’s party trusting her words without question, Tiera voiced her surprise.

“Huh? Why should we doubt you? You’re not the type to spout lies or jokes in a situation like this, are you?”

“But it was just a feeling...I have no proof or anything.”

“That may be so, but we at least trust you. That’s why we believe you, even without

proof.”

Shin answered firmly to Tiera’s whispered doubts.

In this world, after all, unexplainable phenomena such as magic and skills existed in large number. It wouldn’t be incredible to be able to perceive miasma or Demons somehow. In addition, elves and pixies possessed a sixth sense, or intuition, known for its sharpness.

The target of such sharpness differed from person to person, but it was likely that Tiera’s upbringing had made her sensitive to malice and ill intentions.

“It’s faint, but I feel something close to lingering miasma here. What about you all?”

“I cannot feel anything.”

“I feel something different from miasma. But I don’t think it is something malicious.”

Having come closer, Shin and Schnee perceived a lingering presence.

Shibaid looked puzzled.

“It seems that you are perceiving different things.”

“What I’m feeling is probably something similar to what Tiera felt. I wonder what Schnee is feeling, though.”

Shin had experience with miasma, so he was sure of what he had felt. He had no idea, however, of what the “something different from miasma” Schnee felt could be.

“At the very least, it is not miasma. A peculiar item, maybe...by the way, Shin, you had powered up Wilhelm’s weapon, didn’t you? Couldn’t it be that?”

“It’s true that I changed Wilhelm’s weapon to [Beinot], but did it have an effect like that?”

Shin tried to recall [Beinot]’s characteristics.

True to its “Holy Spear” moniker, [Beinot] was highly effective against the undead. It could affect Demons too, but just enough to be considered an added bonus.

It definitely did not have anything that could leave miasma behind this way.

“If anything, its grade changed.”

“The grade?”

“Yes, it went one grade up, from Mythology to Ancient. That could be the reason, I don’t know the details though.”

Even so, there were no other clues leading them further as of now.

The party split to inspect the surroundings once more, but could not find anything; only time passed.

“...I’ve looked all over, but there really isn’t anything here, huh.”

“I haven’t found anything either.”

“Nor have I.”

“Nor I. There’s no trace of fighting, so either he was captured or they used hostages. Those are my guesses.”

Shin, Tiera, Schnee and Shibaid reported their findings after regrouping.

What they discovered was just the absolute lack of any clues.

“Nothing to do here, let’s go back for now. It would be pointless to stay here longer, and I have a bad feeling...”

Ever since Millie’s abduction, they were always reacting to the enemy’s initiatives.

That was probably why Shin felt that this ordeal was far from over.



“What the...!”

“W-what!?”

Shin’s sudden shout startled Tiera.

He had noticed Palmirack’s abnormal situation as soon as they returned.

“Sleeping drug. It has been vaporized to affect the whole structure.”

Schnee identified the anomaly quickly, though it was already too late.

“Shit, they really were here too!”

As Shin used Pamirack’s functions to run a search, as expected, he found no trace of Hermie.

“Our information was leaked?”

“I have no idea. As far as we know, no one was under control, but...”

What Shin’s party imagined first was the black collar used to control Hermie.

While waiting for the messenger, however, they had made sure that there was no one equipped with it. No one was afflicted with abnormal statuses, so it was improbable for someone inside to be under enemy control.

If the leak had been on purpose, however, the collars had nothing to do with it. They couldn’t rule out the possibility of the presence of other “Summit Faction” members within Palmirack.

“Well, I suppose we should consider ourselves lucky that it wasn’t poison. Let’s blow away the drug first of all.”

Using a wind-type skill, Shin drove away the sleeping vapors hanging in the surroundings. It wasn’t something that caused any physical burden, so the affected

people were simply sleeping. It was night, a time when people normally spent sleeping, so there hadn't been any particular commotion. Maybe only the risk that the people who fell asleep in the corridors or on the floor would catch a cold.

"Lowering the security came back to bite us, I see."

"But unless you did that, it would not have been possible for so many people to live in the Church."

Shin scratched his head at the situation, but Schnee replied that there was nothing he could do about it.

The actual problem was that it was impossible to host such large numbers of people of the Church, even just in Palmirack's surface floors, while keeping its security systems 100% active.

To leave the systems active he would need to either register all inhabitants as guests, thus not targeted by the security system, or send them all out.

In the Church there were more than 1000 people, from the Pope to the apprentices. It was impossible to register all of them as guests.

Shin's party then headed to Hermie's quarters, in search of clues.

"Even Konig was affected...but wait, his sword is drawn."

Shin realized that among all those who fell asleep, only Konig managed to resist.

"I'm going to search this place. Schnee, please go check on Lilishila."

"Understood. I will bring her here once she wakes up."

Schnee left for Lilishila's quarters.

Shin then entrusted Shibaid and Tiera with removing the status ailments and headed to Konig.

"Hey!! Wake up!! What happened here!?"

Shin removed the sleep status from Konig and tried to shake him awake. Thanks to the resistance owed to his status as upper-class chosen one, Konig woke up as soon as the status ailment was removed from him.

“Sir...Shin? W-where is Lady Hermie!?”

As soon as he regained his senses, Konig jumped up and checked the surroundings. As he saw Shin in front of him, he asked about Hermie’s whereabouts.

“I’m sorry, but we just got here. The messenger was a monster too, so we couldn’t obtain any real information.”

“The messenger was a decoy, then...gah,how could I have let this happen..!”

Konig’s fist clenched at the thought of his failure.

“This mark is Ouroboros’ Hollow, isn’t it.”

Shin examined the mark left in Hermie’s room and identified the culprit. It was the same mark as the one they found underground.

“That’s beyond doubt. Hermie’s kidnapper stated so as well.”

“Did you see the culprit?”

Konig’s words captured Shin’s full attention.

“A while after I started feeling strange, a hooded figure appeared in the room. The mantle and hood prevented me from seeing their face, but he called himself Milt.”

Konig gave Shin all the information he could remember. The intruder was of short stature, with a voice that could have been both a man or a woman’s. Konig, -though he had been in poor condition- also noted that the cloaked figure had avoided all his blows with ease.

“That’s all I can remember.”

“That’s more than enough. I feel like I know this person.”

“What!?”

It was Konig’s turn to latch on Shin’s words. Ouroboros’ Hollow was a famous organization, but its members were shrouded in mystery.

“I remembered. Small, voice of unclear gender, fighting prowess superior to upper-class chosen ones, the sleeping medicine used here and the name Milt...I’m positive I know who it was.”

It was a coincidence that Shin remembered.

Most of the PKs that Shin had cut down either had eyes filled by hate and resentment or distorted smiles, expressions averted from reality.

Among them, the woman called Milt always had a strangely amused smile on her lips.

She was famous ever since the time when THE NEW GATE was just a game.

She was the type that found endless pleasure in duels to the death, who felt truly alive only at death’s doorstep.

She publicly stated how she would fight anyone strong enough, no matter if they were people or monsters.

That did not change even after the start of the Death Game; even if her way of thinking and playstyle were more and more shunned, she was a deviant who would often barge in the front lines during boss hunt quests.

She would never actively hunt weaker players, and while fighting she would always honestly cooperate with the main party. She was famous in certain circles as she would escape as soon as the fighting ended.

Milt’s style was to use anything and everything that could be used. She was especially talented in the use of poisons, both for battle and for escape.

She became involved with Shin in the time he was called “God of Death”; it was at his hands that she had fallen.

That was everything Shin knew about Milt.

(...Was she the kind of person to assist a kidnapping, I wonder?)

What Shin felt after remembering about Milt was doubt.

Her abnormal conduct was something that made her position slightly complex too.

She did not assault, rob, or slaughter players for fun, as most PKs did. Maybe she had participated in such activities unbeknownst to Shin, but he had at least never heard such rumors.

A PK unlike any other PK, that Milt was assisting in kidnapping...there was something off about it.

“Please tell me, what in the world is she?”

“...simply put, a fiend for battle. She wouldn't hesitate before cutting someone down, but as far as I know she wouldn't engage in something so bothersome as kidnapping.”

Shin explained about Milt to Konig taking care to avoid any game-related jargon.

Shin remembered that her STR stat was at least above 700, while -possibly as a trade-off for this- her VIT was barely above 300. Her stats distribution was not focused on a single stat, but certainly highly skewed.

“If what you say is true, sir Shin, then it's understandable how she could be part of Ouroboros' Hollow. That guild often receives requests from kingdoms all over to exterminate powerful monsters or dangerous criminals. Cooperating with the Summit Faction is probably to fight against stronger enemies, I'd wager.”

“I suppose you're right.”

Konig's words were perfectly logical. If there was the possibility to fight against powerful opponents, regardless of “good” and “evil”, it wouldn't be strange for Milt to participate.

“Let’s forget her train of thought for now. We’ll have to face her when we go rescue Hermie anyway, let us focus on finding out where Milt went first.”

Shin set aside his doubts and changed the topic.

If what happened that night was all connected, Wilhelm was likely to be in the same location.

“I think it’s safe to assume she headed to the Summit Faction’s base.”

Shin heard Lilishila’s words and turned towards her, then noticing how she was still unsteady on her legs.

“That was quick...are you alright?”

“I was forced into slumber, so I am still a little unstable, but that’s not a problem. Concerning the destination, we have more or less pinpointed the location.”

While investigating Bulk, they had found miasma-filled places which were likely to be used for the ritual.

“Could you tell us?”

“Of course I will. Let us go to the table.”

As the current room only had a small table, they moved to the adjacent one.

There Lilishila pulled out an item card and materialized it on the table.

What appeared was a map depicting a region with Sigurd at its center. While the area it showed was not very large, its level of detail was on a whole another level than the map Shin had bought in Bayreuth.

“We think that there are 3 locations likely to be used as ritual sites.”

After saying so, Lilishila placed two black stones on the map. One was on a mountain north-west from Sigurd, the other on a forest area in the south-west.

“The last remaining place is beyond this map, on the coast south-east from Sigurd. We have confirmed that in all of these locations there is a cave leading underground.”

“What makes you think that miasma is accumulating there?”

Shin, thinking that there were many caves other than those three, expressed his doubts aloud.

“These three locations were all theatre of large-scale conflicts in the past, which saw a great number of casualties. They are also reported to be locations where Ley Lines gather. We speculate that they might be plotting something by using these two elements.”

“I see. Yuki, Shibaid, do these locations tell you anything?”

Shin requested their opinion as they had traveled through many lands for years.

“As Lady Lilishila said, these three locations have indeed had large conflicts with numerous casualties. Especially the south-east coast and the south-west forest also saw large appearances of undead monsters. I have never heard anything in particular about the north-east mountain, however.”

“Hmm. I share her opinion on the coast, but have never heard much about the forest. As for the mountain, I have visited in the past to exterminate the “Dragon Alado” that had appeared there. If I remember correctly, part of its body had undergone metamorphosis...possibly due to the effects of miasma.”

Adding the two opinions together, it was concluded that all three locations could be places where miasma gathered easily.

The Dragon Alado Shibaid spoke of was, after all, a type of Undead dragon.

At the same time, Shin also asked Yuzuha via Mind Chat if she knew anything about the three locations.

“(Kuu, Yuzuha doesn’t know...)”

Yuzuha, who had barely ever left her shrine, did not have any information about the

three locations.

However, in addition to Yuzuha's tracking, and the clues on hand, they are able to decide on a plan of action.

“(Well, that’s not really unexpected. Rather than that, what does the tracking technique you used on the figure who flew off from the church say?)”

“(Over there.)”

As she spoke via Mind Chat, Yuzuha pointed her front right paw forward.

“(Schnee, do you know what direction Yuzuha is pointing at?)”

“(...It appears to be south-east.)”

It was vague, but in the same direction lied one of the locations Lilishila had suggested. As they had a few other clues at the moment, this was their greatest one.

“Good, let’s head to the coast then. Our foes can teleport and tame flying monsters, so the distance shouldn’t be a problem for them.”

Also taking Yuzuha's opinion into consideration, Shin decided to make the southeast coast their destination.

He thought about splitting the group for the search, but among the Demons there were also some Schnee and Shibaid could not handle alone.

Including the presence of “Ouroboros’ Hollow”, which also counted the former player Milt among its ranks, Shin decided it would have been unwise to split their forces.

“I’d like to leave right away, but let’s wait for everyone to wake up first.”

“I agree. This sleeping drug affected all present despite the large size of the area. It could have caused other ailments on some.”

The drugs used by former players are more powerful than what is in circulation now. Even if no one was in risk of dying, there could have been affected subjects who

continued sleeping.

However, it was already midnight; as they couldn't simply go wake everybody up, the group decided to wait until morning.

They also had to prepare supplies for what would be a long journey, as well as find the detailed route to the coastal cave.

“(Kuu...Sleepy...)”

“Even Yuzuha is at her limits, huh.”

“It is really late, after all. Let's leave preparations for tomorrow morning and go rest ourselves.”

Schnee made her proposal while looking at the drowsy Yuzuha.

No matter how high one's abilities might be, fatigue is inevitable. There was not enough time for a full rest, but there was no need to stay awake either.

“That's right. Lady Lilishila, you and your men should rest too. Even if we stay up thinking now, we would only grow more tired.”

“You're...right. To be perfectly honest, I don't feel too well.”

Checking the route wouldn't have taken much time. Considering Lilishila's poor condition and the damage Konig sustained, they decided to rest too.

Shin's party too headed for some usable empty rooms. After laying Yuzuha on a bed, Shin lied down himself.

“Milt, huh...”

After whispering the name of the woman he had fought to the death before, Shin closed his eyes. What he pictured were her strangely warm smile and the other ferocious smile, which pulled the edges of her mouth so high that she looked like a different person.

If she had been sent from “Ouroboros’ Hollow” to the Summit Faction’s aid as a combatant, it would almost definitely turn into a fight to the death.

In that case, Shin could end up having to kill the same person twice.

“That’s a twist of fate I don’t need at all...”

After this whisper, Shin fell into slumber.



The next morning.

Shin’s party verified that all those affected by the sleeping drug had woken up, they then promptly began preparations for departure.

After buying the necessary supplies and checking the route, the group climbed onto a carriage.

The party heading to the coastal cave included 5 people and 2 animals: Shin, Schnee, Shibaid, Tiera, Konig, Kagerou and Yuzuha.

Lilishila also wished to go, but as she did not possess enough fighting power to protect herself, unlike Tiera, with her contracted partner Kagerou, and the upper-class chosen one Konig, she remained in Palmirack.

From a fighting power standpoint Konig couldn’t compare to Shin’s party, but as he would have followed them to the cave anyway, they decided to move together from the start.

“In any case...”

Noticing Konig’s fascinated expression, Shin talked to him.

“Hm? Is something wrong?”

“No, well, it’s about this carriage...how does it work? It’s running so fast yet I cannot feel a single vibration. I was prepared for the fatigue traveling for long hours would

have caused, and yet..."

"Ah, I see."

In this world, the technology to stop horse carriages from vibrating was still underdeveloped; the faster the carriage went, the stronger the vibrations became.

Being forced to withstand such vibrations for long hours would cause more fatigue than Shin imagined.

Before, when they had accepted an escort mission for merchant carriages to Beirun, the merchant dwarf Nack had modified the carriage in order to minimize the vibrations and also adjusted the driving speed to not make the carriage shake too much.

"This carriage is somewhat special. An acquaintance of ours modified it, that's what made this possible."

"Is that so. Well, I must say I'm happy I predicted wrong. At this pace, we will arrive sooner than expected."

Konig surely wished to rescue Hermie as soon as possible. His eyes were fixed on the direction the carriage was proceeding towards.

"Let's not be hasty, friend."

"I know. Looking at the scenery flying by so quickly helped me calm down too. If the carriage ran at normal speed, I would probably have jumped off and started running by myself."

This carriage was being led by the divine beast Kagerou, after all; it would definitely be faster than Konig running. From Shin's standpoint he still wasn't completely calm, but his impatience wasn't showing on the surface, at least.

"We will probably come to face enemies equal or superior to you, sir Konig. They might serve as nothing more than a placebo, but I prepared a piece of equipment for you. Please do use it."

Alongside these words, Shin passed an item card to Konig.

What materialized was an amulet-type accessory, which was endowed with resistance to status ailments and the ability to nullify instant death attacks once.

“Can I really have this? Surely it must be precious to you?”

Konig did not understand the amulet’s abilities just by looking at it, but he could clearly feel the magic power emanating from it, which prompted his question to Shin.

Even Konig, who did not possess the 【Appraisal】 skill, could understand how Shin’s equipment was out of the ordinary.

It was obvious that, considering where they were headed, Shin would not pull out just an ordinary amulet.

“It’s not worth that much, really, so please don’t worry. It’s a kind of insurance, in case anything happens.”

As Shin explained the effects of the amulet, Konig was greatly surprised, but that was obvious too.

An amulet with such powers could very well be a national treasure in this world, after all.

“I knew you were out of the ordinary, but who in the world are you people, really...?”

“Just normal adventurers. As you know, magical items can be found in dungeons. We have explored many of those, so we had plenty of chances to find such items; that’s all there is to it.”

“Being able to explore such dungeons already puts you leagues above the average person, though. You must be chosen ones, am I right?”

“Well, something like that.”

Shin gave a vague answer and laughed wryly.

Items with powerful abilities couldn't be found in low-level dungeons, naturally. If one wanted items that satisfied the needs of a chosen one, exploring dungeons of relatively high difficulty was necessary.

The adventurers thus needed to be adequately skilled.

Such skill was beyond the scope of a normal person who just accumulated level ups.

Shin casually handed around items that couldn't be bought with money; it was not strange for Konig to start being wary of him.

"Rather than that, I'll borrow your weapon for a little while, sir Konig."

"By the...! When did you..?"

What Shin had casually lifted was the sword Konig had at his waist, [Haufer]. Shin calmed Konig down, who had not realized that his weapon had been taken away, and activated a skill.

After adding limited-time stats increases and magic skills, Shin returned [Haufer] to its owner.

"...I noticed my sword sparkled, but what did you do?"

"I can't power it up properly in a carriage, so I just attached a couple of bonuses. If you focus, you will be able to use physical boost skills and magic skills."

"....you used an item, then?"

"Having more power at your disposal will only help, won't it?"

Shin answered the question with another question, trying to avoid answering.

Their departure had been rushed, so they didn't have time to power up properly, that was all. It was just a temporary boost, as there was the risk of being attacked during travel.

Among Shin's possessions there also were weapons stronger than [Haufer]. But their

stats requirements were rather high; Konig would only be able to handle a few of them.

Changing weapons without much thought would cause its handling prowess to decrease, in total opposition to the intended results; thus, this makeshift boost was all he planned to do until they could properly rest at night.

“I’ll make it a bit better tonight, so for now please make do with that.”

“Hmm, you speak as if this was something very simple, but I can feel much more magic power from the sword...”

Konig looked on in bewilderment at his faithful sword and the unusual aura it emanated.

“Our opponents are skilled professionals, after all. We have to be prepared too.”

Knowing well that he would probably be riddled with questions later, Shin used skills without reserve.

One reason was not letting Konig die, of course, but the first priority was raising the success ratio of Hermie’s rescue as much as possible. Holding back and then not being able to save her would have been a pathetic ending.

Shin’s party was strong, but its members were very few, after all.

They had skills to compensate for their numbers, but that couldn’t be said to be the best solution to perfectly carry out their mission.

Facing an enemy of unknown size while scouting them, engaging in battle, and performing a rescue operation all at the same time, would easily create openings in their defenses.

One reason to let Konig join their party was to at least partly cover for such a weakness.

“How are we going to move once we reach the destination?”

After they finished making preparations and sat down for a meal, Konig asked this question.

As the carriage was proceeding at high speeds, the coachman, Schnee, could not leave her position to join the discussion.

“First, I aim to infiltrate the location without being seen. Yes, it’s important to stop the ritual, but the first priority is to free the sacrifices. Before anything else, I’d like to avoid any conflict.”

“Indeed, without the sacrifices the ritual can’t proceed either.”

Konig agreed to Shin’s proposal.

That was the simplest and quickest way to put a stop to the enemy’s plans.

“It would help if we knew the cave’s internal structure. It’s a natural cave, so I doubt any maps exist...but most of all, we have no idea of the enemy’s numbers.”

“Should Shin and I go inspect first?”

“I think that’s better, yes. I don’t honestly want to waste even a second, but acting on impulse and messing up would be worse. It’s kind of frustrating, though.”

Shin nodded at Schnee’s words. In any case, risks remained. They could not decide which strategy had higher risks.

“Thus all we can do is wait.”

“That’s right. We would only be in Shin and Yuki’s way, after all.”

Even if accompanied by Kagerou, Tiera’s low stats and Shibaid’s vanguard-type job made them ill-suited to infiltration missions.

They were both fully aware of this, and agreed to stand by without a word.

“I suppose that’s the only way.”

Konig too, despite his frustration, agreed to wait.

They continued discussing and decided what their next general plans would be, after which Shin started reinforcing their weapons.

“Well then, time to start.”

He materialized a portable furnace from an item card and infused it with magic.

Doing so caused a violet flame to appear in the middle of the furnace.

“The color’s different. Now that I think about it, it’s been different since then.”

The flame used to be red during the game era. The first time he tempered a sword at Tsuki no Hokora after coming to this world too, the flame’s color was slightly violet.

It had been a very small change, though, so Shin just thought it was an effect of the world not being a game anymore. Even if he focused, the color was the only change he could perceive.

He tried holding a random sword over the fire, to be sure, but nothing unusual happened. The magic that reached Shin’s hands through the blade was the same one he was well familiar with. Nothing felt off.

“Shin? Is anything wrong?”

“Oh no, nothing.”

After confirming that the color was the only change, Shin thrust Konig’s [Haufer] into the fire.

After a few seconds, [Haufer] glowed red-hot within the purplish flames.

It wasn’t normally possible to work on a Legend-grade weapon with just a portable furnace. Shin’s magic power and the specially-made furnace, while they couldn’t go as far as to let him temper it into another weapon, allowed him to power it up.

“Do you mean you can modify Legend-grade weapons too? I heard that even skilled dwarves have difficulty with it, but..”

“Chosen ones aren’t bound by common sense, after all. But all I can do is reinforcing it, mind you.”

Shin made sure to point out that he can only modify Legend-class weapons, not forge them.

Shin already knew that Rionne’s Legend-grade greatsword, [Muspelm], was considered a treasure of incommensurable worth in this world.

Considering Konig’s personality, it was hard to imagine that he would talk about Shin to just anyone, but Shin made the decision of limiting the information he would give the knight.

“Even just being able to reinforce an already powerful Legend-grade weapon is a precious ability, I’d say.”

“It’s also useless without anything to use it on, though.”

As Shin said, in a world where even Rare and Unique grade weapons were scarce, he had few chances to use this ability of his.

It was like a chest of treasures...without a key.

“Well, here you go. I could increase the sword’s strength and sharpness and added an effect that amplifies the effects of the user’s magic. Adding the limited usage effects I added before, it’s become quite the nice trump card, I would say. Please do check if it feels weird in any way.”

Shin then handed the reinforced [Haufer] to Konig. Two new emerald-green lines adorned the sword’s silver blade.

“...Truly impressive.”

Konig muttered while looking at [Haufer].

He then firmly held the blade's grip and, after moving a few steps away from Shin and the others, swung the sword lightly. The magical blade drew a silver streak through the air as it cut through it with a sharp sound.

Konig nodded appreciatively, then returned to his stance and swung the sword in succession.

What school were those movements from? Following [Hauser]'s flowing movements, silver streaks of light illuminated the darkness.

"Impressive indeed. I feel nothing unusual."

After performing several sequences of sword techniques, Konig expressed his admiration to Shin.

"Good to know. Next up is the armor, take it off, will you?"

Konig, who had kept [Hauser] equipped expecting to test it in actual fighting, was still wearing his armor too.

He nodded at Shin's invitation and a second later his armor sparkled and gradually vanished turning into an item card.

It was different than using the menu during the game era; in the game, the transformation would only take an instant.

It was very similar to the phenomenon Shin had seen during the battle against Barlux. But he was not completely positive that a card had been used at that time.

"If you don't mind me asking, has that armor received any special treatment? It's the first time I've seen an armor turn into a card in this manner."

"Is that so? I have heard that this is a technique developed by people who are attempting to resurrect the technology to transform equipment instantly, which was common before the 'Dusk of the Majesty'. It appears that technicians from the red and black factions collaborated and made it usable normally."

As it was a battle gear-related technique, the factions strong in blacksmithing and

alchemy likely focused all their knowledge to bring it back.

“I see. It’s not complete, so there’s a slight time loss.”

“That’s right. It removes the chore of taking off equipment every time though, so I find it really valuable. There are however few blacksmiths, alchemists, or wizards that can apply this treatment. Mine was performed by a high-rank alchemist of the Church, but it was not an easy feat at all.”

While listening to Konig, Shin materialized the armor once more. He did not place it into the furnace, however, but placed his hand on it to inject magical power within it.

Shin used **【Appraisal】** on the armor while powering it up, but maybe because the technology used in it did not exist in the game era, he could not analyze it in detail.

(Maybe this is something similar to an Art?)

Shin barely knew anything about the Arts.

He had returned to Bayreuth after the battle with Girard, but he had been teleported to the sacred place Kalkia right away. There he joined the Balmel defensive battle, followed by Millie’s kidnapping.

There was no time to ask Schnee or Shibaid to teach him about them.

“...now it’s complete.”

After increasing the armor’s sturdiness and its stats, albeit slightly, Shin turned the armor into a card and gave it back to Konig.

Konig equipped it once more and checked how it felt. The size had not changed, so he moved around a little to see how much his physical abilities would power up.

“We have an early start tomorrow too. Better go rest now.”

“Should someone stand guard?”

“I doubt most monsters could elude our divine beasts’ eyes.”

Yuzuha and Kagerou's danger perception abilities were much higher than average security items. The possibility of being attacked by surprise was extremely low.

In addition, the carriage had been modified before departure, in order to be used as a simple base of operations.

If someone was resting inside, the carriage was protected by a 【Barrier】 and a 【Wall】 that only field bosses could break through. Plus, even when sleeping, Shin and Schnee's danger perception abilities were almost fully active. It was safe to say that a surprise attack was impossible in that situation.

“That's true too. It's more likely for the monsters themselves to turn tail and flee. They would probably be scared and not get closer even if they are asleep.”

Konig agreed to Shin's words too.

After finishing dinner, the group headed back to the carriage to sleep.



In a dark room, a single faint light was flickering.

In the center of the 20 mels square room were a magic circle 15 mels wide and a barrier enveloping it. On the magic circle about 20 people could also be found, men and women ranging from children to adults.

“Damnit!! Let me out!! Let me out of here!!”

Someone's scream echoed through the room.

Those inside the magic circle who could still move began to desperately hit the circle's barrier. Most of them were men, but among them some held children or women in their arms.

None of them carried anything resembling a weapon, nor did their clothes look like what someone who battles for a living would wear.

Indeed, all those inside the magic circle were perfectly average civilians.

“Hey now, you’re at it again? It’s like you enjoy it even...”

Among the desperate shouts, a jaded voice echoed outside the circle.

Illuminated by the light emanating from inside the circle, the silhouette of the owner of the voice emerged from the darkness.

The face that appeared once belonged to the man called Eline.

“Oh my, isn’t this aura I feel Adara’s? It’s been a while.”

“Will these even be enough?”

The man who was called Adara answered. It seemed like that was his original name.

“Many drops make a shower, as the humans say. Well, this is something of a pastime for me, if I can get something from it, wonderful, but that’s about it. It is truly moving to see others act to save their loved ones, after all. ”

“Because the following despair will just taste better, right? You’re the same as always, Scoruas.”

In the upper section of the room, shaped like a gallery on the stage below, Adara spoke to the silhouette grinning before him, Scoruas.

Scoruas was a man with features much like a handsome prince’s. His white hair and red eyes, illuminated by the room’s lights, had something that attracted others’ attention. If he ever joined a party, there would be no doubt that he would garner the attention of many noble maidens.

That is as long as they were not aware of the personality of a man who found delight in the anguished screams coming from the floor below.

“Our masters might be different, but we both serve the same Miasma Lord. I thought you would share this emotion with me, don’t you?”

“I’m a parasite-type, you’re a created-type. Our births are different, so our likes and dislikes are too, I guess? If the mutant-types saw this stuff they’d gobble them all up right away, you know?”

All demons were under the command of one of the three Miasma Lords, the strongest among the Grand Duke class of demons.

All demons, from the moment of their birth, acted with the goal of resurrecting the Miasma Lords, using human despair and grief as fuel.

However, demons with especially strong personalities would distort even this imposition.

Adara and Scoruas were such demons; their strong personalities allowed them to break off the yokes that once restrained them.

“I understand that kind of thinking, though. I would like a bit more cooperation, to be honest. My subordinates haven’t awoken yet, and it appears that Magnamuc* has been erased too.” *(T/N: Changed from Magunumuku)*

Scoruas talked while shrugging his shoulders. He didn’t appear to feel the least bit of rage towards their comrade’s demise.

“Hm? Didn’t it infiltrate some country somewhere?”

“The same country where the man you have with you was.”

While saying so, Scoruas pointed at something behind Adara’s back. It was Wilhelm, standing expressionless.

His right hand gripped the hell spear [Vakira].

“Bayreuth kingdom, was it? I don’t think the rabble there could have defeated someone of that level, though.”

“It looks like the closer princess wasn’t around, but it looks like there was a skilled fighter we don’t know about. Someone good enough to slay him without creating the slightest commotion.”

Despite the fact that more obstacles appeared before them, Scoruas' expression remained serene. After all, having no worthy opponent to face was a source of boredom for him too.

“Well then, looks like we're almost finished here.”

Scoruas cast a glance to the floor below. Something was changing within the magic circle.

The bodies of the people who weren't beating on the barrier, collapsed on the ground or became unconscious, started to emit light.

“Ah, aah..my...my child...!!!”

The voice of the man holding a child rose above the others.

The baby was unconscious, barely breathing. The body had turned into a globe of light and disappeared.

In the arms of the man remained only the tiny clothes the baby was wearing.

“What!?”

All witnesses to the baby's transformation began to pound on the magic circle's barrier with more intensity.

Some were pounding so fiercely that blood started dripping from their fists, but even so they did not let up.

“This...can't...”

“Goddamnit!! Don't go away, noooooo!!!”

No matter how powerful their blows were, however, the barrier did not budge.

It was a barrier that only someone on Wilhelm's level could have broken through, after all. For average citizens without any special power, there was nothing they could do.

“Aaaah, AAAAHHHHHHH!!!”

One by one, the prisoners fell to their knees, screaming.

In their arms rested only the bones of those they had tried to protect with their lives.

“BEEEEEEAUTIFUUULLLL!!!! That expression, that moment when hope turns into despair! This is art, yes art! These howls, this anguish! Delicious!! Such delicacies!!”

Scoruas spread his arms wide and cheered loudly.

It was a one-man standing ovation, after he had seen a memorable show.

What he was ecstatically watching, though, were the last moments of people who had lost the will to live, between tears and sobs, drenched in fresh blood.

As it had happened to their loved ones, they too turned into light and disappeared.

As all its prisoners vanished, a small part of the magic circle glowed red. It was a minuscule change, small enough that it could be considered just imagination.

“Good grief.”

Adara shrugged his shoulders while looking at Scoruas, his expression still filled with twisted joy.

Adara could understand why Scoruas did what he had done, he just personally found it pointless.

Looking for more worthy sacrifices would be more effective. That was Adara’s line of thinking, and also why Hermie had been kidnapped.

“Hmm? Ooh. I see it was worth it to bring him here.”

Adara felt that the aura behind him had changed and turned around; as before Wilhelm was standing, motionless. The hand gripping [Vakira] was doing so much more tightly, while the mist enshrouding him would turn sometimes red and evaporate, only to return shortly and repeat the process. It appeared as if the mist

itself was burning.

Wilhelm was in a manipulated and unconscious state, but he had nevertheless reacted to the gruesome scene that he had witnessed.

It was clear proof that Wilhelm was fighting against Adara's control.

"Nice, nice, that's how I want you to be. How many more will die before you point that spear at me?"

Despite the possibility of the manipulation breaking off, the expression on Adara's face was of twisted joy, much like Scoruas'.

Not caring about how many would die for the sake of their pleasure was a trait the two demons had in common. Even if their likes and dislikes were different they were still both demons, the same type of creature.

Even if the yoke restraining them had been removed, their first priority had not changed. The difference was in the process towards achieving that goal.

It takes many forms. For Adara, the endless thirst for stronger opponents, so strong it almost exceeded the Miasma Lord's resurrection as priority. For Scoruas, the "pointless" staging of shows of despair and the superiority felt towards its own comrades.

In fact, Scoruas did not even recognize the existence of his fellow demons, unless they were Duke class or Grand Duke class, like him. Magnamuc, a Count class, was treated like an expendable pawn.

"Oh my, is that him rebelling to your control? Quite an energetic boy, isn't he."

In the magic circle, figures covered in black cloaks were leading humans inside, roughly the same number as before.

Scoruas moved his look away from that operation and looked at Wilhelm.

"How many times have I told you? It's all about quality. Don't you try to steal him though, am I clear?"

“I would never do something so petty, my friend. I am interested in the taste of his despair, though...”

Scoruas licked his lips. All demons fed on humans’ negative emotions, but among them Scoruas possessed exceptional hunger.

It was difficult to define the quantity of food like “human’s negative emotion”, but still it was not something that could be consumed without limit.

The quantity of energy that could be absorbed and stocked depended on each demon’s level, rank and individual characteristics.

Scoruas was one of the Grand Duke-class demons that boasted the highest capacity for energy absorption.

“Looking at him reminds me...what happened to the ghouls headed to Sigurd? You were there too, weren’t you?”

Scoruas inquired, his expression genuinely looking like he had forgotten everything about that until now.

He hadn’t supported Hermie’s kidnapping directly, but it was Scoruas who sent the monsters to Sigurd.

“Ah, they didn’t actually do anything. They got stomped out by the guy in the ambush who had transformed into the priest.”

Adara spoke casually, with no regard to their fallen comrades. It was not even clear if there was any sense of camaraderie among them.

“I put a little trick inside the Megurade I sent with them too, how did that go?”

Powering monsters with miasma was an easy feat for a demon. They could turn monsters more obedient and resilient.

Scoruas knew that no average chosen one could have matched Megurade’s vitality and offensive ability. He had predicted that even if it couldn’t destroy Palmirack, it would have laid waste to at least half of the city.

“It’s in the powered form...I didn’t watch until the end because I could have been found, but it was dangerous. They were accompanied by a divine beast! It’s as strong as me and you, possibly more, that’s for sure.”

While talking, Adara’s smile twisted even more than when he was talking about Wilhelm. It was almost strange that he didn’t confront the monster then and there.

“...oh, another thing. There were some powerful people there too, but I knew one of them.”

“Oh, that’s interesting. Who was that?”

“Schnee Raizar. You’ve heard of her too, haven’t you? She was under a High Human once.”

“Oh, she was there? I did hear that Tsuki no Hokora disappeared, now that you mention it. I thought it had been wiped off by someone. After all, there are some nasty demons that even she couldn’t deal with by herself. And I bet plenty have a bone to pick with her.”

“Haha, like you’re one to talk.”

Adara replied, always a grin on his face.

He and Scoruas were not enemies at present; demons generally allied with other demons if they served the same Miasma Lord. They were also never in good terms with demons serving other Miasma Lords.

Scoruas had actually slayed several Marquis and Count-class demons who served a different Miasma Lord.

When monsters are subjected to miasma, they can transform into demons, albeit rarely. Ever since the game era, that type of demon is called mutant-type.

The demons Scoruas had slain were indeed followers of the mutant-type Miasma Lord.

Of course, doing so would create hate and resentment among other mutant-type

demons; Scoruas had already been targeted several times.

“That’s the last thing I want to hear from you. Aren’t all other Grand Dukes the same? Demons with strong individuality, like you and me, don’t care in the slightest. What I kill are those boring things which can only follow their instincts.”

“That’s true too. Well, I just wanted to say that Schnee Raizar and her party might come here, so keep it in mind.”

“Understood. Hehe, Schnee Raizar...what will your despair taste like...?”

“You really never change, do you...I’m going back to my room, contact me if anything happens.”

Adara retreated back to the room assigned to him, leaving the drooling Scoruas behind. Wilhelm followed him, in complete silence.

After some time, screams filled the cave again.

C h a p t e r 3

縛めからの解放

THE NEW
GATE

CHAPTER 3

“I have a question, does anyone know where exactly the coastal cave is supposed to be?”

A few days had passed since they left Sigurd.

While driving the carriage and using the skill 【Clairvoyance】 to see the road ahead, Shin looked at the coastline and asked this question to the other passengers.

The map only offered vague indications about the place, so Shin asked for more precise directions from Schnee or Shibaid, who were likely to know.

“The lay of the land looks different from the last time I came. There should be a crag in the vicinity.”

“I remember it too. I cannot see any crags around here though...”

Shibaid and Schnee, who were also using 【Clairvoyance】 to inspect the surroundings, gave their answers.

Shin too was looking intently, but he could only see the coast extending further, with no trace of any place resembling a cave entrance.

“Can you remember if there was any landmark?”

“No, I can’t say I do.”

“Nor do I. Nothing stood out in particular.”

“...by the way, when did you last see it?”

Shin expressed this question after remembering the two’s longevity.

“I think it was roughly 300 years ago.”

“As for me, it was probably 400 years ago.”

“I see....”

Hearing this, Shin reflected that the cave as a whole could have very well disappeared.

On land, in the seas, in the skies; monsters were everywhere in this world. There were more than enough monsters capable of destroying caves as well.

Even without monster intervention, it wouldn't be weird for the cave to disappear naturally and the geography to change, after 300 whole years.

“Hmm....”

“(Yuzuha, what response are you getting?)”

“(It's close, but something's weird.)”

Shin asked Yuzuha for help, trusting her tracking technique, but received an unclear answer.

After inquiring further via Mind Chat, Shin learned that Yuzuha could detect the presence nearby, but couldn't tell in which direction.

It seemed Yuzuha couldn't express herself well because of her young age; Shin arrived at the conclusion that something was interfering with her tracking ability.

“(What do you think about what Yuzuha said?)”

“(A possible cause is miasma. After all, it can disrupt people's senses, so it could be influencing Yuzuha's skill negatively.)”

Shibaid speculated that the cause was miasma. High-level Demons are more resistant to magic skills, so Yuzuha's skill could have been affected too.

“(I agree. Yuzuha's powers have not fully matured yet, and there's a possibility of a barrier being erected around the ritual site.)”

Schnee expressed a valid point of view too.

The demons and the faction members would likely try to eliminate the smallest chance of being found. It was natural to think that they had set up concealment mechanisms to distance people and keep the location hidden.

“The demons must be close, no doubt about it.”

Tiera spoke while Shin and Schnee were completely silent, talking through Mind Chat.

“You can tell?”

“The demons’ miasma is slightly different from the one born from human emotion. It’s something I felt when I directly faced with a demon, so I am positive of it.”

“This means that there’s a high chance of this being the right place. That already is great news. Let’s try running along the coast, first. I will go to the left, you take the right, Yuki.”

After listening to Tiera, Shin voiced his thoughts.

“Understood. We can cover considerable distance even in a short time, so...let’s run for 30 minutes, and if we don’t find anything we come back here, what do you say?”

“That sounds good. We aren’t certain that the cave lies alongside the coast, after all.”

Shin nodded to Schnee’s proposal.

If Shin and Schnee ran at their full speed, they could easily outmatch even a sports car. They cannot perform detailed inspections while running, but their boosted dynamic vision would not miss something as large as the entrance to a cave.

Even if it had been concealed, Shin and Schnee both have skills to detect traps set by scouting units as well as hidden doors. It would be easier, on the contrary, to find if something had been tampered with.

“It looks like I can’t be of much help in a search like this.”

Konig's tone was slightly frustrated.

"We'll be back in under one hour, even if we can't find anything. We are already close to the ritual site, so there's the possibility of being attacked; please keep watch."

"Understood. Be careful, then."

The carriage was stopped just before the coast, then Shin and Schnee ran off in opposite directions.

Shin was running at a certain distance from the waves, sand rising up in his wake.

The seaside scenery continued unchanging, while on the other side trees and plants were blowing past him.

"No difference in the response?"

"Kuu, I don't know..."

Shin talked to Yuzuha, riding on his shoulder, while trying to detect any suspicious signs. He had brought her along to check if the response would change along the way.

"It doesn't feel like we're getting farther either?"

"Kuu? It kind of feels like we're getting farther...kind of feels like it's the same..."

The disruption was still having effect, apparently.

Judging from Yuzuha's words, Shin thought that there might be nothing in this direction, but he decided to keep going forward some more, to be sure.

"Kuu!! We're far now!!"

After roughly 10 minutes, Yuzuha spoke up. The change in the response caused by the increased distance could not be disrupted, apparently.

"So Schnee had the right direction. Let's go back, hold on tight!"

Shin rushed back, kicking up storms of sand behind him. Supporting Yuzuha, dragged and blown around by the wind pressure, with his left arm, Shin retraced his steps to the starting point.

“Kuu!! So fast!”

“I don’t have to inspect the surroundings now!! And I’ll go faster still!”

Shin had already confirmed that there was nothing to note on the path, so he increased the speed of his return.

As the sand made it hard to run, he proceeded where the terrain was harder. While running, he contacted Schnee via Mind Chat.

“(Shin here. It looks like the direction you took was the right one. As I ran, the enemy’s response grew farther. There’s the possibility of the enemy being on the move too, so better pay attention to the sky too.)”

“(Understood. If they have been moving, I will track them down.)”

“(I’m counting on you. I’ll tell Shibaid and the others to head your way. Contact me if anything happens.)”

Shin then closed the Mind Chat for the time being.

To track down someone without being noticed, Schnee’s job, “Kunoichi”, is the ideal one. It combines mobility, secrecy and a rich variety of tracking skills.

Even if she were to be found out, defeating Schnee and the reinforced [Blue Moon] she was equipped with was a feat for few. Even if she were to face an opponent stronger than her, she had the right skills and items to ensure she could escape.

“The problem is how many demons we’ll have to deal with.”

After informing Shibaid of the situation via Mind Chat, Shin thought about the enemy forces.

Demons become more and more human-like the higher their rank is, and their power

grows accordingly. Judging from the silhouette Tiera saw at Palmirack, it was safe to assume that there was at least one Duke or higher class demon.

Duke class demons possessed intellect on par with humans. They would not appear by themselves without making contact with other demons, as it would happen in a game.

As there were former players too, it wouldn't be strange if they cooperated with other demons, based on the information they had acquired.

"If they still operated per the game's settings, we'd only have to deal with the one Tiera saw...based on what Schnee said, it seems the demons became active recently, so maybe the ones active are still few?"

At the very least, Shin was positive that the three demons called Lords had not awakened. The Miasma Lords release intense miasma around them from the very moment of their awakening, then start immediately raising their armies.

During the game era, Shin had seen several guilds pooling their forces to fight against the Miasma Lords' armies'.

If such a thing had already happened, the continent he was in now wouldn't have been left intact.

There was the possibility that they had awakened in other continents, but the Golden Company's Berett wouldn't have forgotten to mention something so important; it was a possibility they could rule out.

"In any case, we can't do anything if we don't find the entrance first."

Shin saw the carriage rushing on the beach and stopped thinking for the moment.

He caught up to the carriage, avoiding the sand it was kicking up in its wake. While running alongside it, Shin waved to Tiera, the current coachman.

"Eh!? You're back already?"

"Yeah, I'm getting on."

Shin casually replied to the surprised Tiera and hopped on the carriage.

The carriage was running at high-speed despite the difficulty of the terrain, but inside no vibration could be felt, a quiet in deep contrast to its wild run. Its speed capabilities were so incredible that, at this point, the only thing the carriage had in common with other similar vehicles was the shape.

“OK, things will get serious now. Tiera, let me check, you are equipping your accessories, right?”

“Of course. Armor, weapons, everything is powered up as much as my stats allow, right? Well, I’m the weakest of the group, so I understand if you’re worried.”

The party didn’t know exactly how powerful their opponents would be this time, and Tiera’s level had increased, so her equipment had been renewed.

She wore a corset-like leather armor with a dark green jacket draped over it, brown hot pants and combat boots adorned with silver feathers. On her arms, arm protectors made with lustrous beast skin were equipped.

The added bonuses had boosted Tiera’s stats much higher than before.

Tiera was a bit concerned that the current equipment emphasized her chest area more than the old one, but it was the best piece of equipment she could wear at the moment, so she couldn’t really complain.

Her weapons too, obviously, were different.

Despite this equipment power-up however, she couldn’t help thinking about that her own abilities were much lower than the others.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. Among high-rank demons, there are plenty that even chosen ones have no hope of defeating. I told Schnee to not fight unless necessary because there is the possibility she might lose too.”

Shin’s voice was a whisper when he mentioned the part about Schnee.

“Master could...lose?”

Tiera was watching forward, but couldn't help turning a surprised look towards Shin.

Schnee, after recovering [Blue Moon], her exclusive weapon, was much stronger than any average boss monster. She could also use the magic skills for wide-range destruction, now that their usage limitations had been partially lifted. It was hard to think of someone less fitting for the word "defeat".

Even so, demons are not to be underestimated.

"Well, with me and Shibaid around too I doubt we'll easily fall in that much danger. We have Kagerou too."

Saying this, Shin looked at Kagerou, who was pulling the carriage.

In a way, Shin had something much more dangerous than Kagerou or the demons resting on his shoulder, saying "kuu kuu"...but no one seemed to worry for now.

"Sir Shin, if you have returned it means the enemy response is on Lady Yuki's side?"

Konig waited for Shin and Tiera to finish their conversation before talking. He had already heard from Shibaid the reason for the carriage's wild speed, so he was not concerned.

"That's correct. We don't know if it's the ritual site, but we will definitely find the silhouette Tiera saw at Palmirack."

"I see, hopefully she's all right."

Konig whispered the words to himself.



"(Schnee here. I found the entrance to the cave.)"

It happened less than 5 minutes since they started running.

The awaited communication came from Schnee.

“(Great! What does the entrance’s surroundings look like?)”

“(I cannot tell clearly without going closer, but it’s bizarre. It is not concealed in any way, there aren’t any of the usual traps that signal the presence of intruders, nor anyone standing guard. I checked with 【Magic Sonar】 , so I am positive it leads inside.)”

The joy of the discovery did not last long. After hearing Schnee’s words, Shin wondered if it wasn’t a totally unrelated, normal cave.

But the information he received after that placated his doubts.

【Magic Sonar】 was originally used to detect buried items and ore, but it could be adapted to search for hidden underground pathways and maps never visited before.

That was how Schnee could inspect the cave’s interior.

“We found the enemy’s hideout. It looks like the response’s target was heading back to base, then.”

After listening to Schnee’s report, Shin relayed the information to the other members in the carriage.

Konig was surprised at how easily they performed long-distance communication, but he seemed to know about Mind Chat, so he nodded in agreement.

Few adventurers are capable of using Mind Chat, but it wasn’t unusual for Shin’s party to be able to, or so concluded Konig.

“Are you sure about that!?”

“Yes, from Yuki’s observations, I think there’s no mistake. So please...stand back a little.”

Shin answered after pushing back Konig, who had unconsciously walked up a bit too close to him, a terribly stern look on his face.

Considering that there was a player among the enemies, they couldn’t completely

discard the possibility of an illusory trap that could deceive even Schnee; but if such a thing happened, they'd just have to praise the user's skill.

The work of an artisan who poured everything into trap making is something that not even those with scout as main job can see through easily.

"It doesn't look like there are traps set around the entrance, but just in case, in a little while we'll get off the carriage and walk. Konig, please take this."

Shin materialized a green cloak from an item card and passed it to Konig.

"What is this?"

"A magic item specialized in concealment effects. Please be aware that in exchange, its defensive capabilities are almost non-existent."

The item Shin had materialized was made with the thread produced by the larvae of the monster Mirage Butterfly, its name "Cloak of Hidden Threads".

The cloak was made with the threads of a monster which couldn't even be spotted without high level enemy detection or presence detection skills. True to such origins, simply wearing the cloak would render the user indistinguishable from their surroundings.

The equipment worn under it could be detected via sound or vibration, but if the enemy relied on visual information, it would have been difficult to find.

The carriage was stopped after a while and the party descended. Before starting to walk, Shin handed the same cloak to Tiera.

"This is yours. Kagerou...doesn't need it, I suppose."

"That's right. Kagerou can hide by himself, after all."

"Gruu."

As they looked at Kagerou, he growled once, then slipped into the shadows. As Tiera said, there was nothing to worry about.

Shin and Shibaid could also take care of it by themselves.

“Yuki should be in the woods up ahead. Let’s go there first.”

For added security, Shin increased their stealth capabilities with the skills 【Hiding】 and 【Silent Domain】 . Walking on the sand would leave clear footprints, so they walked on hardened ground, far from the sea.

At this point, one could worry about the carriage’s tracks; but maybe because the speed it moved at was not something normal for a carriage on sand, they were impossible to distinguish. It looked like the sand it kicked up in its wake had covered the tracks.

After storing the carriage and hiding the tracks left by its weight, they were done.

(I guess I should run a check.)

To be sure, Shin activated his full range of detection-type skills on the surroundings: 【Search】 , 【Sign Perception】 , and trap detection skills.

He couldn’t find any sign of traps or monsters, but he felt a certain chill in the air.

Something not caused by a skill, a sensation he couldn’t quite put into words.

(I can’t make it clear, either because it’s something caused by a technique different than a skill, or my ability isn’t high enough.)

Yet again, the concern that occupied his thoughts so often surfaced to mind.

No matter how high his stats might be, fighting in a game would not allow him to hide his presence or detect others’ presence like real masters can.

As for Shin, the only moment when he can do it is when engaged in a battle to the death with other humans.

For monsters’ presence, he can only rely on skills.

“Once this is over, I have to train again thoroughly...”

Shin wasn't sure why he thought something like that at a time like this. But he felt that he couldn't just leave things the way they were.

"Did you say something?"

"No, nothing."

Inside **【Silent Domain】**, normally all sound is canceled, but it is also possible to prevent all inside sound to leak outside. Nothing prevented normal conversation while inside the area of effect.

"Now then, the woods where Yuki is waiting should be in sight any moment...over there?"

Looking at Schnee's response as displayed on the map, Shin changed directions and proceeded. After five minutes, trees started appearing here and there, and around ten minutes later, they arrived in an area of thick vegetation.

"There she is."

Schnee too, had detected Shin's presence, so she had sent them a signal from the woods. Members of the same party could still see and hear each other, even if others couldn't.

"Did anything happen before we arrived?"

"No, no one came out or went inside. The entrance is over there."

Everyone looked in the direction Schnee pointed at.

"I see, so this is why we couldn't see it. Maybe it's an entrance they aren't aware of? It does look like they're using the coastal cave though."

"That would explain why no one is standing guard."

What the party was looking at was the sea. But Shin and Shibaid could see a cave

entrance, of roughly 3 mels, under the water.

As Schnee said, there was no sign of guards or traps.

“Er, all I can see is the sea...?”

“Same for me.”

“It looks like the entrance is underwater. It’s located around 20 mels from the coastline, no mistake. In that exact point, the sea becomes suddenly much deeper. Rather than entrance, I supposed it’s better to call it a 3 mels hole.”

Shin related what he had seen to Tiera and Konig, who lacked the ability to see through water.

No one would come swimming or fishing in a beach infested by monsters, so normally it would have probably never been found.

“Under the sea?”

“Yes. The regular entrance is probably somewhere else. This is clearly a hidden entrance, perfect for our infiltration plan.”

If Shin’s prediction was correct, it was a great stroke of luck for the party. Finding a route the enemy wasn’t aware of didn’t happen often.

“But could the enemy really be unaware of it? They probably thoroughly searched the area that they’re going to use as a base...”

“I agree with her.”

Tiera and Konig voiced their opinion.

“Yuki is inspecting the interior of the cave with a magic skill. It looks like the water will gradually recede as you proceed inside. We also have the means to fight underwater, so don’t worry. Rather, you’re already pretty much ready, Tiera.”

“Oh, so that’s what “it” was for.”

Tiera seemed to realize something after hearing Shin's words. As they were going to a location near the sea, a certain enchantment was placed on her equipment.

"What is this "it", Lady Tiera?"

"Among all armor enchantments, there's one that changes the armor's shape, to allow the user to act underwater. It's attached to Tiera's armor, and I checked that it was working."

There are skills that boost the user's movement underwater, but in case the user is wearing heavy full-body armor, they aren't exactly useful.

The user would not have difficulty swimming, but simply sink.

As long as the skills are active, the user wouldn't drown. But that's the whole extent of what they can do.

Even if the user was wearing light gear, stat debuffs would be applied to movement, attack and defense.

That is what would happen if one acted underwater with above-ground equipment in THE NEW GATE.

In order to swim like a fish, specific preparations and training were required; first of all, applying the enchantment 【Shapeshift】 to the equipment.

"Along with the shape, do mass and defense power change as well?"

"There's often more skin exposure, in your case, Konig, a special membrane with the same defense power and durability as your armor would envelop your body, so there's no actual change of defensive power. As for the mass...well, it becomes absurdly lighter. I don't really know the reason why, though."

To put it simply, armor enchanted with 【Shapeshift】 would turn into swimwear.

A defensive membrane would then cover the exposed parts, protecting the user from enemy attacks.

In this state, attack speed with weapons would be nearly the same as on land, so it was possible to fight as well as on ground, after getting used to it.

Those who become used to fighting underwater can swim freely, like penguins or even mermaids.

However, a problem that during the game era could be explained with “that’s just how it works” can’t be taken care of so easily, now that the game has become reality. Why does armor turn into swimwear only? What happens to the mass? Shin had no explanation to offer.

Incidentally, the type of swimwear the armor changes into is decided automatically when the enchantment is placed on the armor, and randomly too.

There were myriads of possible results; most of them were orthodox types, the risqué ones were so rare they were considered jokes.

“Generally, the armor changes into swimwear as one enters the water. It’s also possible to change shape at will. I can explain more once the enchantment is placed on your armor, Konig.”

“By the way, what is this “swimwear” you mentioned? Equipment for underwater use?”

“Yes, well, something like that. It looks like plain clothes, though.”

“Clothes? Hmm...the world of skills is complex indeed...”

Konig didn’t seem to understand well what the words “clothes to use in water” meant. He rubbed his chin, lost in thought.

“You’ll understand once you wear it. This enchantment can be applied immediately, so please stay still for a moment.”

Having said this, Shin applied **【Shapeshift】** to Konig’s armor, which shone brightly and transformed into a pair of swimming trunks. Only [Haufer] didn’t change shape and was resting at Konig’s waist as before.

“Th, this...does this really have any defensive power!?”

“Don’t worry. I was the one to propose this, so I’ll show you in practice; please try to slash me.”

“I, I see.”

Shin changed his equipment’s shape. His swimwear was similar to what an athlete would wear, tightly fitting and with little water resistance.

As Shin put his arm forward, Konig -with some hesitation- did as he was told, and lightly swung [Haufer] towards Shin’s arm.

Before colliding with Shin’s arm, however, it was stopped by something; the blade could not reach the skin.

“I see, despite how it may look, there’s no reason to worry about defense.”

Konig tried on his own arms, verifying again the presence of the protective film.

“Shin and I shall go on a first inspection. We have to factor in the underwater sea currents as well, there could be unexpected dangers.”

Schnee talked when she had judged Shin and the party’s preparations to be complete.

As they had already discussed what to do beforehand, no one had objections to raise.

“I’m going first. Keep watching the surroundings and follow me.”

“Yes.”

As Schnee stepped on the beach, her equipment changed shape.

The white sunlight was now shining on her candid skin.

Schnee’s swimsuits shape was a light blue bikini and a pareo, covering her left leg up to the knee. The pareo was longer on the left leg’s side, while the right leg was almost completely bare.

They were on a mission in enemy territory, to rescue the victim of kidnapping, so no one's eyes were overly stolen by the elf's swaying chest.

(If only the circumstances were different, I'd have enjoyed a swim in the sea...)

You blasted demons...! With this slight feeling of resentment, Shin dove against the waves under water.

Schnee followed him immediately.

They could see several mels ahead, thanks to the water's transparency. It was Shin's first time swimming after the game had become reality, so he took his time to get used to the water.

(Nothing feels off, for now.)

He had fought several times in his current body, and he had become quite apt at controlling its strength too.

He didn't feel like he was borrowing someone else's body and could swim as easily as he could during the game era. It was not a mysterious sensation as the one born by magical power, so he assumed it was him getting used to the body.

"No problem breathing either. Schnee, can you hear me?"

After activating **【Dive X】**, Shin talked to Schnee.

It was a support skill for underwater movement, which if leveled up would lessen the negative stat changes derived from underwater action. It made it possible to breathe and talk too, thus allowing normal communication.

At low levels it would only last for roughly 10 minutes, but at the highest level, X, it allowed the user to spend a full day in water, without breaks.

"Yes, it looks like we can talk normally too."

Schnee's words reached Shin's ears. No noise disturbed them, it was just like speaking on ground.

“Let’s go then.”

After confirming that the skill was working properly, Shin and Schnee headed towards the entrance of the cave.

There was no sign of human or monster presence in the surroundings.

“There really isn’t anything around here...”

“This utter lack of defenses almost makes me think that they could be trying to lure us in...”

Shin acknowledged Schnee’s concern and used 【Magic Sonar】 , 【Search】 , and 【Sign Perception】 to inspect the interior of the cave more deeply and widely.

However, there was no sign of an ambush. The terrain itself was not suitable for ambushing.

“Let’s go a little bit further, if there really is nothing dangerous we’ll call the others and proceed together. We have no way of knowing if they are aware of our movements or not, after all. Let’s keep our eyes peeled and go on.”

“That’s the only way, I suppose.”

There was no end to their suspicions, so they decided to cast them away for the moment. Using precious time and risking putting Hermie in more danger was definitely not worth it.

The two entered the cavern and proceeded, wary of any traps.

“There’s someone.”

“It appears they haven’t noticed us yet.”

After roughly 10 minutes, Shin and Schnee had reached a small clearing in the cave, which housed a small lake. The path they had followed ended at the lake, but according to the map the body of water did not lead outside the cave.

Judging from the light shining on the water and the response from 【Sign Perception】 , one person was in the lake, where the water was more shallow.

Shin, who had entered the lake without noise, activated 【Hiding】 and poked his head from the surface of the lake.

There he found several globes of light floating above the lake and, with her back to Shin, a woman submerged in water up to her hips.

The light globes were produced by the Light-type magic skill 【Instant Light】 . It was a skill to create simple shining globes with no offensive or defensive capabilities, used often when exploring dark caves.

The woman was naked from her waist up. She was rather short, with white hair. Her body could not be defined easily too; it's like a thin boy or a petite girl.

Seeing her, Shin had a hunch and used 【Analyze】 .

“Milt - Level 255 - Conjurer”

“Affected by : 【Charm X】 , 【Sleep VIII】 , 【High Confusion IX】 ”

(Just as I thought...but what's going on here...?)

Not even Shin could have predicted the status ailments.

First of all, the 【Sleep】 status would force the affected to sleep, preventing any movement.

Yet Milt was moving normally, as if nothing was affecting her.

Shin, however, was not completely unfamiliar with such a state.

Cardinal Greyl, who had warped Shin and Rionne from Bayreuth to the Sacred Place, was affected with 【Charm】 and 【Confusion】 in the same way.

The cardinal had managed to operate the console even in such a state. Apparently,

even under the effect of such status conditions, one's consciousness partly remained.

Shin thought that the same thing was likely happening to Milt now.

That considered, what was the next step to take...? Shin reflected.

Milt was Hermie's kidnapper. There was no doubt that she was a member of "Ouroboros' Hollow".

Unmistakably, she was to be considered an enemy.

Additionally, she did not have anything equipped now; her defensive powers were at their lowest levels.

If Shin attacked her by surprise, he would have certainly been able to finish her.

"(It's Hermie's kidnapper, correct? Do you think we can subdue her now, without causing a commotion?)"

"(We could probably capture her, but she's a former player too. Is it possible to use Mind Chat even under paralysis?)"

"(Yes, it's possible. If we leave her asleep, we could make sure she never contacts her allies, though.)"

"(The problem is, she's already affected by **【Sleep】**. Since she can move in that state, it's probably impossible to keep her asleep. It would be difficult to keep her unconscious too. If she can use Mind Chat, restraining her would be meaningless. Which means...)"

...the only way is to kill her.

Without voicing this thought, Shin looked again at Milt.

Schnee looked at Shin, but with an uneasy look in her eyes.

(This is a situation impossible in the game, and I have no solution...then, why do I feel that there's still time...?)

Such an inexplicable sensation left Shin uncertain on how to move for several seconds.

Killing her was only in case she was an enemy. However, Milt was clearly not lucid, so Shin couldn't decide to regard her as an enemy.

“.....who goes there?”

Just a few seconds had passed. As if she was waiting for that moment, a soprano-like voice resounded in the space previously dominated only by the sound of water.

Milt's red eyes were unmistakably looking at Shin and Schnee. Yet even if they were looking in their direction, her gaze seemed to be lost in space.



“...eh? You’re...Shin?”

“!?”

Shin was surprised to hear his name from Milt’s lips.

His face was visible only from the eyes and above. 【Analyze】 couldn’t be used when the target’s face wasn’t completely visible.

Milt was one of the top players among those caught in the death game. It wouldn’t be strange for her to identify Shin via 【Analyze】 , but it was a mystery how she had found out it was him before even trying that skill.

“(I will deal with her. I don’t know if Milt noticed your presence too, but it’s best if you stay hidden.)”

“(Understood...her spirit’s condition is abnormal too, please be careful.)”

Shin nodded without turning back and emerged from the water as naturally as he could, in order to keep Milt’s focus on him.

His eyes never left Milt.

“How did you know it was me?”

“I have practiced spirit techniques focusing on the water element, after all. My Undine is a dear friend, and you were underwater. I don’t think I need to explain further.”

“Ah, a technique that wasn’t in the game...no, I should stop thinking in these terms.”

Shin didn’t know what spirits were. He discarded that opinion, reminding himself to stop thinking with a game-like frame of mind.

“I’m glad you understood so quickly. I too have something to ask you, can I? I didn’t contact the others, so rest easy.”

“Well isn’t that grand. What do you want to know?”

Milt's expression became stern after Shin's question. After staring at Shin for several seconds, she spoke.

"Are you really Shin?"

"At the very least, I think I am. I don't know if it'll be enough proof, but I remember the battle when I cut you down."

Shin talked about his final battle with Milt. Some of the information he mentioned was only known to them.

"I see, you really are Shin...but if you are in this world, then it means you died? Did someone kill you? Or was it a monster?"

"No one killed me. I was pretty surprised myself when I got here."

"I bet. I was completely lost too, at the beginning."

Shin continued the conversation while studying Milt's reactions. Time passed, but no other presence was entering his field of perception.

Rather, Shin noticed that Milt's way of talking had changed. Her polite speech was gradually turning into a somewhat childish one.

"You came here to destroy the ritual, I guess?"

"Who knows."

"You don't need to hide it. I'm sure you did. The Shin I know would never ignore something so cruel. Because Shin is scary....and....kin...d...."

"....Milt?"

Shin called to Milt when her words started to sound feverish. She had been talking happily until a moment ago, but her expression had gradually turned into a grimace of pain.

"Ah, aaah...Shi...n...? It can't...be....I'm, dea.....d...? Aaah...Shin...Shinshinshinshinnn!!"

Milt started moving while repeating Shin's name.

Creating ripples in the water, she moved next to Shin in an instant. Even if her mental state was abnormal, her physical body remembered her movements and reproduced them perfectly.

A deranged smile was on her face.

"I felt something was off...so I was right."

After muttering a curse, Shin prepared to fight back. He caught her right hand, which was aiming for a palm strike, with his left hand, then stopped her left knee strike with his right hand.

Milt, thus unable to move one arm and leg, tried to kick Shin with her right leg. Shin let go of her limbs and dodged the kick aimed at his chin.

He had cast **【Cure】** to heal her status ailments, but black mist had covered the attacking Milt's body; the magic skill had not affected her.

However, Shin's **【Cure】** had dispelled most of the black mist. Using it one more time would have likely generated the desired effects.

Possibly because of the mist's disappearance, Milt's expression started to seem confused. She had put distance between them, as if scared by something, and started to attack randomly, like a complete beginner.

Shin drew closer to Milt, while nullifying the continuous magic attacks with his innate resistance.

"I wan...ted..wanted...to see yo....where....fight...sleepy...scary..."

The words coming out of Milt's mouth were scattered, broken. Shin thought she was reliving memories of the death game.

His assumption came from the knowledge of her reason for being so obsessed with fighting.

“...am I, alive? I will, wake up? No....if so...then...”

Milt’s next words cleared all of his remaining doubts.

“Someone, please.....kill, me.”

“I refuse.”

Milt’s words left her lips as tears streamed down her cheeks, but Shin refused her.

He stopped both of her arms with his right hand, then grabbed her head with his left hand.

“Come back to normal already!”

The skill he used blew away all the mist haunting Milt’s body.

He had infused more magic power in this second 【Cure】 , which easily blew past the mist’s resistance and healed Milt’s status ailments.

Milt’s status was now normal. However, possibly because of the mental burden, she had lost consciousness.

Shin couldn’t leave her lying naked like that, so he materialized a mantle and laid it on her.

“If even someone her level ended up manipulated, there are demons on a whole other level than the one in Bayreuth.”

“A Duke class, maybe? Or even...”

“Could be a Grand Duke.”

Milt’s stats were high enough that, with the right equipment, she could fight toe to toe with Kagerou. Being a poison user, she had trained her resistances to status ailments too.

Despite that, she had been affected by powerful status ailments.

Whoever had put Milt under their control was someone with abilities equal or superior to hers.

“Hn...”

While Shin and Schnee were talking, Milt mumbled softly.

As she slowly opened her eyes, maybe because she noticed the presence of people in the vicinity, she looked towards Shin.

“Eh...Shin...?”

“Hey there, you’re awake?”

“Ah, yes....eh? Shin!? Why!? Aaah! Why am I naked?!?”

Milt fully regained consciousness, slightly panicking after noticing her state. She apparently had no recollection of recent events and was rightfully confused, voicing questions such as “Where am I!?” or “Why is my body all sticky!?”

“Er....anyway, let’s calm down, OK?”

“Shin, why are you naked too...? C-could it be that you have taken advan--?!”

“I haven’t!! And look better, I’m wearing a swimsuit! I’m not naked!”

Shin couldn’t help but interrupt Milt’s words, whacking the girl looking up at him, wrapped in the mantle, over the head.

“Hitting her on the head in her current state would be too much, I think...?”

“Nah, no problem if it’s her.”

“Uuh...you’re merciless...”

Shin looked over at Schnee, showing her that there was nothing to worry about, then turned to Milt again.

Milt had somewhat calmed down, thanks to Shin's chop, and focused on understanding her current situation and whereabouts.

"So have we calmed down now?"

"My head hurts, though. But this lack of mercy is just like you, Shin. First of all, could you tell me what I was doing here, and naked?"

"Before that, tell me how much you remember. You just jumped at me, you know. Well, I guess you could wear something first."

Shin demanded an explanation from Milt, arguing that he had the right to ask first.

Milt put some clothes on, finally looking presentable, and started talking while massaging her head.

"....and that's all I can remember. It's all blurry after that...I felt my consciousness return fully when I saw your face in front of me."

Milt explained how she had joined 'Ouroboros' Hollow' in her search of strong opponents; she had visited this cave in an escort mission for the Summit Faction, but then her memories became muddled.

She had surely met someone, but couldn't remember who it was.

"I see, they basically did what they wanted with you."

"Aah...I have no excuses."

Milt's head hung in shame for letting something like that happen to her.

Having fallen to someone's manipulation had hit her deep.

"Shin, you're going to rescue the person I kidnapped, right?"

"Yes, along with someone else though."

"Could you take me with you? I have to put an end to what I caused, with my own

hands.”

Her tone of voice was calm, but Shin felt that Milt was angry.

She had a peculiar code even in her PK days; she would only start a fight to the death if the opponent agreed to it. Even if she had been manipulated, she probably didn't want to blame others for something she had done.

“More fighting power is always welcome, but there are people close to the girl you kidnapped on our side, you know?”

“That's fine. Or rather, that means I should do it even more. I only kill when I am attacked with killing intent, or the opponent agrees to a duel to the death. I dislike and have no intention of assisting kidnapping or blackmailing. I had no control over what I did this time, but it doesn't change that it was me. I have to make amends.”

Milt's expression stiffened.

Shin saw it and thought that she wasn't trying to deceive them.

“(Schnee, what do you think?)”

“(At the very least, I don't think she's acting. Because her contract spirit seems to have placated too. It was probably concerned about its master's abnormal state.)”

After hearing Schnee's opinion via Mind Chat, Shin thought that it could be a good idea to bring Milt along.

It would mean to add a former enemy among their ranks, but Shin knew Milt's personality; he was sure that even if they didn't bring her along, she would act on her own.

“Got it. You can come with us, and it'll be a great help if you cooperated with us. But only if you don't act on your own accord. If you stand in the way of our objectives, then I really won't have any mercy.”

“I know that well. Fighting against you is an extremely charming prospect, but I couldn't enjoy it in this situation.”

Milt seemed to understand that she wasn't actually trusted and nodded with conviction.

"No need to be charmed. We've wasted enough time, let's go back for now. You have 【Shapeshift】 attached, yes?"

"No problem, look."

Milt answered Shin's question and transformed her equipment.

Her battle wear, oriental styled with a great amount of skin exposure, changed shape adhering to Milt's body.

"A school swimsuit...but why..."

Milt's transformed swimwear left Shin at a loss for words. Like a good student, she even had "Milt" printed on the swimsuit's chest area.

Re-attaching the enchantment 【Shapeshift】 as many times as needed would allow the user to pick their favourite type of swimsuit.

For that reason, during the game era very few wore swimwear considered "for fetishists", like school swimsuits or string-type swimwear.

"Hehehe, I will let you know that this shape grants a 10% speed boost to underwater movement!"

"Who even programmed this..."

Shocked and defeated to learn of this surprising bonus, Shin swam back at high speed, his party in tow.

"I might as well introduce you, she's more or less my former support character, Schnee. She's strong, but don't get any weird ideas."

Thinking it weird to not do their introductions, Shin decided to do it first.

"And this is Milt. She's an advanced player they used to call "Milt the Poison Lolita"

during the game era.”

“Po, poison Lolita...?”

“Hey!! What kind of introduction is that!? I didn’t choose to be this short anyway!”

Shin had exposed Milt’s nickname in a completely casual manner.

Milt’s height was the same as her real body, 145 centimeters.

She had apparently used her real self’s face in the game, with her still innocent-looking features, more on the cute than the beautiful side.

However, her body was a junior high school student’s at most. It would be a bit of a stretch even to think of her as a high schooler.

One of VR’s characteristics was the inability to change significantly not only one’s facial features, but also one’s physique.

“She got that nickname because she looks like a lolita and is a poison user. They also called her stuff like “Mini Berserker”.”

“There’s always something saying how short I am ! My main job is conjurer after all, and I might be small but I’m not flat!”

Saying so, Milt pushed up her chest with her hands.

The swimsuit, which was already considerably stretched, changed shape under Milt’s hands.

Her chest had been “touched up” to the point that one could imagine she had went a little overboard when creating her avatar. Such symbols of maternity was already quite prominent in their natural state, but now they looked slightly lewd.

Added to Milt’s looks, this Lolita + Big breasts + School swimsuit combination created a very “dangerous” view.

“If you have time to act silly, then speed up. And once we get on land, stop messing

around.”

“First you reveal my nicknames, but then you ignore me, huh...reminds me of how cold the old Shin was.”

“It’s just your imagination. Do you feel any change in your condition, by the way?”

“Ah, no. I’m alright. Even if I was under control, I was practically sleeping. My head doesn’t hurt or spin. No problem even I’m poked fun at, like you just did.”

Milt had noticed that Shin had tried to annoy her on purpose and stopped complaining.

She didn’t look like she was forcing herself. Her HP and MP had not changed either and her status showed a complete recovery.

“Anyway, I have to applaud your lack of any reaction after seeing this physique of mine. And I thought that this kind of body would be more popular with boys than my real life one.”

What a shame...so muttered Milt, in a manner that made it hard to tell how serious she was.

Shin didn’t find Milt unappealing either. But he wasn’t the kind of person to react to nudity or sexiness in a situation like that.

“You’re a mystery as usual.”

“A woman of mystery, that’s who I am.”

“Don’t puff up your chest dressed like that. We’re almost there.”

Shin spoke while looking at the light filtering from above the water. The three had reached the shore in a few minutes.

“Sir Shin, who is this person?”

Their return had been slightly late, but the party had come back safely. Noticing the

added presence of Milt, though, spurred the question from Konig.

“Ah...I’ll explain, so please listen until the end.”

As Milt would join their entourage, her true identity had to be revealed.

Milt, above all, was Hermie’s kidnapper. If they hid the truth now, and it was revealed by a turn of events later, things would likely take an unfortunate turn, so it was decided to reveal the truth now.

“.....”

After the explanation, Konig remained in deep silence.

He had grabbed his blade’s hilt as he heard the newcomer’s name, but somehow Shin managed to explain to the end.

“You really don’t remember anything?”

After a long silence, Konig asked a question with a calm tone.

From Konig’s viewpoint, as one of the victims and Hermie’s personal guard, simply hearing “she was manipulated, there was no other way” was obviously not enough to convince him.

“I can’t make any excuses about that. But I too resent having been used that way. Shin saved me after all, so I want to show my gratitude. I know my words are less than convincing, but at least I am confident I could match a divine beast in battle.”

Milt spoke while looking directly at Konig. Her eyes expressed that she had no intention of backing out.

“I knew it would turn out like this...”

Shin had expected this development, so he carried Konig away, without missing a beat.

“Sir Shin, I do not mean to doubt you, but will this really be all right?”

“I know what you mean. But it would not be wise to act separately. You also know how strong she is, right?”

Konig was not in prime condition at the time, but Milt had easily bested him. Her stats were also higher than his.

Even using Shin’s map and detection abilities to the fullest, it would have been difficult to find Hermie, who was not a member of their party or a support character.

The cave interior, which was mostly artificial, was quite large, even considering only the extent they were aware of. They had to look for Hermie while avoiding traps and enemy eyes, definitely not an easy feat.

Even if they let Milt go, if she was found Shin’s party’s freedom of movement would be limited as well; and if a Grand Duke-class demon was among the enemy ranks, they would have to go confront it.

Considering that there were also chosen ones among the enemies, there was nothing to lose in having as much fighting power as possible.

“Well, if we used one of these we wouldn’t have to worry about betrayal.”

With these words, Shin pulled out one of the Submission Collars retrieved from Bulk’s room.

“Guh.”

Konig let out a frustrated grunt.

He too knew that Milt’s eyes were not lying.

Besides, he probably would not want to use the Submission Collar on someone who wasn’t some despicable villain, but had just been manipulated.

“...I suppose there is no other way.”

Konig cast away his personal feelings and agreed.

“My name’s Milt. My race is High Pixie and I’m a Conjurer. This is my dear Undine friend, her name is Nel. Anyway, everyone is so strong here! Why don’t we fight later?”

Milt introduced herself to the party while Shin was away. Although the last part was unnecessary.

After that, they heard from Milt all the information she remembered about the cave’s layout, to speculate where Hermie was held and the ritual would take place.

After all party members reviewed their roles, the party started moving.



“To think that it’s possible to speak underwater.”

Tiera muttered this comment while swimming next to Shin on their way towards the cave.

Her swimsuit was a brilliant green bikini, and a necklace imbued with the skill 【Dive V】 floated above her chest.



“Even though I’m using the same skill too, I have no idea how it’s possible to talk underwater though.”

“There’s no air forming around our mouths either, so it’s a mystery how we can breathe too. Well, thanks to this we can move through the water, so I suppose I’ll just accept not understanding how it works.”

The whole party was heading towards the underwater cave’s entrance.

Yuzuha and Kagerou were in tow, dog paddling behind them.

They passed the lake where Shin and Milt met and proceeded forward, wary of any traps or guards.

As long as Shin and Schnee made full use of their detection skills, only an exceptionally intricate trap could slip through their vigilance.

“There are a lot of dwellings and storage rooms in the shallow areas. I guess the more important parts are deeper?”

“Probably, yes. I remember I went down a fair distance. Even though this isn’t their headquarters, the Summit Faction is a large organization. They even reinforced the cave’s walls to prevent them from crumbling easily.”

“I should have guessed. When there are many holes, all it would take is just one earthquake to wipe it off the map.”

The walls were bumpy and uneven, but the path was wide enough for 4 adults to walk side by side.

There also were many large hall-like clearings, personal rooms, and storage rooms; if they had built so many without reinforcing the walls, they would have definitely crumbled sooner or later.

Shin’s party proceeded deeper and deeper while checking the map for the room they were looking for. Since they searched each floor they visited, their progress couldn’t be very fast.

“What’s this?”

Roughly 1 hour since they started their descent, Shin’s 【Magic Sonar】 picked up a larger clearing in the map.

It was far larger than the rooms used as storage rooms. It appeared that there was something in the back of it, but 【Magic Sonar】 couldn’t scan the room completely, so it was only partly displayed on the map.

“Could it be the ritual site?”

Schnee whispered softly.

“It could be. What do you say, Milt?”

“I think you guessed right. I do remember it was a large room.”

It was possible for Hermie to be imprisoned near the ritual site; Shin and the others proceeded downwards, while searching the surroundings even more carefully than before.

“....Shin.”

As they were descending, Shibaid called to Shin, who was walking next to him.

“What’s wrong?”

“It certainly looks like there are Grand Duke-class demons here.”

“I can’t pick up anything in my detection range, though...?”

“I can feel their fighting spirit. This stale, foul feeling...it’s a “War God”-type, no doubt about it.”

Shibaid’s eyes were fixed in one direction as they walked, his words filled with conviction.

Shin asked Schnee with his eyes, but she shook her head.

As Schnee had previously felt something other than miasma, Shibaid had probably felt something the other party members couldn't.

There was no proof for his words, but no one doubted Shibaid. Konig and Milt knew that it was not odd for those who dedicate themselves to battle to be able to feel the presence of other powerful warriors.

Tiera also did not say anything, probably because she too possessed a similar unique sense.

"A solo type, maybe. Hopefully there aren't raid types then."

The humanlike demons called "War God"-type, compared to raid-types, had fixed conditions to defeating them, so it was not impossible to take them down even when fought for the first time.

They were still powerful enemies, but considering the expected spent time and sustained damage to defeat them, they were still easier targets than others.

"We're almost at what could be the ritual site. Let's continue talking later."

The whole party shut their mouths at Schnee's warning.

The detection fields did not pick up anything in particular.

With Shin and Schnee leading, the party headed towards the place thought to be the ritual site.

"Kuu! This place is yucky!"

"Gruu!!"

Yuzuha and Kagerou suddenly became agitated. Their whole bodies' fur stood up, as if they were trying to intimidate something.

"What's wrong now?"

Yuzuha answered Shin's question, expressing her thoughts while stumbling on her

words.

According to her, this location was a node of Ley lines, but because of the miasma their original function was inhibited.

“You can feel it?”

“It’s the same as the place I was before, it feels sick here, kuu...”

The clearing seemed absolutely normal, but they soon realized that there was a very large magic circle drawn on the ground. The material reinforcing the walls and ground was clearly different from the other rooms too.

Apparently, this magic circle was part of what was negatively influencing the flow of the Ley lines that Yuzuha had talked about.

“The stench of blood is strong here, after all. Who knows what gruesome things they have been up to in here...after all they did to us, let’s show them what our craft can do.”

In case they couldn’t find Hermie, the party retraced part of the magic circle, in order to prevent it from activating.

Shin was not familiar with magic circles so large as to encompass a whole floor, so Schnee directed the operation.

“Okay then, time to see what’s ahead.”

After the modification of the magic circle was completed, the party assembled before the door leading beyond the ritual site.

It was a heavy door 4 mels high and 3 mels wide. It was locked as well, but before Shin’s party the lock was no different than a toy.

Shin and Shibaid pushed open the door, which clearly had to be guarding something important.

Maybe because it had been used with care, the door opened without so much as a sound. The scenery behind it, however, was something no one could have expected.

“Are you kidding me..”

Shin unconsciously muttered under his breath.

Before their eyes lied a gigantic crystal, roughly 10 mels tall. Its transparency was so high that it looked like artificially polished glass.

Because of that, the thing...rather, the living being inside the crystal could be clearly seen.

“Is that...Filma?”

Schnee whispered the name of the person in front of her eyes.

It was, without a shred of a doubt, Shin’s 2nd support character, Filma Tolmeya.



Filma Tolmeya.

Shoulder-length hair with a color between red and violet, the same color as the eyes of this High Lord.

However, that color could not be seen now as her eyes were closed.

Maybe because of her race’s longevity, or the special effect of the crystal might have possessed, she did not look at all different than how Shin remembered her, despite the fact that 500 years had passed.

Her chest, on par with Schnee’s, and the magical armor adorned in black and violet around her waist were shining as they did in the past.

“This is a crystal of...Drop of Erathem?”

Shin gazed at the crystal entrapping Filma, an expression of utter surprise.

In the game, he thought it was a simple magic crystal, but after using **【Analyze】** he had realized it was actually an ancient-class material named Drop of Erathem.

“Does this mean that she was hit by a burst of magical power of insane proportions?”

Depending on the size, this material would be polished and used as a weapon. If one ended up trapped in it, not even Filma could have broken out by herself.

Considering the fact that her appearance hadn't changed and that [Exvaine] no longer recognized Filma, the original owner, Shin speculated that the Drop of Erathem's magical power had cast a strong seal on Filma.

“Do you know her?”

“Yes, she's the comrade we weren't able to contact.”

Shin answered with a nod to Konig's question.

In this state, it was obviously impossible to communicate.

“Hey, Shin. The demons started being active recently, right?”

“So it seems. We don't know if it was because they couldn't act, or they simply didn't.”

Shin answered Milt's question based on the information he had gotten from Schnee.

“Do you think that this could be related somehow?”

Milt spoke while pointing at the crystal which imprisoned Filma. It appeared that Milt too felt something coming from it.

“...it's possible. Same for the miasma too, but a crystal as large as this found on top of the Ley line...it wouldn't be weird for a connection to be there, right?”

“That's right, I don't think there were any quests where you could find Drop of Erathem near Ley lines either.”

Drop of Erathem would form in locations where magical power accumulated. Places like Ley lines, where energy would always flow, were not suitable.

“Regarding miasma and Ley lines, though, something similar happened in another

place.”

Shin remembered what happened at the shrine where he met Yuzuha. What Shin now knew is that the demons had a certain reason to meddle with the Ley lines.

“(Kuu, I feel something powerful from under that rock. But that rock is yucky too.)”

Thanks to her deep connection with the Ley lines, Yuzuha could apparently clearly feel the power sealed under the crystal. She did not seem to know what a crystal was. Even such a precious item was a rock in Yuzuha’s eyes.

The usually curious Yuzuha wouldn’t move from Shin’s shoulder this time.

“Hey Shin, just what is this...?”

Tiera drew closer to Shin, who was lost in thought.

“It’s a peculiar item called Drop of Erathem. I’ve never seen one this large, though...”

Shin gave a simple explanation to Tiera, who looked at the crystal as if she saw an incredible thing. Even after hearing Shin’s words however, her expression remained clouded.

“What’s wrong?”

“The magic power trapped here...it’s tainted. Uugh...why...is this...”

Shin was concerned as Tiera’s behavior was rather unusual.

As if answering his doubts, Tiera put her right hand over her mouth and sat down. She held her own body with her left arm and, while it was shaking violently, tears started falling from her eyes.

“Wh-hey Tiera! What happened to you?”

Thinking that Tiera’s sudden change had been caused by a Mind-type skill, Shin quickly checked her status. There was no change, however, nothing to explain why Tiera had suddenly burst into tears.

“Tiera, please be strong. You must not lend them your ears.”

Schnee had noticed Tiera’s abnormal state, ran close to her and spoke to her in a calm, clear tone. She took Tiera’s head and turned it towards her, looking at her straight in the eyes.

“Master...this is, this is...”

“What have you felt?”

“I heard...screams. “Stop it, please save me...”. And another voice who heard them, and laughed...”

Tiera stringed words together, her body stiff, immobile.

Noticing the unusual situation, Shibaid and Konig too stopped searching the surroundings and listened to Tiera’s words.

“Sch...Yuki, what’s going on?”

“I suppose she heard the voices of the people that were killed here.”

Schnee spoke as she was calming Tiera, focusing on listening to their surroundings.

Elves had sharp senses, which apparently included their sixth sense as well.

“I cannot speak in detail, but Tiera’s sixth sense is more sensitive than other elves. I am not particularly sensitive to such influences, but still I can hear whispers. I suppose that a great number of people have been killed here.”

Schnee, her brow furrowed, caressed Tiera’s back.

“The presence that permeated the other room seems to be focused in this crystal. The magic circle that we changed before contained this mechanism too.”

“I see...even I feel there’s something wrong with this crystal. It could be the central point that’s casting an influence on the Ley lines.”

Listening to Yuzuha and Schnee, Shin started viewing the crystal's brilliance as something ominous.

"I suppose it is best not to touch it without the necessary preparations?"

"That's right. You can feel why if you go closer, the miasma stench is overwhelming."

Shin entrusted Tiera to Schnee and walked closer to the crystal, then nodded at Shibaid's words.

The crystal wouldn't originally be affected by the miasma, but if the latter's density was high, things would be different.

"If the Ley lines are tainted the miasma must be connected to it, I suppose it's better to purify it?"

Shin recalled the black mist that enveloped Milt's body during their battle. He now understood that the mist too was a kind of miasma.

"Kuu!"

"Please....! This is too cruel..."

Yuzuha howled, her fur straight, and Tiera pleaded, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Konig, I give you my apologies. We came here to save Lady Hermie, so giving priority to a comrade of mine could be truly disrespectful...but please, allow me to solve this situation first."

"...no, you do not need to apologize. Please do as you wish. If I overlooked something like this for her own sake, my Lady would not forgive herself, even if we could save her."

Shin mentioned his proposal to Konig, thinking that the latter would probably be opposed.

Contrary to Shin's expectations, Konig agreed to Shin's proposal after just a brief silence.

“Are you sure? The demons could notice our presence.”

“If it happens, it happens. I am Lady Hermie’s personal guard, but I also am a knight. I have a duty to protect the people. I do not possess any special sense, but I too feel something abnormal emanating from this crystal. They can’t be possibly plotting anything good with something like this. To save many, sacrificing the few is sometimes...necessary.”

He could not ignore such a source of misfortune for the sake of Hermie herself.

Konig spoke frankly, but Shin felt that he was forcing himself.

“Understood. I shall begin, then.”

Shin gave a small nod towards Konig and cast the Divine-type skill 【High Cure】 towards the crystal. It was the superior version of the 【Cure】 skill he had used on Milt, and it could heal multiple status ailments at once.

As it had happened to Milt, the miasma was overwhelmed by the light that Shin released and grew thinner.

“I guess it’s thicker here...then how about this!”

Shin decided that using only one hand would have taken too much time, so as he kept casting High Cure with his right hand, he raised his left hand towards the crystal and cast the Divine-type skill 【Purification】 .

The lights emitted by the two divine skills shone bright, as if filling the whole underground space.

In response, the miasma was pulsating in an eerie manner as if to resist the light.

Shin felt the rising of resistance, also increase the magical power in his both hands; the light emitted grew stronger.

Roughly 5 minutes later, the miasma had apparently finally reached its limits, and melted away in midair.

The crystal, free of the miasma's clutches, regained its original brilliance, and the whole party sighed in relief.

"The miasma vanished, right...?"

"Yes, it's okay. No one is suffering anymore."

"Kuu"

Tiera and Yuzuha replied to the words muttered by Shin.

The miasma that had tainted the crystal seemed to be completely gone.

"Hm?"

Shin, while looking at the crystal, raised his voice.

The crystal's surface was being gradually enveloped in red light.

"...did I do something wrong?"

"It's alright. The light covering the crystal is the light coming from the magical power of the person trapped inside."

Shin was concerned, but Tiera, who had come next to him, spoke with conviction.

Tiera continued by explaining how highly dense magical power appeared as if shining.

"I believe that as Filma was inside the crystal for a long time, the affinity between her magical power and the crystal grew. As the miasma disappeared, it became easier to see."

Schnee completed Tiera's explanation. Elves have high magic perception abilities, so they quickly realized what was happening.

After calming down, Shin could also faintly feel the presence of Filma's magic power.

"Shin, you sure have moments of panic sometimes. You didn't understand right away

because deep down you are really angry that your support character was used like this, right?”

“Well, yeah.”

“In this world, NPCs are people too after all. To be angry because the support characters, or should I say people, that you care so much about have been used is perfectly normal, I think.”

Being a former player herself, Milt understood what he felt. She nodded and whispered “That’s the Shin I know...” with a smile.

“You never change, do you...”

His head now cooled off, Shin sighed. He knew full well that he was mentally under pressure.

“No one would feel nothing after seeing others lay hands on one’s companions.”

Schnee spoke as if to defend him, but Shin silently shook his head.

“No, that was completely unexpected, but I should have at least inspected a little more. I’m sorry.”

Shin regretted the false step he took. No matter what happened, he had to keep his cool.

“(Kuu? It’s coming!!)”

“Whoa! What? What’s happening?”

Just when he regained some calm, Yuzuha suddenly shouted from Shin’s shoulder.

Paying no mind to Shin’s surprise, Yuzuha headed straight to the crystal.

“Kuu~~, Kuuh!”

Yuzuha flew to the point where the crystal made contact with the ground and growled.

Just then, a light glowing in golden and silver hues sprang forth, to be absorbed by Yuzuha's body.

The light wrapped around Yuzuha, and after several seconds it disappeared, completely absorbed by her.

"Yuzuha? What just happened..?"

"(Kuu! Yuzuha, Power UP!)"

Yuzuha sat straight and howled. Shin looked at her closer and noticed that she had grown larger, her tails increasing from 3 to 6.

Apparently, she had regained part of her strength.

"(Did your power come back because what was tainting the Ley lines disappeared?)"

"(Yep, I guess!)"

...her intelligence hadn't changed much, it seems.

"Well then, this isn't like Yuzuha's power up, but let's free Filma."

Standing next to the cheerful Yuzuha, Shin activated **【Crafting】**, a skill common to all production-related jobs.

All production-related jobs require learning this skill, which is exclusively used to craft Drop of Erathem.

"Please wait a moment."

After saying this, Shin touched the crystal. As he activated the skill, a rainbow-colored light spread from Shin's hands, gradually covering the crystal.

After the crystal had been sufficiently covered, Shin grabbed it. His fingers penetrated the hard crystal quickly, as if it was made of clay.

Shin focused more strength on his fingers and pulled. With a sharp, clear sound, the

crystal cracked.

“Looking at Shin work, you’d think the Drop of Erathem was soft.”

“But it’s actually a material that not even Ancient-class weapons can chip...wait, what’s happening now?”

Shin voiced his surprise while he was trying to turn the crystal into an item card.

The crystal in his hands suddenly floated in midair, as if responding to it, the giant crystal imprisoning Filma also floated upwards.

“Kuu?”

Yuzuha was looking at the scene, puzzled but without feeling any particular sense of danger or trying to run away.

The crystal shone more brightly, then broke up as if it was liquid, turning into 5 globes of light.

Filma, maybe due to the effects of such a phenomenon, floated in midair, enveloped in silver and red light.

Shin was increasingly wary of this phenomenon he had never seen before.

“What’s this!?”

One of the five globes of light was absorbed in Filma’s body. Among the remaining four, three moved respectively towards, Schnee, Shibaid, and Tiera.

“!?”

The globes showed no sign of stopping, so the 3 readied their weapons. Additionally, Kagerou stood before Tiera as to protect her.

“What the!?”

“Hnngh!”

“Gruu!”

“Aah!”

The globes would not stop, so the three swung their weapons. Yet the globes simply passed through them, to be absorbed within their bodies. Tiera’s globe even passed through Kagerou.

As the globes penetrated them, Schnee’s, Shibaid’s, and Tiera’s bodies started glowing.

Schnee emitted a silver and blue glow, Shibaid a silver and black one, Tiera a mixture of silver, green, and yellow. After several seconds, all the lights disappeared together.

“Are you alright....w-whoa!”

Shin was rushing to the three’s side as the globes of light were vanishing, but as the light holding Filma in midair vanished too, he rapidly changed directions to catch her as she was falling. He caught her in his arms, then looked back at Schnee and the others.

“...this is...”

“Hmm.”

“Ehm...”

Their expressions showed surprise, but not pain or discomfort.

“What happened? Are you alright?”

“Yes, I cannot feel anything wrong with my body. How should I say it...my stats increased.”

“The same goes for me. My stats have increased as a whole.”

“Ehm, yes, I think the same happened to me too.”

“What?”

Shin too was surprised to know about their stats increase.

In THE NEW GATE, the only way to increase stats was to level up, perform reincarnation, or use stat-up items.

Stats would also increase thanks to titles, but there were few ways to permanently increase stats.

The Drop of Erathem were also supposed to be items unrelated to stat increases.

“I suppose this means that it happened to Filma too, as she was in the same state as you.”

“It’s very possible. I can’t detect any other change in particular. How is Filma’s condition?”

Schnee inquired about Filma’s condition, whom Shin was still carrying in his arms. As if to answer her, Filma moved slightly and opened her eyes.

What her deep red and violet eyes -the same color as her hair- saw was Shin’s face.

“...Master? Eh? What? Why?”

Still drowsy, Filma saw Shin’s face in a blur.

It took a little for her to recognize him, but when she did she instantly recovered from her half asleep state and looked around frantically, while still in Shin’s arms.

“Ah! Schnee! Please tell me what’s going on!!”

Filma shouted after seeing Schnee.

The fact that she was still holding onto Shin was proof that she was still confused.

“First of all, can you stand?”

“Er, yes, I think.”

Seeing Filma this meek was unusual in Shin's eyes. In the game, he had set her personality as frank and open.

"But more than that!! Someone explain!!"

Filma apparently came back to her senses and raised her voice again.

Shin thought that it was pretty unusual for Filma to act like that.



"I see, now I've grasped the situation."

As the party explained their mission to rescue Hermie, Filma nodded in understanding.

Together with the oral explanation, they explained to her what they didn't want Konig to know via Mind Chat.

They only gave her a very basic explanation for the moment, planning to go in more detail later.

"I will help too, then. I've awakened and there's nothing wrong with my body, so I'm returning to the battlefield right away."

Filma announced her return as if it was a completely natural development. She had checked her condition, but didn't find anything unusual. Her stats, however, had increased as expected.

The one globe not absorbed by anyone had returned to the crystal, so Shin turned it into an item card and collected it.

"And now that we're all set, pull that out Shin, come on."

"Alright."

Shin, acting as if he was pulling it out from his chest pocket, took a card out of the item box and gave it to Filma.

As Filma materialized it, a deep red greatsword with a 2 mels blade appeared.

It was a double-edged sword; the deep red at its center would gradually grow fainter towards the edges, turning silver on the blade itself. Bright gemstones shaped like square pyramids were embedded on the base of the blade, from which originated geometrical patterns which decorated the whole body of the weapon.

The blade was roughly 15 cemel wide, so compared to a wide greatsword like Rionne's [Muspelm], it seemed very thin.

It was Filma's main weapon, the superior ancient-class greatsword [Red Moon].

"This is the sword I'm most comfortable with after all...but wait, it's more powerful than before?"

"Well, lots of things happened while you weren't around. I'll tell you more later."

"Alright then! Let's go and save that poor Hermie, shall we?"

As should have been expected, Filma didn't appreciate at all the enemy's ways, so she was more than eager to act right after joining the party.

"...in the end, we basically have more fighting power now?"

Too many unexpected developments had left Konig unable to keep up; all he managed to mutter was this one comment.

He didn't react to Filma shouting Schnee's name, so he had probably not heard it or not recognized it.

"I think it's better not to think too hard about it. We ended up using a lot of time for this unexpected event, so let us leave other explanations for later."

"Yes, that's...right. We should think about rescuing Lady Hermie right now."

Shin started walking away, and Konig followed while shaking his head.

"Hey Milt! Get a move on or we'll leave you behind!!"

“Yees, coming!”

Milt was crouching where the crystal was, but she stood up and joined the party after Shin’s call.

“What were you up to?”

“I was wondering if there was no way to know why the Drop of Erathem was on top of the Ley line...well, I’m bad at Analyze-type skills, so I didn’t understand much though.”

Milt’s job was a pure fighting one. She barely learned any Analyze-type skills.

“It is unnatural for it to be here, yes.”

“Could they have brought it here from somewhere else?”

“That’s the most acceptable explanation, I think.”

Drop of Erathem like the one that had trapped Filma only formed as a product of natural magic power.

Not even demons or High Humans like Shin, could create Drop of Erathem artificially.

The demons had only tainted the crystal with miasma, through the magic circle in the other room, and used the magic power within it.

Shin possessed a creation machine that allowed him to create materials, but he couldn’t create a large crystal like the one that had imprisoned Filma.

“They might have used it after they found it by chance. In the end, all they could do with it was place it here though.”

Drop of Erathem were so hard that only blacksmiths or alchemists of the highest level were able to craft with it. The fact that they left Filma inside it instead of controlling her through the Collar of Submission was proof that even the demons couldn’t do anything to it.

The number of the support characters expressed the order they had been created

during the game. Filma was number 2.

As she had been created roughly at the same time as Schnee, her stats were slightly superior to Girard's.

If she had been under enemy control, they would have had to deal with her as soon as possible.

"Well, we should ask that to the person directly involved. We will have to meet them one way or the other, after all."

It was no more than a hunch, but Shin felt that it would definitely become reality.



At the same time as Shin's party departed from Sigurd, in the room within the cave where Hermie was held.

Standing guard were Wilhelm, brought there by Adara, and 2 of the Summit Faction's most capable soldiers.

Wilhelm stood with an expression void of all emotion, it was unclear if he was conscious at all. Even if he was aware of his surroundings, it was not possible for him to think of something by himself.

What he was now was just a doll that would attack anyone who came too close without permission.

"...why is this happening...?"

"Because you're a Holy Woman."

Looking at Wilhelm, Hermie let out a weak whisper. The answer came from Scoruas, who was standing near Wilhelm.

"You are..."

"Oh, my apologies for not introducing myself earlier. My name is Scoruas, it is an honor

to meet you.”

Scoruas introduced himself with affected politeness. Hermie, feeling an endless indescribable something hidden behind his smile, felt a chill down her spine.

“Where is this place..?”

She was supposed to be sleeping in her quarters in Palmirack, but when she woke up she found herself in a completely different room. The room was adequately furnished and allowed her to rest without problems. Yet at the same time, it made her feel severely cold chills.

Knowing that Eline, the head of Bulk’s followers, had been defeated, and all other collaborators had been caught one after the other, Hermie thought all danger was over. She would have never imagined something like the current situation could happen.

“It would be meaningless to tell you. There is something I wish to show you, so I will have you come with me.”

Saying this, Scoruas pulled out a black collar.

The collar, which looked an even darker black than before, was burned into Hermie’s memories.

“That’s...!!”

“You know this well, don’t you? I don’t know how you removed the previous one, but this new collar is a bit special. I think it will fit you wonderfully.”

Scoruas equipped the collar on Hermie without even giving her the chance to resist.

“Uuh...aaah...”

The very instant the collar was attached to her neck, all strength abandoned Hermie’s body. Her body, which was attempting to resist, suddenly became immobile; it didn’t obey her will anymore.

“This way, then.”

“Kh...”

She could not refuse the satisfied-looking Scoruas’ gesture of invitation. Untied to her will, her body followed Scoruas. Somehow, it seemed that only her mouth was still under her control.

Probably because they had been ordered to guard her, Wilhelm and the 2 other guards followed as well, in total silence.

After they walked for roughly 10 minutes they arrived in a larger area and Scoruas stopped.

“Come, in front of me.”

As Hermie stepped forward, she noticed something shining in the corner of her eye. She was standing in what seemed to be a gallery for spectators, above a large magic circle with several people standing in it.

What she had noticed shining was the magic circle drawn on the floor of the room below.

The people inside the magic circle were trying to leave, but the barrier erected at the circle’s edges prevented them to.

“What are...you...”

“This is all in preparation for your turn.”

Hermie couldn’t understand the situation, but Scoruas forced her to keep looking below.

Then, after less than one minute, something changed. The people inside the magic circle started glowing, one by one, and disappeared.

Their screams echoed through the room, striking Hermie’s ears.

“What!?”

“Wasn’t it beautiful? The light that flickers when human life expires...the screams that adorn it too, they are so comforting.”

Scoruas spoke with nothing but glee on his face, with a tone of voice that showed he truly enjoyed what they had seen.

“I cannot believe it...! Don’t you have any regard for life!?”

“Hehe, It’s nothing more than manure that increases by itself. Or good soil to grow miasma. Did you know? Humans are the living beings that create the most miasma in this world.”

Scoruas, who found even Hermie’s angered voice pleasant, answered her in a somewhat bored tone.

He then grabbed Hermie’s face and pointed it to the people gathered below.

“Guuh!”

“Look very well. Everyone here has been gathered for you, you know?”

“Eh...?”

His face still in a smile, Scoruas kept Hermie’s face pointed downwards with his right hand and, with his left, pointed at the sources of the continuous screams.

“As we have the honor of her highness the Holy Woman’s presence among us, we had to prepare a fitting welcome, right?”

Behind his smile clearly lied malice.

“All the people suffering before you here...they suffer because of you.”

“What are you...saying...”

“That they wouldn’t have suffered if it wasn’t for you.”

Scoruas whispered in Hermie’s ears. As if in response, Hermie’s collar gave a dull glow.

“Because of you.”

“Because of...me...”

Scoruas’ words were impressed in Hermie’s consciousness.

“They are suffering.”

“Those people...are suffering...”

Emotions, like thick mud, flowed into Hermie’s defenseless heart.

“It’s your fault.”

“It’s...my...fault...”

The whispers of demons lead human hearts astray. That effect was boosted by the collar, its influence stronger than normal.

“Did you think that you could have saved someone by becoming a Holy Woman? You, who can only watch these people suffer before you, without doing anything? Did you seriously think you could do something?”

“I, I did...I wanted...to be useful to...some...one...”

“Yet you can’t do anything, can you. Manipulated, kidnapped, just waiting to be helped. I wonder how many sacrificed themselves to rescue you.”

“Ah...”

After each of Scoruas’ words, Hermie’s heart cried in despair.

There are people who were hurt, who suffered, to save her.

Hermie knew well that it was the truth, so she couldn’t deny Scoruas’ words.

“Look, they are angry at you.”

The screams were caused by the despair born from their unescapable situation, but Hermie, under the influence of the collar and Scoruas' whispers, heard them as voices of resentment and insults towards herself.

"I didn't... I didn't, mean to..."

"You did not realize it yourself? Oh milady Holy Woman, I must bow before you."

Acting like he could not believe what he just heard, Scoruas put his hand on his forehead in an exaggerated gesture.

Hermie felt that even those movements were blaming her.

"St...stop."

"What are you saying. They are dying for you, you know? Seeing them off is your duty, is it not?"

"No, that's not true, I did not wish for any of this!"

"Regardless of what you wish or don't wish, all people involved with you end up suffering...or am I wrong?"

"Gh..."

Hermie could not say anything to Scoruas' words.

She tried with all her might to string the words together, but they dissolved into mist before taking shape.

"To bring temporary solace in order to cause suffering around you. That's the kind of existence you are."

"Ah...aaah..."

Hermie's sight trembled.

Because of the collar and the miasma's effects, her thoughts broke and scattered into

thousands of pieces, while her guilt towards the people before her and the disgust towards her own self grew larger and larger.

The feelings lying deep within Hermie's heart grew stronger, along with her despair.

“Oh my, looks like it was more effective than I thought. What a splendid result.”

Hermie fell to her knees, whimpering. She didn't see Scoruas anymore, looking down at her. Crushed by self loathing and despair, her heart sank into darkness.

“.....”

Hermie had been corrupted by Scoruas' malice, to the point that she was incapable of any reaction, but Wilhelm simply stood there, without moving an inch.

As before, no clear consciousness inhabited his eyes. His utter lack of any sign of life could have made him pass for an extremely intricate doll.

Gradually, the human sacrifices' screams vanished; even if he had been ordered to guard Hermie, Wilhelm was just standing in place, motionless.

C h a p t e r 4

瘴 気 の 大 公

THE NEW
GATE

CHAPTER 4

“OK, now that we’ve decided on a course of action, let’s get moving. There’s no time to waste.”

Saying so, Shin looked towards the entrance.

They used the only entrance into the room where Filma was held. As their first objective was to rescue Hermie, they no longer needed to stay there.

“Hey, Shin. I wonder if there are any secret passages in this room? Like an emergency escape route...maybe it’s better to destroy them if we find any.”

“I tried searching too, but couldn’t find anything. What about you, Yuki?”

“I didn’t find anything either. The sacrifice room is next anyway, maybe they limited the number of entrances to prevent unexpected visits?”

Shin and Schnee inspected the surroundings again before answering Milt’s question. As they confirmed there wasn’t anything worth noting in the room, they decided to leave.

Upon leaving, Shin closed the door and attached one of his specially made locks. Now it could only be opened either by injecting a specific amount of magic power or by forcing it open.

“OK then, for our route...above us, there’s a passageway other than the one we took.”

Shin spoke while pointing at the upper part of the room, which looked like a space reserved for spectator seats.

“The passageway leads to a seating area to watch the area below. There’s also a rather large room on the other side too.”

“That makes it sound like a boss room.”

“Yes. I can also feel Wilhelm’s presence from that room.”

Shin nodded to Filma’s words and shared what he had detected.

The map showed 5 dots in the large room past the passageway. Alongside one of them Wilhelm’s name was displayed.

“If Wilhelm is there, it’s possible that Hermie is close too.”

“But if they’re gathered in the same place, there must be something behind it.”

Everyone seemed to share Schnee’s and Filma’s predictions, so there was no objection to start moving again right away.

The spectator seats were at a height far beyond the abilities of a normal person, but Shin, the rest of the Tsuki no Hokora team and Milt reached them easily with 1 jump.

The problem was only Konig’s lack in jumping power, but it was solved quickly.

“Ehm, I’m sorry.”

“...no, he’s a divine beast after all. There is no other way.”

Tiera spoke to Konig in an apologetic tone, but he replied seriously and nodded.

Just as he thought that he would climb the rope that Shin hung down from above, Kagerou jumped upstairs...with Konig in his mouth.

Tiera or Shin wouldn’t have been a problem, but for the moment it seemed that letting Konig ride on his back was not a possibility.

The image of Konig talking seriously while in Kagerou’s mouth and Tiera riding Kagerou would have been very surreal if one didn’t consider the context.

The slightly bizarre atmosphere that formed was then broken by a serious question from Milt.

“...I feel something evil from the next room.”

Her eyes were fixed towards the passageway leading deeper into the cave.

“Yes, it’s more than clear.”

Shin understood the meaning of Milt’s words.

Probably because of the lack of any lighting, the farthest part of the passageway was pitch black. The evil presence Milt talked about emanated from the deepest reaches of the corridor.

There was nothing visible to their eyes, but they could still feel an unpleasant sensation crawling on their skin.

“I feel sick...the miasma is too thick.”

Tiera was holding herself up, barely managing to stand straight. Her sharper senses were not working in her favor this time.

“There are demons ahead.”

“A presence this strong could mean that they’re of Grand Duke class too.”

“Yes. If we don’t take back Hermie before they get serious...the situation could turn really ugly.”

Using presence detection, Shin had the most accurate detection range of the group.

The map displayed to Shin’s eyes showed Wilhelm’s name among the marks present in the room beyond the doorway. Wilhelm’s mark was colored green, which meant “neutral”.

There was another green mark besides Wilhelm’s, then 2 red ones.

The last remaining mark was colored red and black.

“I detect the presence of one demon. There are 3 human presences, Wilhelm included. One of those is probably Hermie, I think.”

If it was Hermie, her name should have been displayed too, but it wasn't. So Shin related it as a simple hypothesis.

“Could they be manipulated as I was?”

“I couldn't say. It previously happened that the markers stayed green until we were attacked.”

As Shin replied to Milt, Konig interjected.

“Should we wait?”

“Considering Hermie's rescue, that's probably a good idea, but I think it would be bad to just wait like this.”

What Konig said was not wrong. Waiting until the demons created an opening and using it to steal back Hermie would have been the best course of action to prioritize her rescue.

However, in the same way as he felt there was still time when he faced Milt, Shin felt confident that letting the demons go here would have put them at a fatal disadvantage.

Shibaid turned towards him and asked.

“Is there something on your mind?”

“Actually, it also happened when I met Milt before...I have a strangely sharp hunch. Something makes me feel that waiting here is definitely not a good idea.”

“I see, that's probably the effect of **【Intuition】**. I have had similar experiences in the past. We must go then.”

“I agree. The **【Intuition】** of those with high abilities is often correct.”

“Yes, I agree too.”

Shibaid and Schnee, who had fought in this world, as well as the former player Milt all agreed with Shin. They all possessed the skill **【Intuition】**, so they knew where he

was coming from. While she kept silent, Yuzuha also expressed her agreement.

“I wanted to prioritize Lady Hermie’s safety, but if it means for more danger I shall be prepared.”

“Exactly, it’s also better not to stay long in a place filled with thick miasma like this.”

“Gruu.”

Konig, Tiera and Kagerou did not pose any objections either and looked at Shin, their weapons in hand.

“First, Yuki and I will try to grab Hermie before the enemy notices us, then it all depends on what happens next. The demons are probably of Named class. Myself, Yuki, Shibaid, and Filma will deal with them. Sir Konig, I want you to take Lady Hermie to safety. Tiera, you will take care of the remaining forces with Yuzuha and Kagerou.

“Hey? What about me?”

“Milt, I’d like you to take care of Wilhelm. He’s probably in the same state you were before. One-on-one is what you’re best at, right?”

“That’s fine, but I don’t know what this Wilhelm guy looks like.”

“That’s not a problem...this is him.”

After giving each member their orders, Shin pulled out a photo from the item box.

“Oh, a screenshot. OK, got it.”

The photo was a materialized screenshot. In the game it would be saved in data, but in this world one just needed to think “take a screenshot” and, with a small MP expense, a photo would be created.

Shin had found out about this as he tested all sorts of things when he taught 【Purification】 to Rashia.

“Is everyone ready? ...let’s go.”

Shin made sure everyone was prepared and led the party forward.

At his waist hung one of the katanas he tempered while creating [True Moon].

Both the sheath and the blade were pure white. It also lacked any decoration, and while resting inside the sheath it looked like a wooden sword like those used for practice. It was a superior ancient-class katana, [Moonless Sky].

Shin cast the magic version of 【Hiding】 on the whole party; they walked through the darkness, invisible.

To Tiera and Konig, who did not possess 【Night Vision】 , Shin had used an item that temporarily granted similar effects.

They walked onwards slowly, checking for any traps, then Shin noticed a small light peeking through the darkness. He focused and found that the light source was set next to the door.

“Looks like we reached our destination.”

A heavy door stood before them, dimly lit within the darkness. They drew closer to examine it, but apparently it wasn't armed with any traps.

According to Shin's map, in this room were Wilhelm, Hermie, a demon, and two other humans. Maybe because of the now reduced distance, Hermie's name was now displayed.

Shin saw through the door with 【Through Sight】 and found Hermie sitting down in the center of the room, with a white haired man-looking demon standing before her.

Wilhelm and the two other humans, possibly guards, stood like statues at the edges of the room.

“The demon and Lady Hermie are too close.....hm?”

Shin was reflecting on a situation that made it hard to act, when the white-haired demon moved.

His right hand, enveloped in miasma, was drawing closer to Hermie's head.

The thickness of the miasma was easily visible even inside the dimly lit room. Seeing the sludge-like substance, Shin unsheathed [Moonless Sky] before even thinking.

"Sssh!"

A slash hissed through the air, following the arc drawn by the blade.

The long-distance powered slash emitted by the Katana martial skill 【Void Cutter】 cut through the door that separated the corridor and the room without resistance. Slicing through the air instantaneously, it slashed off the demon's right arm.

"What!? M-my arm!?"

As the demon's shocked voice reached his ears, Shin kicked the door down and barged into the room.

"You're finis---"

"Not so fast!!"

The demon squarely blocked Shin's next slash, aimed at his left arm.

It was not visible on his clothing, but he seemed to have something equipped there. With a sharp sound and sparks flying about, the blade sank into the left arm.

What was surprising though, was that the blade stopped before severing the arm.

"Hngh!"

Before Shin could ready the next strike, the demon expelled miasma from his whole body.

It was the same as the miasma that was wrapped around his right arm, clearly a different color from normal miasma.

Before touching the miasma, Shin withdrew [Moonless Sky] and put some distance

between himself and the demon.

“Damn, I couldn’t reach her.”

Shin planned to step back while carrying Hermie with him, but the demon was in the way and he couldn’t reach her.

The miasma hadn’t touched her directly, but maybe because of its influence Hermie’s expression was distorted, in pain.

One step behind Shin’s exchange with the demon, Schnee and the others also made their move.

Shin’s sudden attack had left his allies surprised too. Their reactions were mainly two: Schnee, Shibaid, Filma, and Milt immediately analyzed the situation and followed suit, while Tiera and Konig stopped in their tracks.

“Let’s go!”

“Yes!”

Filma and Shibaid entered the room right after Shin. Schnee used **【Hiding】** and, without a word, erased her presence.

“Kuu!”

“Gruah!”

“!! Sir Konig, let’s go!!”

“Kh, we’re one step behind...?”

Tiera followed after Yuzuha and Kagerou’s instigation. Konig, who had regained his senses after Tiera’s call, moved in last.

“Well now, talk about unexpected. I knew you would come sooner or later, but this is some incredible speed.”

“I couldn’t care less about your predictions.”

Probably because he had overcome the shock of losing an arm, the demon spoke in a petulant tone, a jaded expression on his face.

Behind such a behavior, however, he paid close attention to Shibaid and Filma, who had come in after Shin.

“Wow, stronger than I thought!”

“Are they chosen ones too!?”

Wilhelm and the other humans near the walls had moved, probably. Shin heard the voices of Milt and Tiera, who had begun fighting behind him.

“My my, what a large company. It’s a shame that we aren’t ready to welcome you yet.”

“We’re going back as soon as we do what we have to. No need to bother.”

Wielding [Moonless Sky] and not lowering his guard one second, Shin faced off against the demon.

To his right stood Filma, [Red Moon] in hand, to his left Shibaid with [Placid Moon]; both of them pointed their blades at the demon.

“Oh dear, what impatience. Well, since you came all the way here and all, allow me to introduce myself.”

Saying so, the demon placed his left arm on his chest in a showy gesture and struck a pose.

“I am named Scoruas, one of the Grand Dukes and a follower of Miasma Lord Meahelga.”

After his introduction, Scoruas glared at Shin’s party, as a predator eyeing his prey.

“Unfortunately, I have no intention of doing the same.”

“That is fine. I am not interested in you after all, but in the lady next to you.”

Scoruas looked towards Filma.

“It is a honor to meet you, Lady Filma Tolmeya. For you, who I could not touch inside the Drop of Erathem, to come meet me on your own, is truly convenient for me. I heard Schnee Raizar would be present as well, but I suppose I will keep that enjoyment for later.”

Filma’s eyebrows moved at Scoruas’ words. They could be interpreted as if she was nothing more than an appetizer before Schnee, and she couldn’t help being affected by them.

“So you think that if I just came out you could do anything you please with me? I'm afraid you’re looking down on me a bit too much, you know?”

“I apologize if I offended you. But yes, as you say, watching you sleep within the crystal was enjoyable in itself, but humans shine the most through their emotions, after all. I just can’t wait to see how delectable the taste of your despair is.”

Maybe because he felt he had nothing to hide, Scoruas answered Filma’s question in a completely casual tone.

His lustful eyes did not leave Filma one second.

“(It looks like we don’t even exist in his eyes.)”

“(That’s just perfect. If he creates an opening for us it’ll be easier to rescue Hermie.)”

While talking with Shibaid via Mind Chat, Shin was thinking of a way to draw Scoruas’ attention away from Hermie.

As the invisible Schnee was drawing closer to Hermie, Shin gradually shifted his position too.

“...what?”

“Oh, he’s here.”

As if answering Filma's whispered words, a vibration shook the entire room.

"The room's shaking?"

"An earthquake, now!?"

Milt and Tiera both focused on the possible danger, the first while parrying [Vakira] with her twin swords, the second while shooting the two humans' legs with her arrows.

"(This is bad, Schnee!! Hurry!!)"

While charging at Scoruas, who was still focused on Filma, Shin called to Schnee via Mind Chat.

Schnee heard Shin's words and moved towards rescuing Hermie. Before she could do it, however, a shadow broke through the ceiling and landed right between Hermie and Schnee.

Without losing her pace because of the unexpected situation, Schnee swung her [Blue Moon].

"That won't work!!"

As if Schnee's movements were visible, two longswords swung towards her. The deep green double-edged long swords clashed with [Blue Moon], sending sparks flying all around.

"Gah! This isn't an elf's muscle power!!"

His swords in a cross, the shadow--Adara shouted while laughing.

Maybe because he wasn't in his original form, he was being slightly pushed back. [Blue Moon] was also eating into the longswords he wielded.

Even though his appearance was not his true one, he was still a demon.

Maybe because of a special ability of his, suddenly two swords just like the ones he

was wielding floated in midair. Their blades then pointed at Hermie.

“You know what I’m about to say, right? Don’t you move either, big guy. She can die right now for all we care, you hear?”

The arrival of the second demon had made it more difficult for Shin’s party to move.

Using **【Analyze】** to examine their new opponent only confirmed how powerful he was.

“How underhanded.”

“That’s praise for demons like us. But instead of saying that withdraw your weapon already, you didn’t even drop an ounce of strength!”

While speaking, Adara infused more strength in his arms. Adara’s longswords and **[Blue Moon]** were still in a clash of sparks, but Adara was being pushed back.

As she had moved on the offensive, Schnee’s **【Hiding】** had already disappeared.

“If you cast a single wound on her, I will cut you down here and now.”

“Oh wow, so scary. Who’s threatening who now?”

Adara jeered with unchanged composure.

“Well, that could be fun too.”

It happened just as the blades floating in midair received Adara’s orders and moved to pierce Hermie.

“Waah!! Shin, dodge!!”

“!?!”

One second after Milt’s call, a jet black flash flew through the room.

“GWAAAAHHH!?!”

And one more second later, Adara's scream filled it.

The flash had squeezed through the space between the members of Shin's party and hit Adara. As he was still parrying Schnee's [Blue Moon], he had no way of defending himself.

"What the hell!? My strength is leaving me!"

Adara had been blown away; his stomach was pierced by a jet black spear adorned with designs resembling running blood. The spear, which pulsed as if alive, was [Vakira], the weapon Wilhelm was supposed to be equipped with.



Wilhelm's consciousness was confined to the deepest reaches of his heart.

In a drowsy state, as if it could fall into slumber any moment, it responded lazily to a voice coming from somewhere.

(So sleepy...)

His consciousness was about to fall completely. It would be a sleep he would never awaken from.

The surroundings were enveloped in deep darkness, a blackness that seemed as if it could devour everything.

-----!! !?!

(Shit...what now?)

Just ignore it. That's what he thought to do, but every time he heard that voice, Wilhelm's spirit was shaken.

It was desperately trying to stop Wilhelm's consciousness from sinking.

Like a single thread hanging within the darkness, it kept Wilhelm tied, keeping him from crossing the last line. As if it was telling him to listen to the voice.

(Aaah...I'm...I am...? Who am I...?)

The first thing he thought about was his name. The symbol expressing his identity. His title.

But it wouldn't come out.

As if something was preventing him to, something was trying to remove his consciousness.

(What am...what am, I...?)

In that utter darkness, Wilhelm stirred. But his arms and legs wouldn't answer his commands.

Moving even just one arm felt as if he was sinking in mud, with weights attached all over his body.

-----!?!

(Damn, can't hear...)

He couldn't help but feel that he was failing to hear something very important.

(Why is it so hard to move...what is this...?)

Wilhelm grew more and more irritated towards his unresponding body.

He felt a certain disgust, as if some unknown force was doing what it pleased with him. That emotion, rising from his chest, fueled his rebellious spirit.

At the same time, his hazy consciousness became clearer and clearer.

-----me.

(Not yet...it's not enough...)

As if crawling in the darkness, Wilhelm tried to rouse more strength in his body, which

he still couldn't feel clearly.

It wouldn't normally be possible to visualize one's body when in a state of mere consciousness, but for some reason Wilhelm was in the darkness, stark naked.

He opened his eyes only to find utter darkness before him. He could barely see 1 mel in front of him.

Yet Wilhelm understood clearly that he himself was now existing there.

He felt as if he was holding something. Looking down towards his right hand, he found his partner, morphed into something ominous.

"What the hell is this?"

Wilhelm couldn't help but speak those words aloud.

His beloved spear, which Shin had forged anew, was supposed to be Holy Spear [Beinot] with its platinum-like sparkle. What his right hand was holding, however, was a jet black spear enveloped in a dark purple aura.

Geometrical symbols of unknown meaning decorated its surface, dyed in a blood-red hue.

"Hell Spear... Vakira?"

For some reason, the name of the spear surfaced in his mind. It was a name Wilhelm didn't remember ever hearing before.

-----ll me.

"...I can still hear it."

He could understand that the sound whispered near his ears was someone's voice. But he couldn't understand what it was saying.

"Tch, I can't make it out!"

Wilhelm voiced his frustration.

No matter how much he tried, the voice would always vanish just before he could understand it.

And every time the voice vanished, the feeling of missing something important grew more and more within him.

The direction the voice came from was not fixed and seemed irregular. He didn't know where to move, his frustration only increasing.

"I'm feeling sick...where the hell am I, anyway?"

Wilhelm suppressed the growing feelings in his chest and tried to regain his cool.

Nothing positive would happen if he acted out of frustration in a situation he didn't fully understand.

His consciousness had returned enough to be able to think in this manner.

"I have a weapon, I don't know where I am. What was I doing before coming here, anyway?"

Wilhelm searched his memories while analyzing his current situation.

But no matter how much he tried to recover his past memories, nothing would come out.

What he could barely visualize was himself fighting against a monster. He was defeating undead monsters, when he felt something and entered some woods, where he met something.

His memories from then were hazy. He felt like he had seen some sort of light.

"It's too fragmented. And I can't even remember my own name yet...what the hell's going on."

Even if but a fragment, his memory of fighting against monsters was clear. However,

he couldn't remember anything about the most important thing, himself.

"...hm?"

Just then, Wilhelm felt his right hand vibrate.

He tried raising his right arm slightly, and noticed that [Vakira] was slightly trembling. Part of the weapon's deep purple aura was burning red, occasionally emitting sparks.

"What's going on now...?"

Wilhelm let out a hoarse grunt. Because the right arm grasping [Vakira] was not the one he recognized as his.

The arm was covered in scales, his nails were sharper too...just like a Dragnil's.

"No, wait, this can't...I'm supposed to be a Lord."

"(That is both right and wrong.)"

"!?! Who is this?"

Wilhelm didn't expect his mumbling to receive a reply, and instantaneously pointed Vakira at the direction the voice came from.

"(Hey there, me.)"

".....?"

That casual greeting had come from a Dragnil-like man.

"(Hey now, don't tell me you don't recognize me? Well, normally we wouldn't ever speak face-to-face like this. It's really amazing though...weapons made by a High Human can even pick up people's emotions, huh.)"

The man kept talking to Wilhelm, who furrowed his brows.

When he heard the words High Human, the silhouette of a man appeared in his mind.

“Answer me.”

“(I told you, didn’t I? I am “me”. In other words, I guess I could say I’m another you? But no, not a split personality or something. I am power itself, one of the powers you possess. I gained this form because of the High Human’s techniques and the feelings poured by the brats in your spear.)”

“What the hell are you going on about?”

“(Its form is different now, but [Beinot] can only be created by infusing people’s hopes and prayers. There were ridiculously pure prayers imbued in the Venom spear you used before. Incredible how so many could be gathered in it, really.)”

“Prayers...?”

The man continued talking nonchalantly.

Brats, prayers, Beinot. Every time one of those words reached his ears, Wilhelm was reminded of people connected to him.

“(I’m surprised how the brats don’t get scared of a face like this, really.)”

“What? What’s that, all of a sudden?”

“(Acting all rough like that is just a way to attract attention. Well, maybe half of it is the honest you though. You make others dislike you on purpose to not let them see the more important sides of you. That’s also the reason why you rarely go to the orphanage.)”

“Orpha...nage...? Gah!!”

“(Remember. You haven’t forgotten, have you? That’s the place where you first became a “person”.)”

In reaction to the word “orphanage”, a storm of memories and flashbacks burst inside Wilhelm.

“Gh...aah, shit.....I remembered.”

Wilhelm, who had been holding his head, looked again at the man. As if those words were the key to open the last lock, all his memories had come back.

“(That’s good. We can’t stay here long, after all.)”

“What do you mean by that?”

“(Just look behind me.)”

With some suspicion, Wilhelm looked beyond the man’s shoulders. There he saw an even deeper patch of darkness, shaped like a hole.

Wilhelm had been looking towards the man all this time, but only now realized its presence.

“(You don’t need me explaining, right? If you fall here, you’re not going back anymore.)”

“Yeah, I figured as much.”

“(I’m telling you because you almost fell in. You have your spear to thank for that. The prayers inside it kept you out.)”

“They kept me, huh...and? Your role was also to wake me up?”

“(No, what I have to do is to teach you how to use the power. Because even though you’re a ‘*Critical*’ and all, you don’t even use half of it. That’s why you were done in by some untransformed demon.)”

The man shrugged, almost disappointed.

“There’s power in me that I’m not using yet?”

“(You can use maybe one-third of it now. Usually one has 2 species bonuses, but a ‘*Critical*’ has 3, even 4. Yours are especially powerful too. But that’s one reason why you’re not using your powers to the fullest. Your evil eye’s ability of gathering magical power to increase your physical abilities too, you aren’t using it efficiently at all)”

You're too sloppy, the man said.

The man spoke normally of things Wilhelm was completely unaware of.

"I'd like to know why you know all that, but maybe later. If you're another me, then tell me. How can I use that power?"

"(It's simple, you just need to accept me. The body knows how to use that power. You just need to realize it later.)"

"You...? I don't think I ever denied my Dragnil powers."

"(That's not what I mean. I told you, right? You can probably use one-third at best. If you fully manifest your Dragnil powers, you won't get away with just your eye changing a little.)"

The man meant that Wilhelm would become closer to a Dragnil.

"(You still fear your power. They call you a '*Critical*', but you're afraid you might be a '*Miscelal*'*, something that could lose control any moment.)" (*T/N: a hybrid species*)

"Tch, looks like you really are me...can't hide anything, huh."

"(Well, yeah. I know what happened to make you think like that too. But I can tell you for sure, that you're not. You're not a fake like that.)"

The man's words brimmed with confidence.

"...really now?"

"(Really. And so. Use everything you can. This world is jam-packed with strong people. If you keep fearing you'll just lose it all.)"

The man didn't specify what exactly.

It was something he didn't need to express in words.

"(Come on, make your decision already. Keeping you here isn't hard, but the flow of

time here is different. They don't have much time left.)”

“What does that mean.”

“(Can't you hear a voice?)”

“A voice?”

Wilhelm could think of one thing only.

“(Listen well. You should be able to hear it. It should be more than enough to light yourself on fire, I'm sure.)”

“What are you...”

-----Save me...or, rather...kill me.

What are you saying?

Wilhelm was about to ask this question, but his words died halfway.

He heard it. All too clearly.

It was a faint voice, an extremely weak tone, as if it was going to disappear any moment.

“Tch! So this is what it was! Do it already!!”

He knew that voice.

They only spoke a few times. But Wilhelm knew her.

The girl with the same power as Millie. The power that caused her to be targeted by Bulk, and now she was begging him to kill her...it was that girl's voice.

“(That's what I was waiting for!!)”

As if he was waiting for nothing else than those words, the man standing before

Wilhelm started glowing bright red, gradually losing shape. As if trembling in the wind, it entered Wilhelm's body.

“GH...WOOOOOHHHHH!!!!”

At the same time, power burst forth from deep within him.

Was this the feeling of having molten iron poured into your veins? That's how powerful the scorching heat rushing through Wilhelm was.

Feeling this burst of power, the geometrical patterns running on Vakira's surface started flashing.

“Give me...a...break..”

His clenched teeth produced a grinding sound.

That woman is saying the same thing as before...anger was building inside him.

“Saying I'm going to die, kill me, so easily...”

The words that escaped his mouth expressed bitterness towards his other self, who had offered no explanations, and anger towards the resignation to despair in the voice that had reached his ears.

“GIVE ME A DAMN BREAAAANKKKK!!!!”

The red-hot blood coursing through his body made Wilhelm roar.

As if in answer, Vakira's flashing turned into a glow, dispelling the surrounding darkness.

As if pushed by the light, Wilhelm's consciousness suddenly returned.



Wilhelm's change was first noticed by Milt, who was crossing blades with him.

"Hey, that weapon is [Vakira], right? Since when did it have effects like those?"

She did not expect a reply. But she couldn't help trying to speak with him.

The dark purple aura enveloping [Vakira] had already turned mostly red.

Milt didn't know what it could mean, but her intuition told her that it wasn't something to fear.

While twisting her body to avoid the incoming thrusts, she parried with a sweep.

Her hands gripped her subweapons, fit to fight in such a narrow environment: the Mythology-grade twin blades [Mirbal].

In the dim darkness of the room, [Vakira] and [Mirbal] clashed and generated sparks.

"It's been a long time since I last felt such a burning hot blade. I see, you're resisting, aren't you."

His burning willpower was transmitted through the blade. His spear technique grew sharper with every blow.

That was not something a controlled puppet could accomplish; it was the expression of a powerful self-consciousness.

Fighting, nothing more, nothing less...Milt, who fought to the death for no other goal than the fight itself, could feel it.

"Hey, tell me your name."

"....."

[Vakira], once again aimed to pierce Milt...stopped in mid thrust.

The violet aura enveloping [Vakira] was now no more; a red aura had burned to cinders not only the weapon's aura, but also the one surrounding Wilhelm.

"..Wilhelm...Avis."

In stark contrast with the searing hot aura, the answer came from a rather calm voice.

Wilhelm's eyes, hollow and staring into nothingness just moments ago, now hosted a clear willpower.

"Shht"

With a faint whisper, Wilhelm swung [Vakira] so as not to hit Milt.

This strike dispelled the remaining aura, which dissipated in midair.

"Maybe I didn't even need to face you?"

"No, I have to thank you. Sorry to end this halfway, but there's something I have to do first. If you want to continue, let's do it another time."

While answering Milt's question, Wilhelm readied [Vakira] into a stance.

"I'll be glad to, if we have the chance.....what?"

Milt had but an instant to savor the anticipation for another battle. It felt as if a question mark appeared above her head.

The reason was that Wilhelm's stance was not in preparation for thrusting, but for throwing his spear.

"You will pay..."

The instant his stance was completed, a sharp glint sparked in Wilhelm's eyes.

The placid atmosphere of moments ago vanished into thin air, substituted by an eruption of rage.

It was intense enough for Milt to feel goosebumps.

Wilhelm's eyes were directed beyond Milt, towards Shin and the others.

"..for screwing with me!!!"

"Waah!! Shin, dodge!!"

Milt caught on what Wilhelm was trying to do and immediately shouted.

At the same time as Milt's warning, Wilhelm's hand blurred and Vakira flew through the air, leaving afterimages trailing in its wake.



As if answering its wielder's will, [Vakira] charged forward towards its target, without the slightest bend in its course.

“Gwoooohhh!!!”

[Vakira] had turned into a black flash, piercing Adara, who had been locking swords with Schnee; he was blown away.

[Vakira] stood straight through his stomach, its red glow burning brighter and brighter.

“What the hell!? My strength's leaving me!”

Possibly because he had been taken by surprise, Adara's face was a mask of pain, as he tried to pull [Vakira] out.

“Ggh, damnit!!”

The pain coming from the hand grabbing [Vakira] contorted Adara's expression even more.

Milt's eyes and ears felt the sound of the red aura eroding Adara's hand, a sound as if something was burning.

“Transforming my spear was a big mistake.”

After throwing [Vakira], Wilhelm walked closer to Shin and the others.

At the same time [Vakira] glowed even brighter, enveloping Wilhelm's body with a crimson aura.

“Ggh, gwaaahhhh!!”

Adara understood that wasting more time would be dangerous and forcefully extracted [Vakira] from his body, attempting to destroy it with his blades still floating in midair.

But before he could, Wilhelm said just one word.

“Return.”

“What!?”

That very instant, [Vakira] vanished from midair, as if made of mist. The next instant, it was safely in Wilhelm’s hands.

Thanks to Adara being blown away, Schnee could rescue Hermie.

Holding his hands over Hermie’s collar, Shin inquired to Wilhelm.

“Wait a second now, I don’t remember ever adding a function like that?”

“That blonde guy there had the brilliant idea of messing with it. Now he knows how brilliant of an idea that was though.”

Wilhelm answered Shin while readying [Vakira] in a stance again.

Shin had already seen through that the weapon that stabbed Adara was [Vakira]. His surprise was due to the fact that instantly returning to the wielder’s hands via vocal command was an ability that [Beinot] gained only through an event.

“So that’s why it became [Vakira]... anyway, being able to use both abilities is pretty close to cheating, I say.”

Other than its own basic abilities, [Beinot] also had increased damage against demons and undead. But it wasn’t a significant increase.

On the other hand, [Vakira] could absorb miasma to raise the user’s stats. It was a weapon effective specifically towards miasma, so the increase was much higher than [Beinot].

[Vakira] was wrapped in miasma, but did not generate it. It only looked like it did, as it kept gathering nearby miasma.

Its ominous appearance and the fact that it requires miasma when forging it made its abilities not known; even some players would have the wrong idea about it.

It was clear to anybody that its abilities were best used with demons as opponents.

Demons, essentially a mass of miasma, were nothing more than easy prey for [Vakira].

“Oh my, you look quite pathetic now.”

Scoruas spoke to the collapsed Adara. While he himself was unharmed, he had just witnessed an attack that blew his comrade away. Nevertheless, he had not lost his composure.

“What else could I have done? It was all timing. But hey, they’re taking off your collar too, see?”

The tone of Adara’s answer did not show signs of pain either, despite the wound he had just suffered.

“You’re still pretty damn confident, huh?”

“Oh, rest assured that I’m surprised. I went and turned it to the negative side, but I see it’s totally on “this” side, huh? The weapons humans make are always so interesting!”

Adara’s stomach already lacked any trace of damage. Being a high-class demon, his recovery speed was also off the charts.

“And now they got our hostage...sacrifice too. They know of this place too. Guess it’s time to end this, huh?”

“That’s true. With all the people present here, we can make some very good soil.”

Adara proposed abandoning the cave in a casual tone, and Scoruas approved just as nonchalantly, apparently without giving it serious thought.

“Hey, Shin. “All the people present here”, he said.”

“Well, if they enter their complete form, we’ll end up buried alive deep underground. They’ll grow to considerable size so they won’t die, but normally we’d be either crushed to death or suffocate, I guess.”

Shin answered Filma's words and entrusted Hermie to Konig, who had come after defeating the guard.

Tiera, who had defeated the other guard, and Milt too were in a battle-ready stance.

They did not know the actual depth of their position, but it was surely deep enough that the 10-20 mels within the scope of a upper-class chosen one's abilities wouldn't be enough.

Shin never had the chance to try nor did he ever think to, but if they were buried under great quantities of soil, he was not sure he could survive.

There were skills to dive underground, but they were earth-type skills that only allowed digging 1 or 2 mels; it would have been nothing more than a gamble.

"Oh my, you saw through us already. We are roughly 100 mels underground, after all. Not even a chosen one could...gh!! I do not mind you resisting, but you should listen when someone speaks!"

Wilhelm's strike interrupted Scoruas' speech.

"I couldn't care less. Just looking at your faces makes me want to throw up."

Scoruas had parried [Vakira]'s thrust with his left arm, but Wilhelm continued to attack without giving him pause.

"Shin!! You can cut them down like nothing, can't you!?"

"I'd prefer to give priority to healing Lady Hermie, though. This collar is much more dangerous than the one I saw before. I couldn't destroy it right away, so I have no idea how it's affecting her spiritually."

Shin did not mean to waste time talking either. The eerie miasma coming from Hermie's collar emanated much higher danger than the one he removed at the church.

At the church it only took him an instant to remove it, but now it was taking considerable time.

Even if temporarily, he had turned his back on the enemy. But between Shin and the demons stood Filma and Shibaid, ready to battle and not leaving a single opening.

“What? All the more reason to finish off these bastards and focus on the healing!”

After hearing Shin’s words Wilhelm spat out words seething with rage. As if agreeing with him, [Vakira]burned brighter.

“Yeah, I just needed time to destroy Lady Hermie’s collar. We don’t need to listen to them anymore.”

“That is a problem. We need you all to die here, after all. Oh, I will be taking Lady Schnee and Lady Filma with me, so please do not worry. -----Oh?”

As he was talking, Scoruas’ sight left Shin’s party and focused behind them.

“...this presence...”

The smile finally left Scoruas’ expression. His confidence was no more.

“....Adara, the situation has changed. We must kill her. Cooperate.”

“What? It’s weird for you to be this tense.”

“Just look at her and you’ll understand.”

Saying this, Scoruas motioned towards Tiera.

“...ah, now I get it. Yeah, can’t leave this one alive.”

Apparently understanding without the need for further explanations, Adara muttered these words and raised his speed.

In the same way as Scoruas, he rushed towards Tiera with enough power as to crush the ground beneath his feet, paying no attention to Shin or anyone else.

Their acceleration was enough to leave behind afterimages. But Shin and the others wouldn’t be overcome so easily.

“Hey now, what’s the rush? Don’t you dare ignore me now.”

“You can’t do this after all that bragging, you know.”

Wilhelm stopped Adara, while Shin blocked Scoruas.

Then, as if creating multiple walls, Schnee, Filma and Shibaid stood beside them, ready to assist at any time.

“...eh? Ah...”

On the other hand Tiera, who had been targeted all of a sudden, let out a raucous whisper. She had been swept by a killing intent and crushing pressure the likes of which she had never felt before.

“Grururu...”

“Kufuuuh!”

Tiera’s body couldn’t move, but Kagerou and Yuzuha, their fur standing up, stood in front of her as to protect her. Looking at their backs, Tiera collapsed to her knees due to the overwhelming pressure.

“Are you okay? Do you recognize me?”

“Aah...ye..s..”

Milt helped Tiera stand, as she couldn’t support herself.

She seemed to have trouble breathing, but had not lost consciousness.

Having enough mental strength not to faint under the effect of the killing intent of Grand Duke-class demons was a feat in itself.

“Move.”

“You’re in the way”

Shin and Wilhelm answered the demons' words with taunting smiles.

"Let's just crush them."

"Yes, let's do that."

Deciding that trying to break through would take too much time, Adara and Scoruas decided to return to their true forms.

"As if we'd let you!"

Close to the demons now attempting their transformations, Shin materialized an item from the item box. It was the crystal stone he once used in front of Tiera.

"Facing demons underground, you think I didn't make my preparations!?"

Shin poured magic power in the crystal, without hesitation.

As the magic skill engraved on the crystal activated, the surrounding scenery warped; the next instant, everyone present in the room was now outside, on a wide open plain.

They were now on the plains connecting the sacred place Kalkia and castle town Balmel, near the woods where Shin and Rionne once lit a bonfire.

Shin, having heard about the demons from Schnee after being blown to Kalkia, had marked the location, in case they would have to fight demons above a certain rank.

He had already verified that these plains were scarcely visited by humans, as they were often traversed by monsters because of the [Flood].

"Where is this...?"

"I'll explain later. Sir Konig, please take Lady Hermie away from here. And take this."

Even if her collar had been removed, Shin did not want Hermie to stay in the battlefield.

For added safety, he handed Konig a substitute-type item that would absorb damage

inflicted to them, a monster repellent item and a barrier-creating item. After going a certain distance, they planned to use the “Cloak of Hiding” to conceal themselves.

“You’re always pulling surprising stunts, aren’t you.”

“I had heard about the demons from Schnee, you see. It was like an insurance, but now we can fight to our hearts’ content, right?”

Wilhelm looked very surprised by the development, but Shin answered him casually.

In fact, Grand Duke-class demons were not considered exterminated even if their human forms were defeated. There were exceptions, but very few.

Most Grand Duke class demons achieved their true form by cutting off the head of their human form.

That was one reason why Shin had targeted Scoruas’ arm.

Before the party now stood the two demons in their true forms.

“Hey hey, I wasn’t expecting this. Where are we anyway?”

“That’s not a problem. Our target is still here with us.”

Without paying the slightest attention to Hermie’s entourage leaving the scene, Adara and Scoruas looked down at Tiera.

Adara’s transformation was a giant human-like figure. It was a type also called “War God”: its appearance was human-like but it had 4 arms and 2 faces. It was roughly 25 meters tall and wore armor resembling a Chinese general of old. It wielded two long swords, a battleaxe and a mallet.

As it resembled a human in appearance, it was also relatively easier to think of a way to fight it.

On the other hand, Scoruas was more difficult. It was a Chimera-type, which made it difficult to imagine what it was originally.

Its face was sharp and angular, as if crustacean shells formed an eel-like head. On both sides of the head there also were horn-like objects pointing forward.

Its upper body was human-like and covered in scales, just like Magnamuc; from where his right arm would be sprouted three octopus-like tentacles, while in place of the left arm he was equipped with two crab-like pincers.

The lower body seemed like a mixture between a horse and a tiger's. It would take some effort, but by imagining the front part as the horse's and the back part as the tiger's, it could almost look like a nightmarish centaur. Counting the horse and tiger limbs, it had 6 legs in all.

"Yuzuha, I leave Tiera to you. Tiera, stay close to Yuzuha and assist us. They will probably target you, so put enough distance between you and them. And equip this!"

"Kuu!"

"U-understood!"

While giving directions, Shin threw a defensive item at Tiera. Among all present, Tiera was the only one at danger of instant death.

"This is getting pretty fun!! Shin, who will deal with who?"

Excited at the appearance of such strong opponents, Milt had already put away the twin swords [Mirbal] and drawn her main weapon, a low rank Ancient-grade poleaxe [Breogand], with its blade wrapped in pale blue flames.

Just its handle was as long as Milt was tall; at first glance, no one would think that it was a weapon she could wield.

Shin knew, however, that all players who underestimated her that way had been split in two.

"Let's see...Scoruas is probably a raid type. Schnee, Kagerou and I will deal with him. Filma, Shibaid, Wilhelm, Milt, go get Adara. Tiera, Yuzuha, prioritize evasion and give us assistance. The enemy's strong, never let your guard down!"

As if in unison with Shin's commands, the sounds of Scoruas and Adara's approaching footsteps grew louder. The teleportation had put some distance between them, but for the two giants it was a trivial problem. Shin and Schnee used stat boost skills on the whole party, which then split into two teams.

"First of all, we'll separate them! Kagerou, stand in front!"

"Gruu!"

If they were close, the two enemies could have helped each other. Shin tried to stop that as first priority.

Standing behind Kagerou, who had returned to his original form, Shin hid from Scoruas' sight and released all **【Limit】** .

At the same time as he ran behind Kagerou, Shin cast **【Hiding】** to conceal himself and charged towards Scoruas at maximum speed.

"Time to fly!"

"!?"

Shin's unforeseen full-power kick struck Scoruas' human-like part, in what would correspond to the pit of the stomach.

Barehanded and wind combination skill **【Raging Arrow】** .

The mercilessly delivered kick was something beyond this world's nature.

Along with the sound of the thunder, the 25 mels tall giant was blasted high in the air.

After a few seconds Scoruas crashed back down into the ground, creating a small crater and raising a large cloud of dust.

The total distance the demon flew before crashing down was easily over 800 mels.

The part kicked by Shin showed an abnormal wound; it wasn't clear if it had been struck or gouged.

The attack's power was so impressive that even Adara, who had not been affected, stopped in his tracks. At the same time, the collapsed Scoruas was still under attack.

".....fall."

A clear voice resounded through the battlefield. Following it, blue lightning bolts poured down from the sky.

Lightning magic skill **【Blue Judgement】** .

The storm of lightning strikes which had burned to ashes the swarm of monsters that attacked Balmel, without a shred of pity, doused Scoruas' entire body in flames.

In the game this magic skill couldn't be used in boss battles, but probably because his appearance seemed to be formed mostly by water-element monsters, Shin saw Scoruas' HP gauge decrease significantly.

They had already caused damage for 10% of the total, in just 2 blows.

Scoruas was a Raid-type monster. Originally he would be fought by several parties at once, each one shaving his HP little by little. Considering that, this damage was almost unreal.

"Let's crush him right away and go assist the others."

"Yes!"

"Gruaah!"

The High Human Shin, High Elf Schnee, and divine beast Kagerou headed towards Scoruas.

The difference in fighting power was crystal clear. Thus started the hunt for the Grand Duke.



“Phew! Shin sure showed him who’s boss! But we won’t lose either!”

Milt spoke while looking at Shin’s entourage running off in the distance. She couldn’t help laughing after witnessing the brutal feat of a Raid boss being kicked in the air.

“That was one hell of a first move. Let’s take this guy down before they finish the other off. No holding back!”

Holding [Vakira] with one hand, Wilhelm released his inner power. As his other self had said, he understood how to control or release his power, without the need to be taught how.

“WOOOOOOOOHHHHH!!!”

Wilhelm’s heartbeat grew stronger and louder. An aura started flowing out of his body, dragon-like scales surfaced on his chest. His left pupil split vertically, while blade-like translucent horns grew on his head.

The aura, the scales, and the horns were all colored deep red.

“Fwooooh....”

“Wow, you’re really interesting, aren’t you.”

In this world, Wilhelm’s new appearance was nothing but abnormal, but Milt simply smiled, enjoying the show.

Looking at Milt and Wilhelm, who had not lost their will to fight after seeing Adara’s true form, but instead become more enthusiastic, Shibaid and Filma smiled too.

“Hmm, the morale’s pretty high.”

“Of course, after seeing something like that...it’s been awhile since I faced something this big, I’m going to get serious too, I guess?”

“Don’t let your guard down, you hear?”

“I won’t. There’s a clear difference in ability between us and the monster, after all.”

Their tone was casual, but their expressions were as serious as they could be.

A Grand Duke-class demon would normally be faced by several players together; the frontline with STR and VIT over 700, the rear guard with INT over 700.

No matter how well-equipped the party may be, it was not an opponent 4 frontline combatants, 1 assist unit and a beast could normally handle.

“I will attract the enemy’s attention! Attack at will!!”

“Now this brings back memories!”

“The shield role is yours!”

“You’re going down!!”

In response to Shibaid’s call, Filma, Wilhelm and Milt rushed towards Adara. A hastily formed party wouldn’t make cooperated play possible. For that very reason, Shibaid decided to leave the decision to each member’s prior battle experiences.

“Impressive that you think you can match me with so few numbers. I could rout you here and now, but unfortunately I have no time to waste with the likes of you.”

While deftly parrying Milt’s [Breogand], Wilhelm’s [Vakira], and Filma’s [Red Moon] with his long sword, Adara kept his eyes on Tiera.

Their opponent was a giant over 20 mels tall. If he proceeded ignoring them, Shibaid’s party, which was less than 10% his size, couldn’t stop him easily.

“What you want to do matters not at all. Your center of attention will be me.”

Holding [Placid Moon]in his right hand and [Great Shield of Collision]in his left, and also equipped with his original Dragon gear set, Shibaid stood between Adara and Tiera and used the Taunt skill **【Mind Attract】** .

“What are you looking at!!”

“Hngh, I’m being dragged...! So you chose to face me from the front? Interesting!!”

Adara was forced to change the target of his sights from Tiera to Shibaid.

Different from 【Shura Rush】 and its wide area of effect, 【Mind Attract】 targeted only one monster, making the user the target of all of its actions.

It affected physical and magical attacks, sight, and “hate*”, making it a necessary skill to have for shield-role players when fighting bosses such as Adara. *(T/N: I think this refers to “aggro”)*

“I’ll have to praise you if you can withstand this!!”

The battle axe and mallet swung down towards Shibaid. The weapons themselves were larger than Shibaid himself, their mass more than double his.

Facing a blow that would definitely rend the earth, Shibaid simply readied his great shield in a stance, without moving an inch.

“May the duel begin!!”

An instant before receiving the attack, Shibaid activated the Shield-type Martial skill 【Buster Fortress】. An emerald-green light completely enveloped Shibaid’s body, which was then struck squarely by Adara’s attack.

A shock reverberated in the surroundings, shaking the ground around them and even creating a depression; shockwaves from the attack were released in all directions.

However, Shibaid stood unharmed and the ground crushed under his feet.

“What!?”

The surprise came from Adara. The battle axe meant to sweep off his enemy’s torso, the mallet meant to crush his enemy to a pulp simply touched Shibaid and would not budge.

The mallet appeared to be stopped by the shield, the battle axe by the armor; but looking closer, it became clear that they had both been stopped by the emerald light,

and did not even brush against Shibaid's equipment.

“NGWAAAHHH!!!”

With a chilling war shout, Shibaid moved one step forward and swung his shield. That simple motion was enough to knock away both Adara's battle axe and mallet.

【Buster Fortress】 too was an indispensable skill for a shield role.

It allowed the user to nullify all damage from any attack and inflict knockback that forced the attacker to retreat temporarily.

It was effective for 10 seconds the first time it was used in a battle; after that, its duration and cooldown time depended on the damage that the blocked attack would have inflicted.

It was more effective the stronger the opponent was, and conversely less effective against weaker opponents. It was a perfect skill for boss battles.

“He's open! Charge!”

Milt and Wilhelm attacked Adara, who had lost his balance because of 【Buster Fortress】 .

Filma, thanks to her long-standing relationship with Shibaid, went closer to Adara, avoiding the range of his attack, as soon as she saw Shibaid hold up his shield.

“We might be small, but you'll pay for underestimating us so much!”

An arc-like swing from below by [Red Moon]. The deep crimson slash left a clear slice wound on the left leg of the demon Adara, who was still reeling backwards.

From the slash wound on the demon's leg spilled out thick, mud-like blood. From the wound, crack-like effects spread all over the leg.

The Sword-type martial skill 【Bloody Torment】 .

Not only is its attack power high, it also slows the target's movements and actions.

Adara, with one leg nearly paralyzed, saw his stance collapse even more.

Milt and Wilhelm wouldn't let such a chance pass by.

“Slaaasssh Nooovaaaaa!!!”

Milt swung [Breogand] down on Adara's leg, aiming at the wound Filma had just created.

The skill she used was the Axe-type martial skill **【Slash Nova】** .

It was a skill which made use of centrifugal force to focus on dealing damage only, without additional effects.

Also thanks to the cut that Filma had opened on Adara's leg, [Breogand]'s giant blade destroyed the part of the leg guard it hit; the wound couldn't be ignored anymore.

“EAT THIIIISSS!!”

And then, with perfect timing, Wilhelm jumped in.

[Vakira], wrapped in the Spear and Lightning combination skill **【Thunderhowl】** , went to stab the base of Adara's arm, the one wielding the long sword.

This attack, aiming at a spot not covered by Adara's armor, easily pierced his defenses, allowing [Vakira] to unleash its abilities to the fullest.

“Kh, again!?”

A blow from [Vakira], a weapon demons have terrible affinity against, damaged Adara and at the same time greatly lowered his attack and defense stats.

It also exponentially increased Wilhelm's stats.

Of course, normally [Vakira] doesn't have impressive attack power. It might be a weapon specialized towards demons, but its wielder was still just one person. If a boss that had to be defeated by several parties together could be crushed by less than one full party, the game would lose meaning.

“WOOOOOOHHHH!!!”

Deep crimson lightning bolts swirl around [Vakira]. It looked like a giant beast’s jaw.

The crackling sound of thunder sounded like a bestial roar, bent on ripping off the demon’s arm.

“Gwoooooohhh!!! Don’t....get....cockyyyyy!!!!!!”

Adara had been completely on the defensive until now, but he was still a Grand Duke.

His primal roar, loud enough to silence 【Thunderhowl】’s crackling, spread through the surroundings together with a physical shock.

The beast’s howl caused its 3 attackers’ danger detection abilities to sound the highest alert.

A pitch black aura emerged from Adara’s body, turning him straight back on his feet against all laws of gravity.

“I’LL CRUSH YOUUUUUUUUU!!!!”

What followed was a crushing attack by the demon’s 4 weapons simultaneously. The attack’s power was clearly much higher than before; Adara aimed to strike its 4 opponents at the same time.

However, all attacks focused on Shibaid because of the effects of 【Mind Attract】 .

4 attacks that would each rend the earth and create fissures lunged at Shibaid.

“I will not let you!”

Tiera, who had been looking for an opening in the demon’s defenses, judged it the best time to shoot her bow.

She was holding the [Spirit Tree Resonance]bow, a weapon that manifested its full powers when wielded by specified Jobs.

The flying arrows sparkled with the lightning strikes they carried. Shot after a brief pause, Tiera's arrows pierced the battlefield. They were faster and stronger than the one she had shot at Balmel.

Tiera had shot three arrows. Adara had employed all of his weapons to attack; also because of the arrows' speed, he could not defend himself against Tiera's attack.

“Gwaaaahhh!!”

The arrows turned into streaks of light and struck Adara's head, exactly as targeted. One of the three pierced Adara's right eye, causing a burning silver-colored flash to pour out from the wound.

“Ghaah! As I thought, you are...!!!”

Because of Tiera's attack, one of the long swords Adara was holding stopped its assault towards Shibaid, as if it had lost all its power.

Then, as if his arm had been paralyzed, the sword fell from Adara's hand and planted itself into the ground.

“Hmm? What is this power?”

Shibaid knew well how strong a Grand Duke-class demon was, making what was happening before his eyes all the more unnatural.

Even if Tiera's attack caused status abnormalities, it was too early for its effect to appear, and its power was too high.

Shibaid's calm assessment of the whole situation made him notice this abnormality right away.

“I'm going too!”

“I won't lose either!”

Thanks to Tiera's attack and Adara's slower reaction, Filma and Milt caught up. Milt stopped the long sword while Filma blocked the battle axe.

Both their weapons were heavy types. Taking advantage of the centrifugal force, they drew arcs in the air.

“Superior Dunk!!”

“Impact Slash!!”

Among sword and axe skills, these two martial skills prioritized concussion over slashing power. The skills ripped through Adara’s arm and knocked his attack out of trajectory.

The remaining mallet strike landed, but Shibaid’s shield withstood the impact without a flinch.

“What...? It’s too light.”

The power was definitely there; Shibaid could also clearly feel the vibrations coming from his shield, and the pressure he felt was definitely a high-ranked demon’s. However, thanks to his rich experience in battling monsters, he could feel that there was a large gap between the crushing sense of intimidation Adara emitted and his actual fighting power.

Monsters dubbed “Solo-type” were indeed monsters one could defeat individually. Such a name, when applied to bosses, sometimes gave the false impression that they weren’t really strong.

But that was just a misunderstanding caused by this title.

In “THE NEW GATE” raid bosses were loosely ranked by difficulty level.

The ranks were 5 in total: bosses that low-level and mid-level players could handle were rank 1.

Bosses that a party of high-level players had a 70% chance of defeating were rank 2.

Bosses that even several parties of well-equipped high-level players had but a 30% chance of defeating were rank 3.

Bosses that parties of high-level players with exceptionally high stats could face, but would never be sure of defeating were rank 4.

Lastly, monsters of nearly invincible strength, or rather set by the creators as “Fight me if you dare” bosses were rank 5.

“Grand Duke class demons should be at least rank 3.”

Shibaid whispered to himself.

Rank 3 monsters were the greatest quarry a single player could defeat. Because of this status, rank 3 monsters were also called “Solo-type”.

Not even Shin, in the game era, could say with confidence that he could defeat a rank 4 on his own. In the case of rank 5, luck was heavily involved too.

Most Grand Duke class creatures were rampaging monsters of terrible strength in the game era as well. It was not rare for them to be rank 4, with some rare examples going as far as rank 5.

Even if they were rank 3, it absolutely did not mean that they would be weak opponents.

“I’m going to suck up that miasma!”

Ignoring Shibaid’s doubts, the battle’s situation changed.

Wilhelm, who had not participated in the defense against Adara’s latest assault, took advantage of the opening after Adara’s attack and jumped in close to the demon.

His [Vakira]struck without hesitation, almost as if he was aware of Adara’s poor condition.

The greatest reason for Adara’s weakness was indeed [Vakira]’s presence.

[Beinot]had changed into [Vakira]because of Adara’s miasma. Because of this, it had especially good affinity with the demon’s miasma.

Its miasma capacity, conversion rate, and absorption rate were much higher than normal when facing Adara.

These values were more than double or triple the original stats.

“Show me all your poweeerrrr!!!!”

[Vakira] was enveloped in a burning red color, brought forth by Wilhelm’s willpower.

The fiery iron-melting flames turned [Vakira]’s tip red hot.

Spear and Flame combination skill 【Crimson Lotus Fang】 .

Armor had no meaning before this blow. [Vakira]’s blade easily melted the demon’s defensive gear, delivering its burning heat through it.

The demon’s weakening, induced by the miasma absorption, proceeded alongside Wilhelm’s power-up.

The power-up Wilhelm was receiving was far higher than he expected, but he did not falter.

He knew. He understood what [Vakira] was causing and why the others’ power was overflowing as well.

The words of someone not present at the moment reached Wilhelm’s ears.

“RRAAAHHHHH!!!!”

Wilhelm grabbed [Vakira] as it stabbed the demon’s body and forcefully performed a sweep.

Wilhelm’s reinforced muscular strength allowed him to force [Vakira], while wedged in the demon’s arm, to execute an arc-like motion, thus driving its heat further and slashing half of the arm.

The heat caused the blood to evaporate, as [Vakira] continued to devour Adara’s miasma.

Every time the spear pierced Adara's armor and body his abilities decreased, while Wilhelm's increased further.

"Even if it's a weapon made to fight demons, is it normal for it to be this effective? Do you know anything?"

"The [Vakira]I know doesn't have this kind of insane ability."

Filma and Milt too, who had directly crossed blades with the demon, noticed how Adara was clearly becoming weaker.

Judging from how the battle was going, they realized that the cause was Wilhelm's weapon, but they couldn't help wondering why the weakening and power-up it was causing were much more impressive than what they remembered.

"Well, we can always ask after we've taken him down."

"If we don't hurry up Shin and the others will come back too. They left this to us, we better do a good job!"

Even if they had doubts about the situation, there was no time to slow down their attacks.

Even weakened, the giant demon's mass and muscular strength were a menace just by themselves.

They couldn't let down their guard until they had completely defeated him.

They could see Adara's HP gauge through **【Analyze】** . Around 50% remained.

One arm had become powerless because of Tiera's attack, while another had been deeply cut by Wilhelm.

They were both right arms, thus leaving the demon's 2 left arms as the only ones usable.

If Adara tried to change location, Tiera's arrows and Shibaid's shield would stop his progress.

With no way to go, and his attacks forcefully directed towards Shibaid, it was obvious that he couldn't defend himself at the same time.

Taking advantage of these openings, Wilhelm's [Vakira], Filma's [Red Moon], and Milt's [Breogand] mercilessly beat Adara's whole body.

Filma, who had improved her abilities and stats by fighting alongside Shin. Milt, who had made her name famous as battle maniac. Wilhelm, who had gained his true power as a *'Critical'*.

Their attacks caused Adara's HP to decrease faster and faster.

In addition to their attacks, Tiera's arrows (boosted by Yuzuha's support) continued to pierce the demon.

Every time the arrows hit, Adara's body was bathed in silver light.

In the same way as Wilhelm's [Vakira], every time a silver flash burst the demon would lose his power.

"Gah...kuuh...agh..."

Adara, overwhelmed by the damage sustained, fell down to one knee. Wilhelm, his body completely enveloped with aura, jumped the highest he could and brought down his weapon.

"HURRY UP AND DIE ALREADY!!!!"

Adara was already covered in wounds. There was not enough strength in him to block Wilhelm's full-power attack.

Wilhelm threw [Vakira], now morphed into a crimson flash, towards the demon.

The spear shattered his forehead guard, tore his flesh, and crushed his bones, pulverizing Adara's head from the mouth upwards.

Filma and the others could see that the demon's HP gauge had reached zero.

Yet Adara did not fall. Even with his head lost, the remaining mouth still moved.

“So...It...ends...heeeeeere...for meeeehh...”

“Eh?”

“What?”

A second after Milt and Wilhelm expressed their disbelief, Adara’s body collapsed.

Not only his body, but his gear too gradually turned into a thick goo-like liquid. Milt and Wilhelm stopped in their tracks.

“Buuut...juuuust disaaaappeeeearing liiike thiiiiissss...iiiiisn’t likeeeee meeeehh...”

Shibaid and Filma reacted instantly.

“It’s nooooot fffuuunnnnn!!!!”

At the same time of Adara’s scream, his now liquid body lunged towards Tiera.

It was the demon’s last resort; while moving, his body was slowly disappearing from the edges.

But before completely disappearing, it wanted to swallow Tiera and take her with him.

“No, Yuzuha! Leave me and run!”

“Kuu!”

Tiera realized that she was the target and urged Yuzuha to flee.

In response, as if refusing Tiera’s request, Yuzuha focused more power in her four limbs and cried.

“It’s still a bit too early to give up!”

As Tiera and Yuzuha were talking, Filma and Shibaid reached them.

Shibaid stood between what had become of Adara and Tiera, while Filma took a stance behind him, thrusting [Red Moon] towards the sky.

“You shall not pass!”

With a bold shout, Shibaid firmly planted his [Great Shell Shield of Collision] into the ground.

At the same time, the air before Shibaid trembled. A transparent, hexagonal barrier formed as to separate the space between Adara and Shibaid.

It was one of the [Great Shell Shield of Collision]’s abilities, the creation of attack-repelling barriers.

It was originally an ability intended as anti-air, but it was sufficiently useful against Adara’s straight rush.

“It won’t last long!”

“I just need 5 seconds!”

Judging from the liquid nature of the monster, it was only a matter of time before it crossed over the barrier.

Filma answered Shibaid while focusing her magic power in her blade.

[Red Moon]’s blade, held up high towards the heavens, started shining with a deep red light, which seemed to rise higher and higher.

“Orrahhh!!”

Trying to stop the advance of the thing which Adara had become, Wilhelm performed a long-range skill. A lightning flare and raging flames struck the demon and managed to slow his progress for a few moments.

“Milt, Wilhelm, get away from there!! You’ll burn up too!!”

“Whoa, that’s a huge one! You get away too!”

“Tch!”

Milt caught on what Filma was about to do from Shibaid’s shout and urged Wilhelm to move too.

Perceiving the magic power accumulating within [Red Moon], Wilhelm clicked his tongue but made use of his boosted physical abilities to the fullest and distanced himself.

“Now!!”

“Yes!!”

After Filma’s signal, Shibaid dispelled his attack-repelling barrier. Like a flood no longer blocked by a dam, the turbid stream Adara had turned into grew closer.

“This is the end!!”

As if exchanging places with Shibaid, Filma stepped forward and swung down her [Red Moon].

Deep red streaks of light seared the earth, as if tracing the slashing motion.

Sword and Fire combination skill **【Shiden* - Kagutsuchi】** . *(T/N: Shiden means Ultimate, remember when Girard used Zekka in his final duel against Shin? That’s a Shiden-ranked skill)*

This skill, christened with the name of the mythological god of fire, unleashed heat worthy of its godly origins.

The ground under the turbid stream rose up in flames.

From the spot [Red Moon] had been swung, the light disappeared for an instant, but in the next instant roaring flames scorched the earth, with speed higher than the pitch black stream’s advance. The moment the light soaring in the sky had wrapped the black goo within itself, it had turned into hellfire.

“Aaah!!”

Even if she was at a fair distance from the attack and Shibaid was shielding her, Tiera couldn't help but yell.

Her skin had not been burnt by the heat. Nor had she been blinded by the light.

But she couldn't restrain her voice after feeling the sheer intimidation contained in that attack.

“So this is the strength of a High Human's follower...damn near unbelievable power..”

“It's a skill that combines sword and flame techniques. You can't use it without a specific combination of user and weapon...both of them must be of the highest grade.”

Watching the torpid stream engulfed by the flames, Milt answered Wilhelm's comment.

The game's exclusive special effects were a sight to behold too, but the scenery before Milt's eyes now was something more divine and much more powerful.

A holy flame purifying corruption. That was what it suggested to the imagination.

After the light grew dim, only the torn ground and metals emitting a red brilliance remained.





“Just what...power is that...?”

Scoruas, still reeling from the kick he had received, whispered his astonishment while pulling up his body, scorched by lightning and flames.

“I’m wondering too. Do you know anything?”

While perceiving the energy from the other battle, Shin answered to Scoruas’ mumbled words.

As the lightning stopped, Shin kicked the ground and closed in on the demon.

His right hand wielded [Moonless], the left one the newly unsheathed [Oboro Muramasa]. Its grade was superior ancient, similar to [Moonless]. In this world, it was a masterpiece among katanas, regarded as a “sword of the gods”.

“ThiSs poWeErr...are yOu rEeAlly hUmaN?”

“Who knows? In any case, you’re going to die here, so you’re fine not knowing, right?”

Shin answered Scoruas while cutting through the octopus tentacles that stretched towards him.

The tentacles were hard enough that Legend-grade weapons would simply bounce off them, but, before Ancient-grade weapons, they were as helpless as regular octopus tentacles.

With **【Limit】** released, Shin’s muscular strength was unbound, which, coupled with the blades’ sharpness, sliced through the tentacles like a hot knife through butter.

“Here’s a little bonus too.”

After slashing 3 of the tentacles in half, Shin activated the Flame and Wind combination skill **【Echo Bomb】** .

What appeared was a ball of fire with a 1 mel diameter.

The balls of fire quickly became 10, then 20, then rained on Scoruas' face.

“GwAAh?? nOT onLy pOweR, bUt MagIC toOo!?”

Scoruas tried to parry the fireballs with his pincer-like arms.

The fireballs exploded as soon as they touched the pincers, thus inflicting damage to the monster's shell. The compressed air within the fireballs was also carried by the blast, sending its vibrations to the enemy's shell.

As the directed sound waves hit the shell, they gradually caused cracks to appear on its sturdy surface.

【Echo Bomb】 was a skill that caused damage both by sound waves and explosions, useful for damaging a monsters' hard skin and armor.

The endless flood of fireballs crushed Scoruas' pincers and scales, which were starting to fall off.

Continuous casting of this skill was a feat that not even several magicians could perform, even when taking turns casting.

It only became possible when one managed to cast it without chanting, possessed enough magical power, and high enough stats.

“As expected of a Grand Duke, you're pretty sturdy.”

This fierce attack would have turned a normal field boss to ashes, but Scoruas' HP had barely decreased.

Protecting himself with his pincers helped too, although Scoruas' defensive power was originally very high.

With his previous kick, Shin had planned to crush the demon's organs. However, Scoruas' stomach was now only slightly dented and had already recovered to the point that it couldn't be said to have been sunk in.

Shin's main priority had been to create distance between the two demons, but to

withstand an overlimit kick showed that Scoruas' defenses were quite impressive.

"The scales form a layered armor, I see."

Shin formed his guess while looking at the scales still falling from the demon's body. New scales were created where fallen ones used to be, hiding the demon's skin from sight.

"Looks like I can't just lock you down."

The newly formed tentacles knocked down 【Echo Bomb】 before Shin's eyes.

The 3 tentacles, huge in comparison to the demon's body, moved all around and hit all the fireballs, barely missing any.

The few fireballs left were blocked by the pincers.

The recovery ability probably extended to the whole body, as the demon's lower body also began to move again.

"Not a chance."

Shin, while keeping the magical skill active, rushed towards the horse legs that were trying to move.

The trunk-like legs were nothing more than a target for Shin. He closed in and swung his swords down, attempting to cut them off in one fell swoop.

The legs, however, noticed the sudden change before Shin could get close enough.

Octopus-like tentacles began sprouting from the horse legs' surface.

Every tentacle was roughly 15 mels long and as thick as a big rope. The tips were armed with knife-like shells, but the most notable thing was their massive numbers. The octopus leg-like appendages, easily numbering over 100, chased after Shin just like tentacles hunting their prey.

"Quit sprouting bizarre stuff!"

“dO noT thINk I wILL juSt SIT BaCK aNd do NOThINg!!”

Shin put some distance between him and the demon, all the while cutting down tentacles. After roughly 10 mels, the tentacles stopped their pursuit.

In their place, huge tentacles came crashing down on Shin’s head.

“Hah!”

Shin swung [Moonless]and [Oboro Muramasa]in a cross, which was enough to blow away 3 tentacles sprouting from Scoruas’ right arm.

“Oops!”

The left arm’s pincer came on the offensive as well. It was not impossible to slash it, but if he remained in place he would have been thrown back.

As Shin jumped to dodge it, he felt a stronger gaze pointed towards him.

Shin faced upwards and found Scoruas, with his mouth wide open and pointed at Shin. A large amount of compressed water was already present inside the mouth.

“Kaaahhhh....”

It was highly pressurized water breath - a wide range attack sea-dwelling monsters excelled at.

But it could not be unleashed.

“GRUAAAAAAAAA!!!”

“-----!?!”

Kagerou had circled around the demon, jumped on its back and sank his claws on Scoruas’ head.

Returning to his original form, Kagerou had jumped while using **【Hiding】** , attacking Scoruas from his blind spot.

After Shin had kicked Scoruas away, Kagerou had hid on Shin's shadow.

Streams of water burst through the gaps of the demon's closed mouth. By forcing Scoruas' mouth to close just before the shot, the breath attack was unleashed within the demon's mouth.

The leaked waterstreams cracked open whatever ground they touched, proof that the attack's power was not to be underestimated.

“YoU FiLThy BeASt..!!!”

Scoruas was now rampaging, trying to shake Kagerou off his back. He tried to reach around his back with his tentacles, but Kagerou had enveloped his whole body in lightning, thus burning the tentacles and preventing them from wrapping around him.

Scoruas was a rank 3 boss, but close to rank 4.

In comparison, the Gruefago -the ordinary monster version- was roughly in the middle of rank 3.

Kagerou, however, was a mutated species, and his rank was more or less the same as Scoruas'.

His physical abilities were more than enough to cause damage to the demon.

“GHAAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!!”

Kagerou, his battle instincts now completely released, unleashed a roar that boomed throughout the surroundings. His lightning-clad blow easily crushed Scoruas' scales and sank into the demon's flesh.

The divine beast then attacked the pincers' base with his fangs, causing cracks to open on the monster's carapace with a loud creaking sound.

“Kagerou! Get away!”

Schnee's voice resounded through the battlefield.

Scoruas was freed from Kagerou's attacks, but his relief was short-lived; seconds later, the demon was once again under attack.

Just as his attention was drawn to his back, crescent-moon-shaped blades of ice targeted him from the front. The blades were thin and almost invisible to the naked eye.

The blades were roughly 1 mel long: if they could be caught, they looked extremely fragile.

“Kh!”

Scoruas tried to crush them with his tentacles, but felt that each blade was imbued with magical power; he then quickly jumped away while using his shell-clad left arm as a shield.

“My arM...is FReeZiNG...”

The ice blades did not cause much damage. Yet each spot they touched froze instantly, in a 2 mel radius.

The chilling air affected not only the surface, but also deep within the carapace, robbing Scoruas of his mobility.

“I apologize for being late.”

“We were all waiting for you.”

Because of his physical abilities, Shin always struck first. In this situation, separating the two demons was of the utmost priority, so it was not a real problem.

“It looks like they are struggling less than expected. They might really defeat the enemy before we join them”

“Fantastic news. That Adara demon wasn't that strong, then?”

“It appears that Wilhelm's spear and Tiera's arrows had a greater effect than expected. They were much more powerful than I expect them to be.”

“That’s intriguing. We’ll have to ask them after we take care of this one.”

Shin and Schnee drew closer to Scoruas, all the while conversing in a perfectly usual manner.

“The tentacles always get in the way. It’ll be easier to use this too.”

“I’ll borrow it, then.”

Shin passed a card to Schnee, who materialized it.

What appeared in her left hand was a short sword with a transparent emerald-green blade and dainty decorations. The blade part was roughly 60 centimeters long.

The name of this superior Ancient-class weapon was [Suirentou - Kabutohana].

“Here I come.”

Schnee’s silhouette vanished in thin air. Moving quickly and gracefully as if dancing, leaving after-images in one’s wake was a Kunoichi’s specialty. It was fruit of the combination of the movement-type martial skills 【Ground Shrink】 and 【Mirage Dance】 .

While the tentacles unsuccessfully tried to halt her advance, Schnee carved Scoruas’ front left leg with her blades. The weapons she wielded were both of Ancient grade; the carapace’s defense power was nothing before them.

At the same time, she had activated the Katana-type martial skill 【Pomegranate Burst】 .

Scoruas’ front left leg, struck by a storm of blue and green slashes, had already lost half of its functionality.

“It won’t go like before this time!”

Shin was running towards the demon’s front right leg.

His attack was straight from the front; [Moonless] and [Oboro Muramasa] repeatedly

unleashed cross-like slashes.

It was the Katana-type martial skill **【Brilliant Void Cross】** .

The Light and Dark elemental blades felled the tentacles and carved cross-shaped scars on the demon's body. Scoruas' front right leg lost all of its functions roughly at the same time that the left one was crushed by Schnee.

“ThIS iS...ABsUrD...hOw coUld I...”

Because of the damage to the legs and Kagerou's lightning attack received from behind, Scoruas was now slumped forward. Before his eyes stood Shin and Schnee, both with weapons at the ready.

“Let's go with a combination attack.”

“Understood.”

The magical power focusing in their weapons caused even the atmosphere to emit a sharp, grinding sound.

The concentration was so dense that all that Scoruas' pupils could register was a violet and blue flashing light.

“ThIS lIght iIIIiSS...!!!”

Scoruas could not finish his sentence before the slash reached its target.

Cooperation-exclusive skill **【Decapitation Spark】** .

It was a crushingly heavy sword slash, coming from a gigantic blade-shaped energy, extending from [Moonless] and [Blue Moon].

What they had unleashed was a single flash. A single cleave that cut through the arms Scoruas had raised to defend himself, his harder-than-steel carapace and layers of scales, as if they were nothing.

The blade descended as mercilessly as a real guillotine.

The skill, possessing power unimaginable in the game era, cut Scoruas' head off in one fell swoop.

“Better safe than sorry.”

“Yes.”

Shin and Schnee readied their blades before the skill ended.

Their opponent was a Grand Duke; even if its HP had become 0, they doubted it would just die like that.

Scoruas' gigantic body was run through by sword slashes, which crossed in its center and divided the demon's body in 4 parts.

It was defeated, without a shred of a doubt; after some time, the demon's body turned into particles and started disappearing.

“How could I lose so easily...? Just who are you...?”

“You only have your head left, but you can still talk? Well, there's no reason for me to tell you though.”

Scoruas' sliced head had started speaking. It was a mystery where the voice came from, but its distorted tone had returned to a more human-like one.

“Someone who could subdue Schnee Raizar and a divine beast...haha, now I see, you are a hi---”

That was everything Scoruas managed to utter. It appeared he could not maintain his existence anymore; his head also turned into particles and disappeared.

Items such as jewels and metals were the only things left where Scoruas' body had been.

“Demons drop items in this world?”

“The demon we defeated at the king's castle did not drop anything, though.”

On closer inspection, the dropped gemstones were all Unique class. The metals too were rare kinds, such as Orichalcum and Mithril.

Shin assumed that the items the demon created within its body were expelled when the demon passed, thus appearing just as dropped items would.

They did not seem tainted by the miasma, but to be sure Shin purified them before converting them into cards and storing them in the item box.

“Well then, let’s rejoin the others.”

“It doesn’t look like they needed help after all.”

Adara was nowhere to be seen. While Scoruas was disappearing they perceived a large quantity of magical power and turned around, to find a deep red flash of light rising in the distance, signaling the conclusion of the conflict.

The effect suggested that 【Kagutsuchi】 had been activated.

The group of 3 quickly started on their way back and re-joined with Shibaid’s entourage.

“You wrapped things up pretty quickly.”

“That’s my line, honestly. I thought your party would have needed more time, Shin.”

Shin’s words were answered by a disappointed-sounding Filma.

Based on the monsters’ shapes, Adara was much easier to fight than Scoruas. The latter would take longer to fight because of his many unpredictable attack patterns. Scoruas was also slightly higher than Adara in terms of level of ability.

If both groups stopped the enemy while continuously adding damage, normally Filma’s group would have finished their opponent sooner.

“We had the chance to power up a little, you see. Let’s talk more later.”

In order to regroup with Konig’s entourage, which had gone a safe distance from the

battlefield, Shin materialized the carriage from a card.

A short while after the group's carriage departed, Konig's marker appeared on Shin's map.

The [Cloak of Hidden Threads]Konig was wearing was something Shin had lent him, so he would not be hidden from Shin's sight.

Maybe because he had noticed the cloud of dust raised by the carriage headed in their direction, Konig had stopped moving.

Shin left the reins and waved in Konig's direction, who unequipped his cloak.

"Apologies for the wait. We're going back to Balmel, so please get on board."

"I have a mountain of things I'd like to ask...but first I suppose I shall do so."

Konig was carrying Hermie on his back. She had regained consciousness, but her expression was still somber.

"How do you feel?"

"I am fine, thank you. I humbly apologize for all the trouble I caused you."

"No, we made some unexpected findings on our own, so please do not worry."

If Hermie and Wilhelm hadn't been kidnapped, Shin's party would not have rushed to their location. In that case, Scoruas' plan could have been successful.

For Hermie and the worried Lilishila it was an unfortunate turn of events, but Shin was glad they could crush the demons' plans. Of course, he kept such an opinion to himself.

"We will depart right away."

The group planned to head towards Balmel, then travel by sea to a town close to Sigurd, lastly reaching Sigurd with the carriage.

Reasons for this route were also that the carriage alone would have taken too much time and Vizzy's dragons could not carry all of them.

It would have been possible if they rode separately, but they were not in a rush like before, so Shin decided not to reveal to Konig that they can ride dragons.

After they reached Balmel, Shin's party went directly to check the ship's timetable. They also had to stock up on food.

Konig also left to send a message to the Church.

Hermie, who was not feeling too well, stayed in the inn, with Wilhelm as her guard.

"I apologize to have you stay back for someone like me..."

"What?"

Wilhelm's brow furrowed after hearing such self-deprecating words. Hermie had spoken unusually belittling herself on the carriage as well.

In the beginning he thought she felt down for having been kidnapped, but even so, her voice and expression were far too dark. It felt as if she was rejecting everything about herself.

Wilhelm thought about what the reason could be.

"Did those bastards say something to you?"

Scoruas, Adara, the Summit Faction members. Those were the possible answers.

"I am....no, because of me, many people were sacrificed."

"Now that you mention it, I seem to remember them saying something like that. But it's nothing for you to worry about, is it?"

Wilhelm spoke lightly, as if it wasn't anything important enough to be burdened by.

"That's not...!! All those people, they.."

“I couldn’t save them either. Even Shin and the others didn’t make it in time. Also, you can’t fight. The moment they got caught by those bastards, it was obvious that they couldn’t be saved. They were doing that stuff even before kidnapping you too.”

Hermie couldn’t possibly be the reason why they were sacrificed.

“If you’ve got enough free time to think nonsense like “it was my fault” or whatever, think about what you can do from now on instead. There might be other people captured in that cave, after all.”

“Concerning that, Konig, who can command the Church’s knights, is contacting the Church. Once he knows the reason, His Holiness the Pope will surely authorize them to act...”

Hermie answered Wilhelm’s words. The destruction of one of the Summit Faction’s bases was surely advantageous for the Church. There was no reason to hesitate.

“Is there anything I could do...?”

“Who knows. They call you Holy Woman, though. I don’t know what you can or can’t do, but if you just say something, there are plenty people who can achieve something better, isn’t it?”

“Holy...Woman....am I really worthy of such a name...?”

“Hmm, well...before we talk about who’s worthy or not, I don’t even know why they call you that.”

Wilhelm knew that those called “Holy Women” existed, but did not know why that was.

Excluding Konig, among the current members the only ones that maybe knew were Schnee, Shibaid, and possibly Milt.

In answer to Wilhelm’s admission of not knowing the reason for that title, Hermie started talking in a feeble tone of voice.

At first, people found her creepy. Someone from the Church heard rumors about her

and came to pick her up, she learnt how her power can help others. With time, they started referring to her as Holy Woman.

Hermie narrated her story, sometimes finding that the words died in her throat and wouldn't come out.

"People treated you like a creep, and still you think about helping them, that's really something."

"If I was asked why I did, it would be difficult to give a clear answer. Maybe...I wanted to prove that even someone like me can be useful to others."

"And isn't that good enough? They call you Holy Woman because there are people that were saved by you, right?"

"Is what I did, right...?"

"That's what they call a question with no answer. Maybe even if you weren't there they would have gotten by somehow, or maybe an even worse tragedy would have happened. In the end, we can only do what we believe in."

Wilhelm's words might have sounded banal, but they were the truth. To know all consequences one's actions could bring was something not even a Star Reader could do.

"Besides, a certain High Human said that even he can't save everyone. In other words, it's not possible even for a living legend. Just give up."

During their serious conversation, Wilhelm mentioned it as if there was nothing they could do.

"A certain High Human...?"

"Once I was trained by Schnee Raizar, see, and she told me so."

"Is...that so. All the more reason to do our best, then."

It wasn't clear if she had believed Wilhelm's words or not, but she showed a different

smile from before.

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it. It’s going to get busy now too. You better rest up while you can.”

“I will. You really are the person I was told about...”

“Huh? You were told about? By whom?”

Hermie’s words provoked a clearly annoyed look by Wilhelm.

“Let us just say that children watch the people around them more than we think.”

“Tch.”

Wilhelm clicked his tongue, a grimace on his face. Seeing this, Hermie let out a chuckle.

The group would now cross the sea towards Sigurd.

To their ears then echoed a distant sneeze.

s t a t u s

ステータス紹介

THE NEW
GATE



Name: **Filma Tolmeya**

Gender: **Female**

Race: **High Lord**

Main Job: **Magic Knight**

Sub Job: **Dark Knight**

Adventurer's Rank: **None**

Affiliation: **Rokuten**

● Stats

LV: 255

HP: 9344

MP: 6325

STR: 857

VIT: 661

DEX: 701

AGI: 712

INT: 633

LUC: 76

● Battle Equipment

- Head: Lifesphere Hairpin (HP bonus[XL], Auto HP recovery[XL])
- Body: Magic Armor of Hollow Lacquer (STR bonus[XL], Magic Power release, Sustained damage decrease[L])
- Arms: Gauntlet of Hollow Lacquer (STR bonus[XL], Inflicted damage increase[XL])
- Legs: Greaves of Hollow Lacquer (AGI bonus [XL]), Bind immune)
- Accessory: Age of Gods Earring
- Weapons: Red Moon (Immune from weapon-destroying attacks, Immune to penetration, HP absorption[XL], User limitation)

● Title(s)

- Master of Magic Swords
- Apex of Magic Skills
- Sleeping Beauty
- She who dances with the God of Death
- Exterminator etc

● Skill(s)

- Impact Slash
- Ominous Blade
- Darkness Thrust
- Bloody Pain
- Kagutsuchi etc

Other

- Shin's support character no. 2



Name: Milt
Gender: Female
Race: High Pixie

Main Job: Conjurer
Sub Job: Berserker
Adventurer's Rank: A
Affiliation: Ouroboros Hollow

● **Stats**

LV: 255
HP: 7657
MP: 3722
STR: 776
VIT: 221
DEX: 603
AGI: 539
INT: 400
LUC: 67

● **Battle Equipment**

Head: None
Body: Oriental Battle Garb (HP bonus[M], Damage reduction at set % [XL])
Arms: Oriental Battle Garb (DEX bonus[M], Critical damage increase[M])
Legs: Oriental Battle Garb (AGI bonus [M]), Critical damage increase[M]
Accessory: Scarf of Enticement (Enemy accuracy reduction[H])
Weapons: Breogand (Effective against humans[L], HP absorption[M], User limitation)
 Mirbal (Effective against humans[L], Magic skill damage increase[M], User limitation)

● **Title(s)**

● Master of Magic Spears & Axes
 ● Instructor of Physical abilities
 ● Trickster
 ● Protection of the Crazy Star
 ● Ally of Water Spirits etc

● **Skill(s)**

● Slash Nova
 ● Superior Dunk
 ● Clear Mirror
 ● Mirage Mist
 ● Spirit Summoning etc

Other

● Former player
 ● Former PK



Name: **Wilhelm Avis**
(Evil Dragon Awakened)

Gender: **Male**

Race: **Lord + Dragnil**

Main Job: **Magic Lancer**

Sub Job: **Dragon Knight**

Adventurer's Rank: **A**

● Stats

LV: 201

HP: 7011 + 1500

MP: 4921 + 750

STR: 624 + 200

VIT: 488 + 200

DEX: 446 + 100

AGI: 561 + 100

INT: 340 + 50

LUC: 55

● Battle Equipment

Head: None
Torso: Steel Silk Battle Attire - Altered(Miasma resistance[L], Sustained damage reduction [M])
Arms: Dragonscale arm guards - Altered(Miasma resistance[L], STR bonus[M], VIT bonus[M], Flame resistance)
Legs: Dragonscale leg guards - Altered(Miasma resistance[L], Binding reduction)
Accessory: None
Weapons: Hell Spear Vakira (Inflicted damage increase, Miasma resistance[L], Miasma special attack[L], Auto-return, user limitation)

● Title(s)

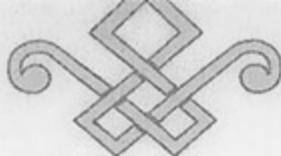
● Master of the Magic Spear
● Instructor of Spear Arts
● Holder of Magic Eye
● Holder of Dragon Genes
● Protector of Smiles
etc

● Skill(s)

● Tetralight Firestreak
● Thunderhowl
● Shadow Penetrator
● Ki Manipulation
● Crimson Lotus Fang
etc

Other

● Owner of the ancient grade spear "Vakira"
● A Critical



Name: Adara
Race: Demon
Class: Grand Duke

● **Stats**

LV: 881
HP: ????
MP: ????
STR: 761
VIT: 628
DEX: 923
AGI: 703
INT: 401
LUC: 45

● **Battle Equipment**

None

● **Title(s)**

- Grand Duke Class
Demon
- Servant to the Miasma
Lord
- Mad War God

● **Skill(s)**

- Dance of Confusion
- One Blade Flash
- Twin Blade Crossing
- Earth-rending
Hammer
- Earth-splitting Axe
etc

Other

- Named



Name: Scoruas
Race: Demon
Class: Grand Duke

● **Stats**

LV: 890
HP: ????
MP: ????
STR: 745
VIT: 951
DEX: 791
AGI: 426
INT: 601
LUC: 41

● **Battle Equipment**

None

● **Title(s)**

- Grand Duke Class
Demon
- Servant to the Miasma
Lord
- He Who Devours
Lamentations

● **Skill(s)**

- Wave-crushing Right
Arm
- Neck-crushing Left
Arm
- Creeping Tentacles
- Quake Stomp
- High-speed Recovery
etc

Other

- Named



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