

風波しのぶ
Kazunami Shinobi

RENEW
ザ・ニュー・ゲート
GATE

08.神刀の継承者

THE NEW GATE

- Volume 8 -

THE DIVINE KATANA'S INHERITOR

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Hell's Resident

[Translated by: Shin Translations]

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Illustration:魔界の住民



Toudou Kankurou
566 years old High Lord. Possesses incredible swordsmanship, equal to Shin's. Leader of the Hinomoto Brave Ten.

Mikazuki Munechika
521 years old. Supporting NPC and boss monster. Born from the anthropomorphization of the katana with the same name.

Tiera Lucent
157 years old Elf. Assistant at 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.

Saegusa Karin
20 years old Human. Swordsman in charge of Kanade's protection. 3rd seat of the Hinomoto Brave Ten.

Kujou Kanade
13 years old Human. Lady of the great clan governing east Hinomoto. Left on a journey to heal her sister's sickness.

Yuzuha
? years old Element Tail. Her appearance is that of a small fox, but she can also assume human form.

Shin
The story's main character. 21 years old High Human. The strongest player who engraved his name in the history of an online game. After clearing a death game, he was sent 500 years in the future of the game.

Main Characters

THE NEW GATE

Elnia Continent

Sea

Sigurd

Dragon Empire
Kilmont

Falnido Beast
Alliance

Lens

Sacred Place
Kalkia

ラミアの森
Larua Grand
Woods

ベイルン
Beirun

バメル
Bammel

ワイルド平原
Wraith Plains

バイレウ王国
Bayreuth
Kingdom

クジョウ城
Kujou Castle

聖山 富士
Sacred Mountain Fuji

ヒノモト



C h a p t e r 1

海

嵐

竜

THE NEW
GATE

CHAPTER 1

PART 1

“If you’re feeling out of it, you could rest at the inn, you know.”

“Kuu...”

Yuzuha, curled in a ball on Shin’s shoulder, expressed that she was okay, so he just lightly patted her on the head.

Since their battle with the demons that attempted to sacrifice the Holy Woman Hermie, Yuzuha would sometimes lean on his shoulders, maybe because she was not feeling too well.

“Your companion does not seem to be feeling well.”

“She’s saying she’s OK, though. It doesn’t look like she has a fever either, so I’ll just keep an eye on her for now.”

Leaving Hermie to Wilhelm’s care, Shin and Schnee had gone to meet Berett at Balmel’s Golden Company, as they needed a ship to return to Sigurd.

Many of the ships leaving Balmel’s port headed towards the northern part of the continent (Est). Travel by land would take too much time, so they decided to head by sea to a port town near Sigurd and then reach the city by land.

Using the dragons to travel by air was a last resort, so the party would not use them this time.

“So, how are the arrangements for the ship going?”

At Schnee’s question, Berett lowered his head apologetically.

“I would love to help you, but unfortunately our guild’s ships are all out. There is, however, one ship heading towards Est. It will stop by another port for supplies on the way there, but it will certainly allow you to reach your destination faster than waiting for one of our ships. What do you say?”

It was a ship that carried both trade goods and people. A relatively high social status was required to board it, but with Berett's introduction the party would have been able to board it easily.

"Using Tsuki no Hokora's introduction or revealing our members' identity would have been troublesome, so this really helps."

An introduction letter from Tsuki no Hokora would have been more than enough proof of status. Using Hermie's name too would have probably made it easy to board the ship. But both methods would have created trouble down the line, so they wanted to avoid them as much as possible.

An introduction letter from Berett, Golden Company deputy manager, had the same worth, but saying that they were business partners made it easier to use in their situation.

Having an A-rank adventurer (Wilhelm) and a Church knight (Konig) with them, saying that they planned to do item transactions would make their travel more believable.

"The ship's departure is scheduled for tomorrow, would that be alright?"

"Yes, we don't have a lot of time to waste, so that's perfect."

"I will contact you later about the current available cabins."

"I would prefer a private one. There are some members that wouldn't like their faces to be seen."

"Understood. Please wait a while."

Berett opened a drawer and began to write quickly on a piece of paper. He then inserted it into an envelope marked with the Golden Company's logo and sealed it with wax.

"Please show this to the captain. I will let them know."

"Thank you, and sorry for the trouble."

"It is a joy and an honor for me to be of help to High Humans. Do not worry."

Berett's smiling expression as he bowed was honest and pure. There wasn't the single trace of malice within it.

Shin thanked the man again and left the Golden Company.



While Shin's entourage was at the Golden Company, Tiera, Filma and Shibaid were buying foodstuffs and items. Kagerou, as usual, stayed within Tiera's shadow.

Filma, who had awoken after a 500-year long sleep, was excited to see the streets' hustle and bustle.

"As expected of a town based on trade, there's so many people here. They also look pretty happy too, it's a relief to see."

"A relief?"

Filma's words caused Tiera's puzzled question. After a chuckle, Filma answered.

"I only remember until the era of reconstruction after the natural disasters. At the time, even a small earthquake was enough to send everyone into a panic."

There was no sorrow in Filma's tone.

"As the generations changed, they probably forgot about what happened then. But the present was born on the efforts of many people. Now and then, people are much more resilient than one would expect."

Shibaid, who was accompanying them to prevent Filma from going too wild, commented with a smile.

Not finding any words to say, Tiera kept quiet.

"Yes, I feel that clearly. Anyway, that was nice of you to leave Shin and Schnee by themselves, Shibaid. You've become more perceptive, haven't you?"

"To be precise, there's someone else with them. But I didn't do it for a particular reason. I just made the decision that letting you go unattended was far more dangerous."

“And what would you mean by that?”

“I’m speaking from past experience. Try to think about it and you’ll understand.”

Shibaid was looking at Filma with half-opened eyes, clearly showing his disbelief at her last question.

“Don’t treat me like a troublemaker now. Well, I’ve gone a little overboard sometimes in the past, I’ll admit.”

Maybe because she recalled what Shibaid was talking about, Filma avoided looking directly at him.

“Come on, both of you, that’s enough. Since we’re out in town and all, why don’t we check out the stores?”

“That’s true too. We have the list of what we need, so let’s wrap that up quickly.”

“Yes, yes...”

Filma welcomed Tiera’s proposal, while Shibaid gave a wry laugh. He didn’t want to fight either, after all.

Filma quickly went to buy foodstuffs.

“Tiera, are you good at picking the good from the bad here?”

“More or less. I’ve been trained by master, after all. How about you, Filma?”

“I can cook if it gets down to it, but I make no promises about the taste. So, the choice of the groceries is up to you.”

Shibaid wasn’t one to be fussy about food either, so the only one among them who could tell the good groceries from the bad ones was Tiera.

The huge load of foodstuffs they bought was then carried by Shibaid.

“We really bought a huge amount...will you be all right?”

Tiera was worried about Shibaid carrying the large bag of groceries by himself, but

Filma casually brushed away her concerns.

“No need to worry, he’s not the type of guy to buckle under this much weight.”

“No problem, I will place them in the item box as soon as we reach a place without people around.”

Shibaid was in fact holding the bag without the least bit of difficulty.

“By the way, Tiera, there’s something I wanted to ask you…”

“Yes, what is it?”

“What’s your reason for traveling with Shin?”

“Hmm, I have been wondering that too. And the divine beast you have with you is clearly superior to your abilities as a tamer, too.”

Shibaid also joined in questioning Tiera.

“Uhm, do I have to talk about that here?”

“On the contrary, this is the ideal situation to. Crowded places are the best to talk about secrets.”

In a noisy and bustling street, as Filma said, it would be impossible to understand who was talking about what. Furthermore, neither Konig the Church knight nor Wilhelm the White Lion Lancer were around.

“Shin and Schnee are close to me, that’s why I want to know.”

Both Filma and Shibaid served directly under Shin, thus they wondered why Tiera, who was not under Shin’s command, was part of the entourage.

Tiera understood that they didn’t just ask her on a whim, and nodded seriously.

“I understand. Everything started when my master, Schnee, saved me.”

Tiera then explained briefly what happened until Shin removed her curse.

“...I see. It’s true that the “Cursed Gift” was usually removed in town before, so there was nothing else to do.”

“Indeed. I too have attempted to research it, but could not find anything.”

“Shin seemed to know about it, but both of you didn’t?”

Tiera was surprised to know that, Schnee included, no one knew how to acquire the skill of [Purification] .

“I knew that Shin had learned it though. I helped looking for the items needed to learn it, but the last part was done by Shin alone, so I don’t know the details. It wasn’t a skill used often to begin with, so it was enough for only Shin to learn it. I think it’s similar for the other people we know too.”

“That’s right. That time, even if you did not learn it yourself you could have curses removed easily in the cities now called ‘Sacred Places’. It was not something to spend effort to learn.”

“What can I say...it’s incredible.”

The existence of cities where cursed people could freely enter and leave and easily be purified was something Tiera was not able to imagine.

Shibaid and Filma, who knew how the world changed after the “Dusk of the Majesty”, understood Tiera’s surprise.

“By the way, Tiera, what do you think about Shin?”

“Eh?”

Tiera couldn’t help but voice her surprise at the sudden question.

“I mean, you thought you wouldn’t ever leave that shop and he pops out of nowhere and dispels your curse without a single explanation. I honestly doubt that you aren’t the least bit interested in him, with all that happened.”

Filma spoke with confidence and a strange gleam in her eyes. She couldn’t help pointing it out.

“It wouldn’t be exaggerated to call him “a prince who saved the damsel just as she was about to give into despair”, right?”

“Well, um...of course I am thankful! But, er, you know it! Shin has master with him!”

“Polygamy is the norm in this world, isn’t it? Elves don’t seem to like that too much though. But do you really feel only gratitude for him?”

“Ah...um....”

Tiera couldn’t find the words to answer Filma’s dead serious look. But her floundering for words without denying the allegations was an answer in itself.

“Filma. It’s not proper to poke about in people’s love affairs.”

“I know, and I’ll stop now. But Tiera, let me say just one thing.”

“Y-Yes.”

Filma wasn’t grinning anymore now, and talked with a very serious tone.

“It’s better to make your feelings clear. If you do after you feel regret, it’s too late.”

“!!!”

Tiera found herself swallow her breath, feeling that Filma had seen right through her.

“I’m sorry. I know this is none of my business.”

“...no, honestly speaking, I can’t find the answer yet myself.”

Tiera spoke with a small, wry laugh.

Filma was looking at her with a kind smile.

(I wonder what Shin’s answer will be, then.)

That was what Shibaid was thinking, apart from the two women.



“First, we’ve secured a means of transport.”

Shin’s entourage, back from the Golden Company, explained to the others about the ship to Sigurd.

Not only Tiera, Filma and Shibaid, but also Hermie and Wilhelm, who had stayed back at the inn, plus Milt, who had gone out with Konig, were listening.

“When will we depart?”

Konig asked.

“Tomorrow morning, in the ship called the Mediel. How were things on your end?”

“I contacted the Church. As I said before, they should come meet us at the town called Leshelle.”

Konig nodded to Shin’s inquiry.

Most members of the group coming to meet them, however, would be heading to the “Summit Faction” base.

The group, composed of Chosen Ones, was made to subdue the base in one fell swoop. It was a strategy possible only because Shin’s party had defeated the more powerful demons.

“Aw, I wanted to go with Shin too...”

“Didn’t you say that you would pay for the trouble you caused? You’ll have to work hard volunteering for a while.”

Milt’s complaints were quickly shut down by Shin.

Even if she had been manipulated, it was a fact that she had kidnapped Hermie. For this reason, it was decided that Milt would serve the Church for a period. Starting, of course, from this base capture mission.

“Well, is there anything else that needs to be said? If not, we have an early start

tomorrow, so let's go rest."

As no one had anything in particular to add, all members proceeded to their assigned rooms.

The room division was Shin with Yuzuha and Shibaid, Schnee and Filma, Konig and Wilhelm, Tiera with Milt and Hermie.

The bright and cheerful Milt had become good friends with Tiera and Hermie and could also act as bodyguard, so she was put in the same room. Kagerou was, as always, in Tiera's shadow too, so the fighting power was more than sufficient.

"Anyway Yuzuha, you're still sick?"

"Kuu..."

"Monsters get sick too, huh. It's not a status ailment, so I really have no idea what it could be..."

Shibaid was worried too, but Yuzuha kept mentally signaling that she was all right.

Shin told her again to let him know if her condition got worse and went to sleep.



The next day, Shin's eyes opened earlier than expected. The reason was a weight of unknown origins on his right arm.

"I think this happened before...Yuzuha, is that you?"

After confirming the situation with [Analyze], Shin looked at the young girl sleeping next to him.

She was Yuzuha, transformed in human form. But her appearance was not the "small girl mode" Shin knew.

She looked like she could be in her early teens. Her height was around 150 centimeters, and her body now showed budding feminine curves. Her silver hair, stretched until her waist, sparkled in the sunlight coming in through the window.

Her ears and tail were the same as before.

“Your feeling sick was because of this, then.”

Shin pulled out the arm that Yuzuha was hugging and, with his free hand, laid a blanket over her. As he did so, Yuzuha slowly opened her eyes.

“...where?”

Staring at where Shin’s arm used to be, Yuzuha’s hands fumbled around in the now empty space. Maybe because she wasn’t fully awake yet, she hadn’t noticed that Shin had just slightly moved away.

Her expression was just like a lost child looking for her parents.

As she clumsily propped her body up, the blanket over her fell down, revealing her naked figure.

Mornings in Balmel are slightly cold. Shin picked up the fallen blanket and wrapped Yuzuha with it.

“...here.”

Yuzuha didn’t even glance at the blanket; with a mumble, she laid her head on Shin’s lap and quickly slipped into slumber. Her expression was one of simple bliss.

“Wait, you’re going back to sleep!?”

It would be a problem to just leave her like that, so Shin wanted her to put some clothes on first of all. Previously she had turned in fox mode with clothes on, and when she had turned into a small girl again she had them still on, but for some reason it didn’t happen this time.

Yuzuha’s clothes were on the ground next to her, in card form, so there was no need to pull them out.

“Tell me what’s going on, first.”

“Hm?”

“Your looks, I mean. Is it because your power returned?”

“Yes. I’m still not used to it, so this is my limit for now.”

According to Yuzuha, she had been feeling sick because alongside the recovery of her powers, a lot of new knowledge returned to her too. A large quantity of memories had returned to her as well, so her head felt overloaded.

Her powers apparently returned to 60% of their original state; if she got used to her newly recovered strength and more memories returned, her appearance would also grow some more.

“Is that also the reason why your expression is so stiff?”

“Kuu?”

Yuzuha tilted her head to the side, puzzled by Shin’s question.

Excluding her blissful expression while sleeping, her facial expressions barely changed. It was a perfect poker face.

Shin checked Yuzuha’s status again, finding that her level now exceeded 600 and her stats had increased exponentially too. Even judging from the numbers alone, she was now at Raid rank 3 strength.

“I guess we should let Schnee and the others know. Can you go back to fox mode? Some people might be surprised that you grew bigger all of a sudden, so that would be better.”

“No problem.”

Yuzuha answered positively and transformed right in front of Shin.

After confirming her transformation, Shin contacted Schnee via Mind Chat. He told Schnee, who was already awake, to call Filma too, while Shin himself woke up Shibaid.

Tiera was with Hermie, so he decided to tell her later.

“Ooh, you really got stronger.”

Filma was impressed after seeing Yuzuha's new level.

"I suppose that her level will be 1000 eventually."

Schnee, her hand on her chin, was imagining Yuzuha's final form.

"Having an Element Tail as an ally is a great asset."

As he had battled one before, Shibaid knew what a reliable companion she could be.

"Nothing's particularly different from before, so please treat her as you did until now."

"Please."

After finishing talking, it was now time to prepare for departure.

Shin joined the others for breakfast on the ground floor. It was still a little early when they finished eating, but they decided to head to the harbor nonetheless.

Shin was walking next to Wilhelm.

"Hermie seems to feel a little better, right."

"So it seems. But why are you asking me?"

"Isn't it because you two stayed back at the inn? That she smiles like that now."

Hermie clearly looked in Wilhelm's direction more often than before. It wasn't hard to think that something must have happened. Next to Hermie now walked Konig and Milt, as protection.

"We just talked a little, I tell you nothing happened."

"Looking at her tells me something else, though."

"Whatever."

Shin felt that it wouldn't be good to pursue the matter further, so he dropped the topic. They kept walking, chatting casually, until they spotted the ship's sails.

Probably because the time for departure was close, the port was full of bulky men carrying supplies inside the ships.

“It’s really packed! By the way, which one is our ship?”

Milt asked while her eyes darted all around the port.

“The largest one, over there. I confirmed it yesterday, so there’s no mistake.”

Shin pointed at one of the anchored ships. It was clearly larger than the others around it, looking like it could carry a large quantity of goods.

“It looks like there are people on board already. Shall we go too?”

“We don’t have anything else to do anyway, let’s go.”

Shin answered Tiera’s question and started to walk towards the ship. As the group drew closer, the crewmember in charge of the passengers’ check came up to them.

It was a large, muscular man, who looked like he could break in bodybuilding poses any second.

“Do you plan to board the Mediel?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have the boarding pass or a letter of introduction?”

The man’s intimidating appearance hid a perfectly polite demeanor.

Representing the group, Shin handed the man the letter received from Berett. The man took the letter, opened it carefully and examined its contents.

“...yes, this will do. Welcome aboard the Mediel. Shall I guide you to your cabins?”

“Please.”

Berett said to show the letter to the captain, but apparently the crewmembers already knew of them too.

The ship's cabins reflected the overall size of the vessel; Shin's request for a private cabin had been granted as well.

Following the muscular man, Shin's party proceeded through the ship and finally arrived before a room protected by a sturdy-looking door.

The cabins were divided between men and women. Hermie was camouflaged, but they picked the farthest room from the entrance for her, to avoid others' eyes as much as possible.

"Guess I'll go see the ship."

"Kuu."

Shin stood up and Yuzuha leapt on his shoulder with a small cry.

"OK, let's go together."

Shin called Shibaid too, then went on a walk through the ship. They checked the ship's interior structure, what was located where, while paying attention not to get in the way of the stockers.

After they checked most places they had access to, they heard the sound of a bell, the signal that the ship was about to depart. More time had passed than expected.

Just as Shin thought that it was time to return to their cabins, they heard a voice from beyond the corner.

"Finally, my sister's sickness will be healed!!"

"Yes, I am sure Lady Haruna will be very happy too."

The owners of the voices could not be seen, but from their high pitch Shin assumed they belonged to a little girl and her female attendant. As the ship was very large, they had already seen several passengers accompanied by servants.

They were now close to the guest rooms and the surroundings were fairly quiet, so they could hear the conversation clearly.

Shin assumed the little girl had obtained a precious medicine for her sister. Even a

stranger like Shin could tell that the girl's voice was brimming with joy.

"It was really hard to find it...aah!?"

"Eh....?"

The girl beyond the corner had suddenly cried, so Shin stopped moving. Before him stood the little girl, with a look of utter surprise on her face. She looked like she was in her early teens.

The girl was small in stature, around 140 centimeters. Her flame-like bright red hair, extending until her waist, were her most striking feature. Her black, clear eyes looked straight at Shin.

"Milady?"

Behind the little girl appeared a young woman who, from her clothing, resembled a Samurai. She was wearing gauntlets and shin guards, black with patterns drawn in orange lines. On her shoulders she wore large protective plates called "Osode", while her chest was protected by a relatively small breast plate.

Her height was probably close to 170 centimeters. Her waist-length black hair was tied behind her head in a ponytail.

"Do you have business with these gentlemen?"

The woman looked towards Shin with eyes as deeply black as her hair. Her sharp look eloquently signaled how she did not only look tough.

"No, it's nothing. It appears I was a little too excited. I didn't catch their presence. My apologies, fellows. I didn't pay attention, kindly forget about this."

"Er, yeah..."

After the woman's question, the little girl apologized to Shin.

Even if his answer was vague, Shin was relieved to hear the girl's words, because the woman's eyes when looking at him appeared somewhat dangerous.

"Ehm, so, I will take my leave."

“Yes, a good trip to you.”

Shin gave a slight nod and headed towards Schnee’s room.

As they arrived, they noticed everyone except 2 members were there.

“Where are Hermie and Konig?”

“Hermie started feeling sick as soon as the ship started moving, so Konig’s taking care of her.”

Shin’s question was answered by Milt, who was drinking a glass of water. The horse carriage hadn’t made her feel sick, but the ship apparently did.

“She wasn’t terribly sick, so she should be OK as long as she lies down.”

Schnee added to Milt’s words.

“Shin, you went looking around the ship, right? Anything caught your interest?”

“No, nothing in particular. There weren’t suspicious passengers either.”

Thanks to the map function, Shin had also verified that there wasn’t anyone hiding in places such as the ship’s hold. In the game era there was an event in which NPCs would hide there, to attack from within when the ship was attacked by pirates.

After briefly talking about the party’s next plans, all members went on their separate business.

Shin headed towards the deck to see the scenery.

“Ah, I’m coming too.”

“Me too.”

Milt and Tiera quickly followed after Shin. Yuzuha was perched on his shoulder as usual.

Shin had already visited the deck while inspecting the ship, but he had only checked the path which led to it and had not watched the scenery.

“Coming on deck, you can feel the wind picked up.”

“It feels really nice.”

“Ah, there’s something there!”

Tiera, who was looking at the sea from the edge of the deck, had found something.

Shin and Milt went closer to the edge of the deck and looked in the direction Tiera was pointing to.

“Oh, Hero Dolphins.”

“As colorful as usual, too.”

What Tiera had spotted were Hero Dolphins, dolphin-type monsters.

Maybe they were inspired from certain superhero shows, because they always traveled in packs of 5 or 6; a red and blue one were always present, while the other colors were more varied, ranging between yellow, green, white, black or pink.

They were non-active monsters, a type that generally didn’t attack unless provoked.

“Oh, that’s rare. There’s a gold one.”

“Wow, it’s true.”

Milt pointed at a pack of Hero Dolphins, led by a red one and followed by a blue, white, black and gold one, all swimming parallel to the ship. It was really rare to witness a golden one.

“It’s shining much brighter than the others.”

“Its power should be about the same though.”

If defeated, it could drop items slightly rarer than the others. It was said that if a player found one, their luck would increase.

“Hm? Hey, Tiera, what’s wrong?”

Shin looked back at Tiera, to find her staring at the seawater.

“Nothing, I just realized that now we aren’t touching the ground with our feet...”

Apparently it was her first time on a ship, so she felt slightly uneasy.

“We won’t sink unless something really big happens, so rest easy, I tell you.”

A skill to increase resilience had been used on the ship, so even if charged by a large marine monster, it wouldn’t sink easily.

“I know that in my head, but I won’t calm down until I get used to it, I guess.”

It wasn’t something that could change instantly.

After contemplating the scenery for a while, Shin and the others returned to their cabins.

PART 2

The sea travel proceeded smoothly; except a brief stop at a port town, nothing worth mentioning happened.

The only thing notable was that they met the young girl and her attendant a few more times. As it was inconvenient to not know each other's names, they briefly introduced each other.

The young girl with the unique speech style was Kujou Kanade, a level 159 Archer.

The samurai-like woman's name was Saegusa Karin, a level 221 Samurai and Kanade's escort.

Even without fighting, Shin felt that those two had strength surpassing their ages. They could even be Chosen Ones.

"The weather's pretty bad today."

"Indeed, you can feel a storm brewing."

Whispered Shin, while looking at the cloudy sky. Kanade nodded in reply, Karin was standing next to her too.

It was almost dusk, but the setting sun was hidden by thick clouds.

"You two are headed to Hinomoto, was it?"

"Indeed we are."

"I too would like to visit it if I have the chance, what kind of country is it?"

Shin thought it was a good chance to ask about Hinomoto. Both the country name and the two women's names reminded him of Japan.

"It is said that Hinomoto came to be when, at the time of the natural disasters, islands detached from the continent were conquered by several groups of people. At present the two representative families of Kujou and Yaejima rule over its eastern and western regions."

The guilds that Gaien -the Dragnil Shin met during the escort mission to Beirun- talked about apparently only ruled over parts of the country.

“I see...oh? Lady Kanade, you are a Kujou too, aren't you?”

“I am indeed. I might look like just a little girl, but I am one of the Kujou, the rulers of east Hinomoto.”

“Milady, you are aware that we should not mention such things in public.”

Kanade's words were met with a reprimand by Karin.

“I know that full well, but we do not need to fret if it's them.”

For some reason, Kanade seemed to place some trust in Shin's party after a few conversations. He didn't feel Karin's piercing look anymore either.

Incidentally, Shin had to address Kanade politely because not doing so would have attracted intimidating looks from Karin.

“It's a country overflowing with nature.”

“It reminds me of my homeland. But is it alright for a lady of such a household to leave the country? Having just Karin as an escort seems odd too, to be honest”

“In truth, I left the country in secret. The situation is...rather complex.”

“For a member of the Kujou house to become an adventurer is unheard of, after all.”

“Don't be like that. You know well there was no other choice, Karin, that's why you accompanied me. Am I wrong?”

“No, that is correct, but...”

Judging from Karin's grim expression, one could assume that the “complex situation” Kanade mentioned could not be solved without leaving Hinomoto.

“That's enough. We obtained what we were seeking after all. We just need to return now.”

Ships for Hinomoto leave from the port Shin's party will disembark at.

"It started raining."

They expected it to rain, considering the amount of clouds in the sky. What they didn't expect was the force with which the rain battered the ship, and the sudden increase of the wind.

Just seconds after the first raindrops, an incredible deluge started pouring down, followed by powerful gusts of wind that stirred the sea.

Around the same time, a group of monsters entered Shin's perception field. They were closing in on the ship at an alarming speed.

"Monsters. They're coming straight towards this ship."

"Is that true? Karin, can you feel it?"

"No, nothing at all."

Shin's perception field was quite large, thanks to the combined use of skills. Shin didn't know the range of Karin's field, but it would likely take a little more time until she could detect the monsters.

"I don't know if you will believe me or not, but I detect 10 units, and quite large ones at that."

While explaining to Kanade and Karin, Shin contacted Schnee via Mind Chat.

Schnee and the others had also detected the monsters' arrival; she replied that Filma had gone to talk with the captain.

Shibaid, Wilhelm, and Tiera were also headed to Shin's position.

"My companions will come soon. Lady Kanade, what will you two do?"

"If they are headed towards the ship, barricading ourselves in our cabin will do little good. Fortunately, I have some skill with the bow. I shall lend you my aid."

"I too offer what little strength I have."

Kanade pulled out a card from her drenched kimono and materialized it.

The next instant, the middle Legend-grade bow [Fiery Diamond] appeared in her hand.

It was a large weapon, close to a longbow size, which came accompanied with the quiver. Its long range was its major characteristic.

Karin materialized her battle gear as well; her left hand was holding a katana with a red sheath.

It was the middle Legend-grade [Vermilion Orchid], a fire elemental katana.

“Did we make it?”

“Just in the nick of time.”

“T-too fast...”

Shin had just drawn his [Kakura] when Shibaid, Wilhelm, and Tiera arrived on deck.

At Tiera’s feet were both Kagerou and Yuzuha. They were all members capable of defense and long distance attacks.

“What about the others?”

“Lady Hermie is in her room. For added safety, I had Milt and Konig stay with her. Filma went to speak with the captain, and Schnee will come after bolstering Lady Hermie’s defenses.”

Milt, a water spirit user, was a powerful ally on the seas.

“Have you noticed anything?”

“The monsters appeared roughly at the same time as when the weather turned rough. From that, I suppose that they are either serpent or mollusk types.”

Shin quickly answered Wilhelm’s questions with his hypothesis.

There are monsters that influence the weather when they appear. The types of

monsters mentioned by Shin often cause storms with their coming.

“Esteemed passengers! We shall deal with the situation, please return to your cabins!”

Maybe they heard from Filma, or detected the presence themselves, but the crew members came to advise Shin and the others to take shelter.

The crew probably also acted as a monster protection team; they were carrying bows, rods, harpoons, and other weapons.

“We shall help too.”

“But sir....!? I understand. Thank you for your assistance!”

The crew members were reluctant at first, but changed their mind after seeing Shin’s party’s postures and equipment.

The ship, battered by the waves, made it difficult to stand straight. While it also depended on the opponents, the more numbers they had the better their chances would be.

“They’re coming!”

Moments after Shin’s warning, the seawater swelled greatly. Then, from the raging sea emerged the silhouettes of several monsters.

“Gale Serpents!”



The monsters appeared from the sea and glared at the ship were Gale Serpents, also called “Dragon of the Seas”. Part of the dragon category, this monster favored attacks such as water breath, roar, and tackles.

Its level usually ranged from 500 to 600, but facing it in an unstable battlefield such as the sea made it more powerful than the level indicated.

“What numbers!”

“And just when we needed to return to Hinomoto...!”

Kanade and Karin reacted with frustration at the sight of the Gale Serpents, emerging one after the other. No matter how sturdy the ship was, under the attacks of 10 Gale Serpents it was inevitable for it to sink, or so they probably thought.

In fact, the crew members that came on deck also stood still, pale after seeing the monsters.

“Wilhelm, Tiera! Don’t let them get any closer! Shibaid, block their long-range attacks!!”

While shouting these orders, Shin let his [Kakura] flash.

The Mallet and Wind combination skill [Bestial Drive] created a fierce gust of wind which blew away the rain and wind with a single hit, while also crushing the head of one of the Gale Serpents surrounding the ship.

Even among the battering wind and rain, the sound of the skill’s impact boomed clearly through the deck and the ears of everyone present.

In the span of a few seconds, the Gale Serpent with the smashed cranium gradually sank below the waves.

“Let’s finish this quickly!”

“I won’t lose either!”

After Shin’s attack, Wilhelm threw his Hell Spear [Vakira] and Tiera started shooting arrows.

The Gale Serpents, stopped in their tracks by the sudden fall of their comrade, tried to

avoid the attacks' trajectory with agility ill fitting their huge bodies.

Their response, however, had been too slow; the Gale Serpent closest to the ship was hit by an arrow on one eye and by [Vakira] on its body.

“—————!?!”

The monster did not die on the spot, but unleashed a scream like grinding metal and collapsed among the waves.

“You are far from the average traveler, I see.”

Not just the monsters were surprised by Shin's movements. While aiming an arrow at a Gale Serpent poking its face from below the water, Kanade talked to Shin.

Shin replied that he was just a common traveler and focused again on his perception field. The Gale Serpents were swimming around the ship, alternatively getting closer and farther.

“Is it just me, or is the ship shaking more and more?”

“It's probably caused by the monsters.”

Karin also felt something was off, and agreed with Shin's observation.

“Tch, the bastards went underwater and won't show up anymore!”

“Hey, Shin!! The ship isn't going to turn over, is it!?”

Even if she had come closer, Tiera's voice was almost drowned out by the ever stronger storm's howling winds. Her concern was well placed, as even the crew members could barely stand without support, that's how violently the ship was shaking. They all grabbed handrails or sail masts, sticking their weapons on the floor to keep standing.

Only Shin and Shibaid still managed to stand straight.

“Shin! Looks like they're going to attack!”

Shibaid's words made Shin look all around himself, only to find 9 Gale Serpents emerging from the waves, open their jaws wide and point them at the ship.

“A breath attack, huh. Shibaid, take care of the ones in front. I’ll handle the rear.”

While sprinting through the shortest path on the ship, Shin pulled out the same shield Shibaid had equipped, the [Great Shell Shield of Collision] . Then, he activated a fully-powered anti-air barrier.

A barrier composed of interlocked hexagons appeared in midair and repelled the Gale Serpents’ water breath.

“Shit, the rain and wind make it hard to aim...”

Shin unleashed several magic attacks while holding up the barrier, but because of the storm rocking the ship and the distance between him and the targets, none reached their intended destination.

Even bow users such as Tiera and Kanade could not reach the monsters with their attacks.

Seeing this, Yuzuha made a proposition.

“Should I support?”

“Please.”

Shin earnestly asked for help.

“I should have lowered the numbers more with the first attack.”

Fighting on a ship during stormy weather was even harder than Shin had expected.

The clouds kept the sunlight from filtering through, making the surroundings constantly dark. The rocking ship made it hard to stand, but they had to fight off the monsters and protect the ship at the same time.

Shin’s party would survive even if the ship sank, but they couldn’t save all the crew members and passengers. If things continued like this, their situation would get worse little by little.

Shin regretted choosing the wrong skill for the first attack.

“Kuu.”

Yuzuha cried and activated a skill, which caused the rain and wind to temporarily weaken.

“There’s no time to hesitate anymore. Yuzuha, cover me!”

“Yes sir!”

Taking advantage of the instant the breath attacks stopped, Shin leapt from the ship.

“Sir Shin!?”

He turned back to see Kanade and Karin, hanging onto the ship handrails, looking at him. They had left the front to the reinforcements and rushed to his aid.

“Don’t go falling into the sea!”

Thinking that he didn’t need any help, Shin gave a short warning and kicked the sea.

“What in the...!?”

Accompanied by Karin’s exclamation of surprise, Shin rushed towards the Gale Serpents while causing bursts of water.

As long as the Movement-type Martial skill [Water Passage] was active, one could fight using water surfaces as footholds.

The first monster Shin targeted was the one hit in the eye by Tiera’s arrow. Shin swung [Kakura] from the monster’s blind spot and chopped off its neck.

“One down!!”

At the same time, Shin spun and kicked the Gale Serpent’s fallen head sending it crashing into the next Gale Serpent.

“———!?!”

As the Gale Serpent lost its balance, Shin activated the Light-type magic skill [Avraid Ray]. Thanks to the weakened storm, the light ray pierced two serpent heads.

“Two down!!”

There were 7 remaining Gale Serpents.

As Shin was searching for the next monster, an explosion echoed from the front of the ship.

In the dim darkness, a silver flash reverberated.

Looking at the map, Shin could verify that, among the 5 serpents in front of the ship, 3 had already disappeared. As Shin expected, the reinforcements had arrived.

“Let’s finish this once and....hm?”

As he was about to say “for all”, Shin detected that something else was coming closer.

2 new signals were closing in on the ship, much faster than the other Gale Serpents.

“(Schnee! Shibaid! Two more coming!)”

While taking down another serpent, Shin informed Schnee and Shibaid via Mind Chat about the two incoming monsters.

“(We have sensed them as well. Who would have expected such an assault though.)”

“(Indeed, were we not on board, the ship would have sunk by now.)”

Shin received a somewhat jaded response via Mind Chat. The location made it difficult to fight, but they did not feel particularly cornered.

With Schnee and Shibaid on deck, the ship would be sufficiently protected.

“They split, huh.”

The new monsters’ signals separated along the way; they were now heading one towards the front and one towards the back of the ship.

The sea swelled even higher than before, sending water spraying all around and revealing the silhouette of a Gale Serpent almost twice the size of the previous ones.

“I see, the Queen and King showed up.”

Even before using [Analyze] on the new monster, clearly different from the 10 Gale Serpents which appeared before, Shin had seen through its identity.

“Gale Serpent Queen – Level 702”

The monster’s details appeared at the same time as Shin’s words.

As expected, the monster name included the word “Queen”. The King was likely headed to the front.

Many monsters had “King” or “Queen” in their names, and most of them were escorted by monsters of the same species.

“I guess they built a nest around here.”

It was confirmed that monsters too, had the notion of territory. Considering their “King” and “Queen” names, these monsters were probably a couple. If so, the serpents that attacked the ship first could have been their children.

“Why did they come and attack the ship I wonder. There should be plenty of other prey.”

Maybe they were chased by a bigger monster, or wanted to practice hunting. Shin couldn’t know what the reason was, but in any case, what they had to do didn’t change.

The prey retaliating against the hunter was also a fact of nature.

“I’m sorry, but we can’t let you sink this ship.”

Shin ran towards the Queen.

He was about to strike it with [Kakura], while avoiding the breath attacks it unleashed, when the sea showed an unnatural movement.

The rumbling sea created a gigantic wave between Shin and the Queen, forcing them apart.

Then, as if in response to the giant wave, a series of 60 meters long harpoon-like jets of seawater shot towards Shin.

“[Aqua Lance] , huh? Sorry, that won’t work on me.”

Shin made the lances, coming at him from all sides, focus on one point, then leapt away.

As it used real seawater, this [Aqua Lance] had a higher number of lances, power, and resistance to magic than an ordinary one, but it wasn’t enough to stop Shin.

With one swing of [Kakura] , Shin blew past the barrage of water lances created by [Aqua Lance] . It wasn’t necessary to deal with all of them.

“Sorry to do this when you just arrived, but...”

Shin dodged a newly unleashed water breath, slashed through the giant wave and closed in on the Queen.

He then held [Kakura] ’s hilt with both hands, gripping it forcefully.

“The curtains are already closing!!”

With a shout, Shin pounded [Kakura] into the Queen’s cranium. With a thunderous sound that silenced the winds, the Queen’s skull visibly caved in.

The power of the attack strengthened by the Mallet skill [Fierce Impact] was not something even a Queen could sustain.

It was a superior species, with a shell that acted as a helmet, so its head was not crushed to bits. The shock did not kill it on the spot; the Queen’s body swung down to sea level, floating powerlessly on the waves.

“W-What in blazes is going on!?”

Kanade, who had been watching Shin’s battle, lost her balance because of the sudden shaking. Shin looked back and saw the shadow of a Gale Serpent beneath the ship.

“Trying to sink the ship now? You got a good beating, time to retreat.”

Of course, Shin would not let the monster succeed.

Shin immediately dove underwater to punch away the Gale Serpent before it could tackle the ship

Thanks to the marine environment, however, the serpent was not killed right away and slithered away from Shin.

“Guess it doesn’t work as well as aboveground.”

This was Shin’s first underwater battle after coming to this world. The response he felt on his fists was also lighter than usual.

“The currents are a pain too.”

He had to move while kicking the water to prevent his body from being dragged away. The invisible water currents were swirling all around Shin.

In an underwater environment, without a solid foothold, even Shin who still retained his memories of his experiences during the game era had to focus at all times or he would lose track of the direction he had to face.

Shin returned temporarily to the sea surface, and jumped in midair while kicking up jets of seawater.

In the same instant, he saw Kanade as she was about to jump into the sea.

“Hey, what are you doing!?!”

Following Kanade, Karin jumped into the water too.

Shin then noticed that the ship was severely tilted. He wanted to chase Kanade and Karin right away, but couldn’t leave the ship like that.

As Shin tried to get closer to the ship with the Movement-type Martial skill [Flying Shadow] , the seawater around the bottom of the ship suddenly froze.

The ice spread as to cover the ship, acting as a floating tube with the surrounding

seawater.

The waves were still tall, but not enough to knock over the ship now supported by the ice. Unless the frozen surface was crushed, the ship would not sink.

“I see they’re almost done too.”

From his position in midair, Shin saw Filma unleash crimson sword slashes towards the King and felt positive that the battle would be over soon .

“Then I will—!?”

Shin turned to quickly chase after Kanade and Karin, when a breath attack was unleashed in his direction. It was from the serpent that he had failed to defeat just before.

“I’m busy enough already!”

Shin kicked the air to dodge the breath attack, then pointed a finger towards the Gale Serpent, which was preparing another water breath, to activate a magic skill.

A light blue beam froze the Gale Serpent along with the surrounding water, instantly creating an ice pillar.

It was the Light and Water combination skill [Freezing Ray] .

This beam of light, characterized by high activation speed and freezing properties, froze the Gale Serpent until deep within its body.

Seconds later, the frozen pillar broke off in large and small blocks of ice.

“It made me waste too much time...they’ve already gotten far.”

Shin checked for Kanade and Karin’s signals and fell down to the water while grumbling. The two women had been swept away farther than he had expected.

“(Schnee, I’m going to pick up two women that fell into the sea. Can I leave the rest to you?)”

“(Understood. We will eliminate the remaining monsters very soon. Be careful.)”

Shin exchanged a Mind Chat with Schnee and kicked the water. Gaining distance by moving through the air, he rushed on the seawater while jumping to avoid the waves.

“There isn’t much time left.”

Kanade and Karin were apparently trapped in a sea current and were moving towards the edge of Shin’s perception field.

They were probably getting swept away by the current. Their signals were moving in a fixed reaction, but the trajectory was highly unstable.

“If I chase after them like this, we won’t be able to return to the ship.”

Shin considered their movement speed and the distance to the ship, then reached a conclusion.

Kanade and Karin were in the perfectly opposite direction to the ship. The ship would disappear from his perception field before he reached the two women’s signals.

“I’m sorry for Hermie and the others, but I have to go.”

The option of prioritizing the return to the ship and abandoning the two women did not exist for Shin.

During the sea trip, they had exchanged words several times. He couldn’t think of them as strangers and leave them alone anymore. For this reason, Shin decided to prioritize rescuing them.

“Let’s go to Karin first.”

Since she had jumped into the sea later, Shin managed to reach Karin first.

Shin deactivated [Water Passage] as he hit the water and dove into the sea. He proceeded while cutting through the currents swirling around him and caught Karin as she was being tossed about by the waves.

“There’s not much time left.”

Shin cast [Dive X] on Karin and sped up.

Shin was holding her torso with an arm and keeping her still, but there was no response from Karin. Considering how much time had passed since she had jumped into the sea, it was not possible for her to be still breathing.

“Don’t tell me I came to rescue them and they’re both dead...!!!”

With a shout, Shin charged through the water. As soon as Kanade entered his sight, he drew the white-sheathed katana [Hakuramaru] from the item box and swung it vertically very quickly, easily overcoming the water’s resistance.

Katana and Water combination skill [Deepwater Cleave] .

As if tracing the slash itself, the sea was cleft in a V-shape.

Shin, carrying Karin over his shoulders, jumped in midair and kicked the horizontal sea surface.

In the air, Shin kicked again. He rushed towards the center of the sliced V, towards Kanade.

“Here too?”

Shin, with [Hakuramaru] in his mouth, carried Karin with his right arm and Kanade with his left. Before the cleft seawater returned to its original state, he kicked against the horizontally sliced sea surface. After jumping back in midair, Shin activated [Clairvoyance] and looked around.

As he was focused on chasing the two women, He didn’t know where he currently was. He looked around to see if there was any land in the surroundings, and found a promising shadow on the right.

“Hang on, please!!”

Shin ran as fast as he could.

A mad rush straight towards land, leaving water spouts in his wake.

Maybe because the rain clouds had not reached this stretch of land, the waves near the coast Shin reached were very calm.

Shin reached the sandy beach, quickly laid the two women down and checked their breathing and pulse.

“No, don’t tell me.”

They were both in a state of cardiac arrest.

Trying to suppress his growing impatience, Shin thought of a way to solve the situation.

With [Analyze] , he saw that both women’s HP were slowly reaching zero. The decrease speed was more or less the same, but Karin seemed to have incurred damage somewhere, as she had 10% less HP.

The only solution Shin came up with at the moment was to cast [Heal] and then perform CPR on both.

He first performed CPR on Kanade. Even if slightly, she had jumped into the sea earlier than Karin. As she was younger, Shin decided that she was the more urgent case.

“Cough! Cough!!”

“Great, one’s done!!”

With relief at a resurrection quicker than expected, Shin put Kanade in a more comfortable posture and made her spit out the water.

He then left her and performed CPR on Karin. It didn’t go as well this time, so Shin, relying on a hazy memory, tried to perform a heart massage.

“...h...n...? What...are you...?”

Shin was too focused to hear what Kanade was saying.

Was her breathing adequate? Was the heart massage’s strength and rhythm correct? Was there still time for her to come back to life?

That was all Shin could think about.

“Kah!! Cough!!”

“Yes!!!”

Shin’s emergency procedure seemed to have worked, as Karin sprang back to life as well.

Looking at Karin spitting out the seawater, Shin let out a shout and, at the same time, felt all his strength leave his body.

“So this is what it means to be scared to death...”

Shin mumbled after a deep sigh. Life support procedures are not to be made while relying on hazy memories.

Karin’s breath had stabilized and she had woken up, so Shin told the two women to rest while he went to gather dry wood.

It apparently had not rained in their location, so he was able to quickly gather a good quantity of dry wood.

At the same time, Shin looked for any huts or caves where they could rest.

“Oh, this place looks just right.”

It was at a fair distance from the place they came ashore, but he found a naturally formed cave. It was also deep enough that, even if it rained, they would be protected.

Shin placed the dry wood in the item box and returned to the beach.

“There’s a cave over there. I think it’s better to move before the sun sets, but can you walk?”

“I’m all right, but I suppose that Karin would still have trouble walking.”

The two women had fallen into the sea at roughly the same time, but Karin was more exhausted.

Shin had cast healing magic at the time he performed emergency procedures, so their HP was recovered, but both of them were not in good condition. Recovering HP did not mean that one’s condition returned to normal as well.

The sun was already setting over the beach, so after asking permission, Shin carried the still exhausted Karin on his shoulders.

Kanade had recovered enough to be able to walk without problems, so they walked towards the cave at a pace relaxed enough not to tire her.

As they arrived at the cave, Shin let Karin down and prepared to light a fire.

“Let’s use a small Fire spell and...OK, it lit up. Lady Kanade, please use this to warm..... what-are-you-two-doing?”

What Shin saw when he turned around was Karin, stripped of her armor and wearing only her kimono.

Her wet hair, sticking to her cheeks, and half exposed chest emitted, in total contrast with their current situation, an aura of sensuality. Karin was apparently the type that looks leaner when clothed.

Judging from the situation, Kanade had probably removed her armor.

“I certainly can’t leave her in those drenched clothes. It is quite unbecoming to show skin in front of a gentleman, but warming Karin up takes priority.”

“Definitely. Then allow me to offer new clothes, a towel, and a cloth for her to lie on.”

In a situation like this, Shin wouldn’t just keep staring at Karin. Prepared for the fact that he might be interrogated about it later, he materialized several items from cards.

The mantle Shin took out for Karin to lie on possessed an HP recovery effect. He didn’t know if it could help relieve her exhaustion, but it was still better than nothing.

“From the number of cards you possess, I am more positive that you certainly are not an ordinary traveller.”

“Rather than that, I suggest that you rest for now. You must be fatigued too. I will stand guard, so please try to rest.”

Shin’s clothes were generally equipped with an underwater mode too, so they weren’t wet at all. He hadn’t lost much energy.

“Atchoo!”

Kanade’s sneeze, echoed within the cave, as she warmed up beside the fire. No matter how close she was to the fire, as drenched as she was, her body couldn’t not feel cold.

Shin told Kanade to also change into another kimono and went outside.

While they were changing, he used a monster repellent item to prevent monsters and wild animals from coming closer to the cave.

Some monsters could come closer despite the item, so for added security Shin set some traps that would damage them the instant they stepped into the cave.

“You may return!”

Shin returned inside the cave to find a changed Kanade and Karin sleeping, wrapped in a blanket.

First, Shin tied the ends of a rope to two short daggers and stabbed them in the cave’s walls, to hang the wet kimonos from this improvised clothesline.

“We are in your debt.”

“As they say, when in trouble people should help each other. Lady Kanade, you should also sleep a little. Are you not tired?”

“However...”

“I will stand guard. First priority is recovery now.”

Kanade’s eyelids were already closing. She was probably at her limit.

“I will repay you for everything one day...”

Shin made sure that Kanade started sleeping too and sat down near the fire.

(Even if they almost drowned, their fatigue is too much for someone who simply fell into the sea. Is this normal when someone nearly drowns? Or not?)

This was the first time Shin had seen someone nearly drown before his eyes, so he

didn't know if their condition was normal or not. But more than 10 minutes had passed between when they fell into the sea and Shin began emergency treatment on them.

He didn't know how long they had been in cardiac arrest, but Shin thought that the possibility of not saving them must have been higher.

(Both of them are probably Chosen Ones. Maybe when stats and level are high, at times like this the survival rate increases too?)

While dwelling on such thoughts, Shin waited for them to wake up. Until then, he decided to try contacting Schnee.

“(Shin here. Can we talk now?)”

“(Are you alright? Here the storm passed and the ship departed again. Are the people who fell into the sea safe?)”

The Gale Serpents must have been exterminated. Other than Shin and the two women, no one else fell into the sea, fortunately.

Shin explained their current situation and told Schnee to give priority to protecting Hermie.

“(Understood. Please let us know your location once you know where you are. Let's choose where to meet then. Also, Yuzuha is quite restless, could you summon her by your side?)”

“(Yuzuha?)”

“(She seems to feel down because although you had left those two ladies in her care, they fell into the sea.)”

“(Ah....I don't think that was Yuzuha's fault in any way. Anyway, I understand.)”

Shin confirmed his understanding of what Schnee related.

Rather than falling, Kanade had thrown herself into the sea, so Yuzuha didn't have to feel responsible. Yet Yuzuha herself certainly didn't think so.

Shin contacted Yuzuha via Mind Chat and called her with a Tamer skill.

“Kuuu...”

“Don’t feel so down, that wasn’t your fault Yuzuha.”

Yuzuha cried weakly, and Shin patted her head while talking.

For Shin too, it was a complete mystery as to why Kanade had leapt into the water like that.

PART 3

“Hmh...”

The two women woke up roughly 2 hours later.

Karin woke up first, then Kanade a little later.

Perhaps because their bodies had rested, or because of the equipment’s effects, their conditions had improved greatly.

“I offer you my most heartfelt thanks for saving my mistress’ life.”

“I do too. If you weren’t there, we would be sleeping among fish and seaweed.”

“It would have felt bad to just abandon you, that’s all. Rather than that, it’s almost time for dinner.”

Both had lowered their heads in thanks, but Shin replied that such excessive politeness was not needed, and handed them a large bowl instead.

He had made some stew while they were sleeping. It was simple – he just cut the ingredients and let them boil in the roux he materialized from a card.

“Allow me to thank you again..”

“And this is quite the delicacy too. I feel my whole body getting warmer.”

“It’s a simple dish, I just cut the ingredients, boiled them, and put in some seasonings.”

While saying so, Shin poured himself another bowlful. Yuzuha, of course, had her share too.

The two women were surprised at first by Yuzuha’s presence, but understood when Shin explained that he could call her because they were bound by a contract. Apparently, users of a similar technique were also in Hinomoto.

After the meal, they decided to talk a while before sleeping.

“First, tomorrow shall we see if we can find a dwelling or some sort around here?”

“That’s right. Without knowing where we are, we can’t decide where to go.”

“Ah, at the very least I know in which country we are.”

Shin interrupted the women’s conversation. He had seen a particular mountain when he had exited the cave.

“Is that so. Tell us then, where are we now?”

“Hinomoto, your homeland.”

“Sir Shin. May I ask how you know?”

“When I went outside, I saw the sacred Mount Fuji. Is it not Hinomoto’s symbol?”

Shin, who had heard this piece of information in Balmel, had understood right away where they were.

Sacred Mount Fuji was a map added in the 5th update, “Banquet of Blades”. It had been reproduced with such precision that it was almost identical to the real Mt. Fuji, so Shin understood at a glance that what he saw was Mt. Fuji.

“Indeed it is. In such a case, we can have a rough idea of our current location?”

“Yes. If we are in Hinomoto, we can find a way back.”

Shin thought of heading to a certain port town and meeting with Schnee and the others.

Kanade and Karin’s equipment had not been lost, so they did not need to be accompanied.

“Now that we have a destination, there is something I need to ask, Lady Kanade.”

Also thinking of Yuzuha, Shin decided to ask the question right away.

“What is it?”

“Why did you jump down from the ship? I am sure you knew it would put you in mortal danger.”

Shin had a few theories about the reason, but nothing more.

Kanade appeared to hesitate, but maybe thought that she couldn't keep silent either, so she nervously started to speak.

"In truth, the medicine we had obtained for my elder sister had been blown away by the wind. I always kept it with me in order to not lose it, but that proved to be my undoing...I owe you both an apology."

Saying so, Kanade lowered her head towards Shin and Karin. She knew it was dangerous, but moved without thinking.

"Even so, in the end only this much remained."

What Kanade was holding were green colored leaves with a hint of red.

The name of the plant was "Mimic Dead Snake Grass". As the name suggests, it was a plant that looked very much like "Dead Snake Grass", but was a completely different species.

Shin had seen the plant name displayed via [Appraisal] and felt something was off, but couldn't quite put his finger on it, so he urged Kanade to continue.

"My sister has contracted quite a unique disease you see. She doesn't have much time left anymore. This medicinal herb can specifically cure it, but it cannot be found in our country, nor did any merchant have it. We had finally managed to obtain some."

A unique illness, a specific medicine, Dead Snake Grass...Shin tried comparing the pieces of information found in the conversation with his own knowledge.

"However, this much can only prolong her life a little longer..."

"Milady..."

Karin tried to console the downhearted Kanade. The country's merchants had done everything they could too.

(I think I've already heard about this...a quest, maybe?)

Shin took a thinking pose and opened the menu via mental control. Inside the menu,

he picked the “Event History” option.

This mode allowed Shin to browse, in detail, the past events he participated in during the game era: the contents, the item rewards, and other information.

Among them, Shin looked for events that required Dead Snake Grass.

(There’s just one...did I hit the jackpot?)

Among the events that required Dead Snake Grass, only one was related to a sickness.

In the events guilds could participate in during the game era, there was one that involved concocting medicine for a villager.

It was mainly aimed at players with alchemist jobs, but Shin took it for the rewards.

(Now I’m not sure if I should say it or not though.)

Shin looked at the event details and grimaced, careful not to be noticed by the two women.

If the illness was the same as the one he looked up, Kanade’s Mimic Dead Snake Grass would have no effect at all.

Not knowing the sister’s symptoms, though, he could not talk lightly. Even if he talked now, he would just dash their hopes of prolonging Kanade’s sister’s life.

“I apologize for the depressing story. We should go to sleep to be ready for tomorrow. We will watch the fire tonight, so please go ahead and sleep sir Shin.”

“My mistress and I will take turns standing guard. Please rest well sir Shin.”

“No, I can’t let you...”

“It must have not been easy to pull us up from the sea. You must be weary too. I assure you, we are better trained than the average person, we shall not succumb to mere monsters.”

Kanade smiled, full of confidence.

Shin was not excessively tired, but realized that even if he insisted he was fine, they would not be convinced, so he decided to rest.

Around 20 minutes after Shin went to rest, Kanade and Karin headed towards the entrance of the cave.

Shin, who stayed awake in case of an emergency, noticed it and checked the surroundings just in case, but did not perceive signals of monsters or the like.

(...someone's crying?)

In the silent night, except for the sound of bonfire, the sound of someone crying reached his ears.

"...but why...!!.....a little....more and....help....my sist.....this can't...."

It was Kanade.

She must have kept it all inside while she was talking to Shin.

She had left her house, her country, to save a person...and just when she thought she had achieved her goal, the Gale Serpents attacked.

Without enough medicine left to save her sister, it was natural to feel like crying.

Furthermore, Kanade was still a child. It wouldn't be weird for her to feel heartbroken.

"(Kanade, crying...sad?)"

"(Well, who wouldn't...)"

Yuzuha had heard too. Shin patted her head lightly, telling her not to mind and go to sleep.

(If I could....leave her alone, I wouldn't be concerned like this...)

Sighing at himself for not being able to cut her off as someone he had no relation to, Shin decided to help the two Hinomoto women.

C h a p t e r 2

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THE NEW
GATE

CHAPTER 2

PART 1

The next day, Shin contacted Schnee via Mind Chat after breakfast.

“(...and so, I’m going to help them for a while. I’m sorry, but please take care of Hermie and the others.)”

“(Don’t be, we’re just waiting for the ship to reach port here. I doubt that the ship will be attacked again like yesterday after all.)”

Shin told Schnee that he was going to help Kanade and entrusted Hermie and the others to her. Even if they were subjected to an attack of similar magnitude, they had enough fighting power to withstand it, so he wasn’t particularly worried.

Shin ended the Mind Chat with Schnee and spoke to Kanade.

“Lady Kanade, about what we talked about yesterday...could you tell me the name of the herb you went looking for?”

“This? It’s called Dead Snake Grass. Depending on the concoction, it can become a potion, or so they say.”

Hearing the name of the herb, Shin was more and more confident that the situation could be just like the quest he remembered.

“...I apologize in advance for such a personal question, but could you tell me in detail what symptoms your sister has? Ever since I saw that medicinal herb, something was bothering me, and I finally remembered what it was. I might be able to help in curing your sister’s sickness.”

As Shin finished his sentence, Kanade and Karin looked at him with astonishment.

“I am nothing but thankful for such a proposal, but are you sure? We essentially fled from the main house, I doubt we can properly reward your assistance.”

“I realize this might seem suspicious, but there is nothing in particular that I want. A

friend of mine lost her life because of a sickness, so I am weak to such circumstances.”

The shadow of Marino, Shin’s passed girlfriend, appeared in his mind. He also thought that he being too kind, but he couldn’t ignore a situation like this after all.

“I see....to be frank, we would grasp at any straw in our current situation. We gladly accept your offer.”

Maybe because she felt something in Shin’s expression, Kanade spoke about her sister’s symptoms after a few moments of silence.

Karin had probably felt how serious Shin’s expression was too, as she did not even try to stop Kanade.

A few minutes later, Kanade stopped talking. What Shin heard was extremely close to the quest he had remembered.

“I see...this is difficult for me to say, but if what I know is true, the medicinal herb you have will be of little use.”

“!? What do you mean?”

“Sir Shin, please do explain!!”

Shin calmed down the surprised women and proceeded to explain.

“Lady Kanade, you think that those leaves come from Dead Snake Grass, correct?”

“Indeed I do, but from your words, I suppose you mean that this is not the case?”

“I do not know if you have been deceived or the person who sold it to you did not know either. But that is Mimic Dead Snake Grass, not a medicinal herb but a poisonous one. If you doubt me, please have someone with the skill [Appraisal] examine it.”

“What did you say!?”

Yes, Dead Snake Grass was an herb used to make grade 4 potions, but Mimic Dead Snake Grass was nothing but a toxic herb, which would inflict the status ailment Poison III to anyone unfortunate enough to ingest it.

“The merchant who sold it to us said it was Dead Snake Grass, without a doubt.”

“The appearance is almost completely the same, after all. The base of the leaves, here, is colored purple, isn't it? The real one is red though.”

Looking at the explanation displayed by [Appraisal], visible only to Shin, he explained the difference between Dead Snake Grass and its Mimic counterpart.

“How can this be...”

“Sir Shin. Do you have any idea where we can find a replacement?”

“I have some myself, but not enough to make medicine with. I could ask some acquaintances, but is it really not possible to find within Hinomoto? I heard that it should grow spontaneously near the peak of sacred mountain Fuji.”

Shin mentioned his game knowledge as if he had heard it from someone.

In the quest history page, one could find the locations items had been retrieved in as well.

As the geography was now different, most information was not useful anymore, but if the location corresponding to the original map was still there, there was still a chance.

However, Kanade's answer was not a hopeful one.

“That is indeed so, however...”

“Is there a problem?”

“The peak of Mt. Fuji is a forbidding area, which does not allow human presence. It is shrouded by mist at all times, which sways the senses not only of humans but of monsters too. In olden times, many brave warriors challenged the peak, but none returned. Even now it is one of the most perilous zones of Hinomoto, where no one dares go to.”

Karin explained the current status of Mt. Fuji's peak for Kanade. But when Shin had looked at the mountain he had seen the peak too, without any mist, so he felt somewhat doubtful.

“If from afar, looking at the peak is possible. No one knows the reason why though.”

Kanade answered while shaking her head when Shin revealed his doubts. Shin could not remember any quest corresponding to the situation the two had described.

“In any case, it seems that the only way of saving Lady Kanade’s sister is to go to Mt. Fuji. That mist you speak of intrigues me too, so I suggest we pass by it on our way back.”

“What are you saying now? To willingly go to a place none have ever returned from is pure folly. I am thankful for your concern about our circumstances, but do not be hasty. I do want my sister to heal, but I would never just send you to your death so easily.”

Shin’s casual proposal had prompted Kanade to stop him sternly. Her eyes showed how she couldn’t believe what she had just heard.

“I’ll try to go, and if it looks like things won’t work out, I’ll give up. If we could at least get rid of the mist we wouldn’t get lost. I will contact my acquaintances about it too of course.”

In the game era, the monsters on Mt. Fuji were around level 500. Their unique characteristic was that the level increased together with the altitude. The boss monster was a phoenix-type residing on the peak, Kagutsuchi.

This was an important monster, as it dropped an item essential to learn the skill [Shiden – Kagutsuchi], which Filma had used in the battle against the demon Adara.

At the very least, the typical monsters wouldn’t be a problem.

What Shin was concerned about was the presence of unique monsters such as the Skullface Lord, which he had encountered in the past at Wraith Plains. The situation was different now from that time, but as a phenomenon not present in the game era, it was still on his mind.

“Milady, I propose that we at least try to go there. From the battle on the ship, we clearly know that sir Shin’s fighting prowess is out of the ordinary. There might even be the chance to break through the mists.”

“Of course, I would be the first to request for his help if it was possible...but are you really sure? Your party’s companions are not with you now, are they?”

Kanade and Karin, who had traveled alone until now, knew well the dangers of adventuring solo.

“Kuu!”

Yuzuha cried as to protest against Kanade’s words. She might look like a baby fox, but her fighting capabilities were far above the average monster. In addition, Demon Foxes excelled in illusion magic. There was a high probability that she could do something about the mists said to sway human senses.

“I have my partner here, so I’m not really on my own. She might not look it, but she is pretty strong too.”

“Is that so? Well, if it is the partner of a formidable warrior such as you, I should not judge her by her youthful looks.”

Even while saying so, Kanade was eagerly stroking Yuzuha’s fur.

“By the way, when we were on the ship I remember she used a powerful magic spell. If I didn’t witness it with my own eyes, I would doubt that such an adorable creature could perform such a feat.”

Karin was just looking at Kanade at first, but probably lost to the temptation and started stroking Yuzuha too. Cute things were their weak point too it seemed.

The group left the cave and walked along the coast. After roughly an hour, they reached a small fishing village.

There they asked about their current location and the directions to Mt. Fuji, and once again departed on their journey to the sacred mountain.

“How is your condition, you two?”

Just after they lost sight of the village, Shin inquired to his companions.

“Nothing out of the ordinary. Rather, I must say I feel even more lively than usual.”

“I have nothing to report either. Is something the matter?”

Shin wondered if they were tired, as they had taken turns standing guard the night before, but the answers he received were very reassuring.

Looking at them, he didn't feel they were putting up a facade either.

"Well, walking at this leisurely pace is nice too, but considering your lady sister's sickness, I think we should speed up a bit. Judging from our battle on the ship, I don't think either of you are average adventurers; if we raise our pace a little, we can shorten the travel time considerably."

"You had seen through us, after all. Yes, while not as far removed as you are, neither I nor Karin are simple adventurers."

"People such as I and Milady are called "Returned Ancestors" in Hinomoto. Sir Shin, I assume you are familiar with the term "Chosen Ones"?"

As expected, they were both Chosen Ones.

When they introduced themselves to Shin they both mentioned to be rank C, but other than their levels, the weapons they equipped were of Legend grade.

They also carried equipment that required stats impossible to achieve only through level up, so he was sure they had to be Chosen Ones.

Judging from their speech and equipment, it was not difficult to imagine that they came from a household of high rank.

"You too must be a Returned Ancestor, I suppose. I have the ability to read others' level and job type, but in your case the information I see does not match your actual abilities at all. For someone with your strength to be under level 200 sounds like a joke."

Kanade could use [Analyze] , apparently. Shin's status was modified by skills, so for Kanade, who had seen the battle on the ship, it must have seemed unnatural.

"To tell the truth, there are skills that allow you to hide your status. In the guild of the country where I registered as an adventurer, I was told that there are few people of high level with an appearance close to mine. When appearance and actual ability do not match, in some cases unnecessary trouble occurs. That's why I'm hiding it."

Shin had until now taken part in the extermination of the irregular Skullface monster,

the “Great Flood” at Balmel, Hermie’s rescue at the Church..all events that would attract a great deal of attention, so he wasn’t sure anymore that hiding his status served any real purpose.

“Indeed. An adventurer’s ability cannot be judged by appearance, but those who will judge a book by its cover can be found everywhere...”

“We are sometimes treated lightly as “just a woman and a kid” as well, so we understand how you must feel.”

“So you had a similar experience too lady Kanade.”

They looked like sisters with a wide age gap, after all. People probably thought that even if they could fight monsters, they could only defeat small ones.

“Just punishment was administered to anyone who acted improperly towards us. Mainly by Karin though.”

“It was troublesome to see how many uncouth people there can be.”

“I can imagine.”

From Kanade’s words, Shin had imagined that Karin wouldn’t keep quiet if someone had dared to look down on them.

His prediction seemed to have been correct; Karin looked sour as she was recalling such situations.

“By the way, are there guild branches in Hinomoto? It is completely separated from the mainland after all.”

Compared to the mainland, Hinomoto was just a small island country.

Shin was wondering how many branches the guilds had located in it. Kanade, as a good representative of one of the ruling houses of the country, answered after pondering for a few moments.

“Certainly there are. Hinomoto’s government structure however, is slightly different from countries; because of this, guilds are only present in large cities.”

“There are guild branches in the city at the foot of Mt. Fuji. Sir Shin, do you have business with them?”

“No, nothing in particular. If there are guilds, in case of necessity we could sell materials to obtain funds for our journey, so I wanted to make sure it was possible, that’s all.”

The reward Shin had obtained after Balmel’s “Great Flood” had been split with Schnee and the others, with everyone managing their part on their own. Shin was carrying a considerable amount, so there was no risk of finding himself without funds for the road.

There was always the possibility of sudden expenses though, so he wanted to know if there were guilds to change materials into money.

“Now that Shin’s doubt has been cleared, let us depart soon. Fortunately, the path is simple enough that we run little risk of losing our way.”

“Understood.”

“Let’s go then.”

Kanade was in the lead, with Karin and Shin in tow. As expected of Chosen Ones, their running speed was faster than a horse’s.

As they could always see their destination, Mt. Fuji, in the worst case they would pass through the forest, but the relatively well-maintained road was naturally easier to run on.

Shin’s entourage of three thus kept running towards the mountain, while surprising passing travelers and carriages with their speed.

PART 2

“Shall we seek an inn in this town to spend the night?”

“Are you alright? You looked pretty exhausted.”

“I’m alright, rest assured. Perhaps I felt a bit too excited.”

While they took breaks every now and then, the group had run for almost a full day, so Kanade’s voice was not as energetic as it was in the morning. Karin, who was probably more experienced, looked just a little tired.

“Let us look for the best inn available. Any fatigue left would weigh upon us tomorrow.”

“That’s true. I’ll go gather information, so please wait in that tea shop, have something to drink and rest.”

Shin pointed at the first tea shop he had seen in town and invited his two companions to rest.

“Sorry for the trouble.”

“I am thankful for your concern.”

Shin watched them enter the tea shop, then headed to the first item store he found. The range of goods available was one rank above the store he visited in Bayreuth. Even if some products were the same, their quality was higher here.

“This must be the artisan blood in me boiling...”

From the oriental patterns of its equipment to its name, Hinomoto really resembled Japan. Maybe because of that, like a Japanese artisan, Shin was also very particular about the quality of items.

However, Hinomoto’s towns were not only similar to what one could see in history-themed TV series, as Shin had imagined, but there were also Western-style buildings.

Shin thought that maybe the place they had visited was special, but Kanade had said that it was not the case.

The oriental-style and western-style architecture mixture was jarring, but no one other than Shin seemed to pay any mind.

The citizens of Hinomoto didn't seem to find this kind of scenery unusual at all.

“Well, it's not like one is better than the other anyway.”

It might look unusual, but it wasn't inconvenient.

Shin picked up several items and headed to the register. While paying, he asked for any inn recommendations.

“I apologize for the wait. Oh, and I'll have a dango.”

Shin finished his shopping and joined Kanade and Karin. The seat next to Karin was open, so he sat down and ordered a dango for himself too.

“Did you learn anything?”

“It looks like the inn called “Kasumitei”, located down this road, has a fairly good reputation.”

After a short break, they headed to the inn recommended by the clerk.

Kasumitei was a historical inn built in traditional Japanese-style architecture.

Lodging for one night cost an expensive price of 5 gold Jul coins, but the services provided well justified the price. Shin's entourage spent the night and departed again for Mt. Fuji the next morning.

The 2nd day after they started their journey to Mt. Fuji, they arrived at the large forest area surrounding the mountain, Aokigahara.

(From now on, we can't just go forward normally...)

Aokigahara was, as its name suggested, a map modeled after the Aokigahara “Sea of Trees” around the real Mt. Fuji. In the forest, the players' map function is severely limited: leaving it without marking one's progress or using special guide items was extremely difficult.

By the way, it is also possible to reach Mt. Fuji without going through Aokigahara.

“Let us camp near the forest for today. There’s something abnormal about it.”

“Ooh, you perceived it? This forest is indeed different from any other. For some unknown reason, it’s almost impossible to feel the presence of monsters when within. Entering and leaving it is possible once one is used to its geography, but I hear that many have fallen victim to surprise attacks by monsters in it.”

It seemed that the feature of monster signals not appearing on the map was still present.

To lose your way inside the forest, be ambushed by monsters, and come back dead was one of the common patterns of return from Aokigahara.

“What shall we do? Go around the forest?”

“No, that will not be necessary. I have an item to let us pass through.”

Kanade had been thinking of challenging the mountain already, but only as a last resort.

For Shin it would have been a reckless plan, but considering her reasons, it was no laughing matter.

After taking a brief rest just before Aokigahara, they proceeded into the forest, with Shin in the lead and Karin taking the rear.

The map displayed at the edge of Shin’s field of view became smaller and monster signals disappeared.

However, it was still possible to use various detection skills at the same time, a technique available in the new world, so they ran no risk of being ambushed.

“I say, we are proceeding with impressive ease.”

Kanade made her surprised comment as they were following the light showing them which direction to take, displayed by the item “Wings of Beckoning”.

Any monsters drawing closer would flee after Shin sniped them with a shot of killing

intent, so there was not any actual fighting either.

“I think that is better though?”

Shin thought that the fewer obstacles they had the better, as he replied to Kanade. He wasn't hoping to find any obstacles, naturally.

“That is obviously true. But while things had been going all too well, we found an unexpected obstacle right at the end...so I can't help but think that this might be the signal that something will happen...”

“I see what you mean...or rather, I feel that what you said just now raised a flag...”

“A flag? I don't see any flags?”

“Not an actual one, I'm referring to words or actions that decide things that will happen later. Doesn't it happen sometimes? Before going to a battlefield, whoever says “Once we come back, I will do this or that” will have a high chance of dying for example...”

Shin used a common example of Death flag to explain.

“Hmm? I cannot say I ever heard of such a thing. Have you, Karin?”

“Let's see, I think I have heard something similar once from Sir Kankurou. When one goes to battle, one should never talk about what they want to do after returning. Promises of marriage are especially taboo...”

An honest to goodness death flag.

Shin thought that this Kankurou person could very well be a former player.

“What kind of person is he?”

“One of the greatest samurai in Hinomoto. He was alive since before the “Dusk of the Majesty”, a true living testimony of that age, we could say. He's an extremely strong warrior.”

Hearing that he had been alive since before the “Dusk of the Majesty”, Shin thought that he could have been someone's support character.

As far as Shin knew, former players only appeared after the “Dusk of the Majesty”. There might be exceptions, but Shin knew most of the advanced players caught in the death game, especially if they were samurai like him.

“I’d like to meet—”

Shin stopped while he was expressing how he would have liked to meet him one day.

Here comes the result of the flags...a signal was coming closer to them.

“Sir Shin? Why have you stopped all of a sudden?”

“It looks like the obstacle that Lady Kanade mentioned is coming. We have 12 signals coming from behind. And they’re not monsters.”

After hearing Shin’s words Karin drew her weapon. Slightly later, Kanade did too.

The 12-strong group heading straight towards Shin was using both the magic and martial versions of [Hiding] . That was the reason why Karin, second only to Shin in signal perception, had not noticed their presence.

“Allow me to confirm, do you know of any ninja equipment-clad group that would attack you?”

“...not exactly, but we have been attacked in the past by a similar group. They were clothed like bandits though. We were attacked during our travels, after all...we heard that such ruffians are common outside Hinomoto.”

Shin asked Karin too; apparently their attackers until now were not anything special in terms of equipment or ability, and they had never been attacked by a clearly bizarre group such as this.

It was difficult to decide whether or not the earlier attacks were connected to the group currently closing in.

“I see we cannot make the situation clear. Let us go ahead and ask them.”

“But they are four times our numbers, are they not?”

“Well, just wait and see. Lady Kanade, please hide yourself for a while.”

After saying so, Shin used illusion magic and [Hiding] to hide Kanade and Karin from the ninja group closing in on them, replacing them with illusions.

He then had Yuzuha hide traps in the trees and bushes nearby, then waited for the group to arrive.

The group of ninjas reached Shin's location roughly 3 minutes later.

Despite their looks, their jobs were not all the same: 8 ninjas and 4 hunters. Their average level was a little over 200.

"I know you are hiding. I just want to talk with you, could you show yourselves?"

The group seemed to be already aware that they had been found. The 4 hunters came before Shin.

"Hand over the women."

"What if I refused?"

"You will die."

As they said so, the men threw knives painted in black towards Shin.

Then, with purposefully delayed timing, the ninjas behind them threw their kunai towards Shin.

"Too slow."

Shin dodged the flying knives and kunais; in exchange, his right hand was holding a throwing knife imbued with paralyzing properties. He pulled out a similar knife with his left hand and threw them at the 2 opponents closest to him.

"Guuh!"

2 ninjas fell to the ground at the same time groaning. They fell from a tree, but considering their level they would not die from that level of damage.

Among the remaining six, four had already been caught by Yuzuha. She had paralyzed them with lightning magic and caught them.

“So now there are the trap victims left.”

The last 2 had lost consciousness because of the traps that Shin had Yuzuha set up. They could do little before the mind and negative status combination trap.

“Well, honestly, I didn’t expect things to be over so soon.”

“Agreed.”

It wasn’t weird for Kanade and Karin to comment about the situation in this way.

The ninja job specialized in assassination attacks and was an advanced scouting job. It was normally unthinkable for not only their ambush to be seen through, but also for them to fall so easily to a counterattack.

“First, let’s tie them up and see what they have to say. We should be able to gather some information.”

As their opponents were ninjas, Shin had Kanade and Karin wait while he walked closer to one of them. He was just a few steps away when he suddenly stopped.

“What’s this?”

Shin felt not a look, but a feeling of something pointed towards him, and his eyes narrowed.

There was nothing on the map. His skill-enhanced perception field, however, showed the signal of someone boosting their own magic power at the entrance of Aokigahara.

Shin used [Clairvoyance] and focused. He found a man clad in equipment many levels greater than the group that attacked them, raising his hands towards Aokigahara. Countless fireballs were floating around him.

“Yuzuha!! Come back!!”

Shin swiftly called back Yuzuha and ran towards Karin and Kanade. He broke open the bushes they were hiding behind and grabbed them.

“What is going on??”

“Si-sir Shin!?”

“I’m sorry, but please keep quiet for a while!!”

Ignoring their questions, Shin started dashing away to put as much distance possible between them and that place.

After Yuzuha caught up and landed on his shoulder, he accelerated even more.

“I have a question!! Do you know anyone who could shoot countless fireballs at once!?”

“I don’t understand what is going on, but I know someone who would be capable of that!!”

“Anyone that would target your life, Lady Kanade!?”

“None that I know of!!”

“Rather than that, sir Shin!! Please let us down!!”

“Just a little bit more patience!!”

While conversing loudly with the two, Shin expanded his perception behind him. The fireballs were flying towards the location Shin had been attacked.

After a few instants, the booming echoes of consecutive explosions rocked the forest. The vibrations shook the ground under Shin’s feet.

“The group that attacked us is probably dust and ashes by now.”

“The explosion just now...was an attack?”

“Yes. Countless fireballs stormed the location we were in just now.”

The explosions and vibrations had let Kanade and Karin realize the situation. Kanade looked at the billowing smoke, furrowing her brow.

“So their objective was to block our progress and serve as target for the attack.”

“That’s possible. It was already planned for them to be defeated. I don’t think...anyone

is chasing us now. It would be difficult.”

Even before verifying the results of the attack, the caster had left the entrance of Aokigahara.

Shin’s perception field registered one signal only, moving away from Aokigahara at high speed. A Chosen One, probably.

“They attack enemies by using their allies as targets...?”

“Lady Karin, do you have any idea who they could be?”

“Not exactly...but I know of a family under the command of the west’s Yaejima house, the Rokuhara. They have a family of ninjas at their command, and rumor has it that if their master wills it, they will use whatever method possible in order to assassinate their target.”

Karin repeatedly states that it was only a rumor.

Regardless of the truth, or lack of it behind the rumor, Shin felt that this mission had suddenly evolved beyond a simple herb-picking quest.

“It will be better to pay attention to such ambushes too from now on. Let us proceed towards Fuji for now. At least, I doubt we will be attacked again soon.”

Maintaining a high level of alertness towards his surroundings, Shin quickly started to head toward the mountain again. Once they exited Aokigahara, it was a straight path to Mt. Fuji.

In the town at the foot of the mountain, they stayed in the inn with the highest security, with one person awake to stand guard.

“Just to be sure.”

Without Kanade and Karin knowing, Shin activated the skill [Wall] .

That night, however, no assailants appeared; Shin’s entourage left for Mt. Fuji at dawn.

As they were already at the foot of the mountain, it didn’t take long until they reached it.

“It looks like the mists start appearing in the middle of the mountain.”

Shin voiced his thoughts while looking up at the mountain.

Just as Kanade had said, ashen mists invisible from a distance could now be seen hanging on the mountain. It would be difficult to proceed without some sort of countermeasure.

“What do you say? Can you do anything?”

As they arrived at a distance dozens of miles from the mists, Kanade asked for Shin’s opinion, a mixture of expectation and concern in her voice.

“Seeing through them isn’t a problem. To know if we’d get lost or not, we have to go inside first.”

Shin replied while looking towards the other side of the mists.

He asked for Yuzuha’s thoughts via Mind Chat, and she replied that the mists had the same effect as monsters’ illusion techniques. It was a pretty powerful one too apparently.

“I’ll try to go inside first. I will decide later if it’s possible to pass through or not.”

“What if you can’t come back anymore?”

“Shouldn’t we spend some more time inspecting the mists from outside first? We wouldn’t be able to help you after all.”

They probably found his proposal reckless. Kanade and Karin cautioned Shin to be more careful.

“I will tie one end of a rope to my body, and you will hold the other end. Like this, if anything happens you can pull me out. I’m going to check only if it’s possible to pass without getting lost, so I don’t plan to go in too deep, it should be all right.”

“Hmm, I suppose this method could work?”

“If we were to get pulled inside ourselves, we would have no choice but to let go of the rope though...”

“In that case, just let go. I will handle things on my own.”

It would be different if he had no idea about what could happen, but thanks to Yuzuha’s [Analyze] Shin knew there would be no problems, so he told Karin that they could let go of the rope.

The two women were still not entirely convinced, but they decided to trust Shin’s promise of not doing anything reckless, and firmly held onto the rope.

“Well, I’m off then. Please wait a while. Yuzuha, stay on the lookout.”

“Kuu!”

Yuzuha cried in reply and Shin turned around to head inside the mists. At his level of ability, seeing through such visibility-limiting mists was not difficult at all.

“Monster signals are...few, but they are there. If it’s the same as it was in the game era, even those two would be fine by themselves.”

Shin walked as much as the rope allowed, then looked towards the peak of Mt. Fuji.

Most signals he could perceive were repeatedly moving and stopping, typical signals of ordinary monsters.

“This feeling...is not normal. Why is Kagutsuchi not there, anyway?”

Shin’s perception field extended until the peak. What he perceived there gave him concern.

On the peak, he felt a small signal and a very large one. In the location where normally Kagutsuchi used to be, he didn’t feel anything.

Both signals were standing firmly on the peak, not moving an inch.

As they weren’t on the map, he couldn’t see the color of their markers; thinking about it from a game perspective, he decided they probably were boss monsters, present in place of Kagutsuchi.

“The medicinal herb is supposed to be near the peak, so we have to get closer in any case...I don’t suppose they’ll just ignore us if we do.”

If the monster was still the Kagutsuchi Shin knew, there were ways to pick up the Dead Snake Grass without being noticed.

It was impossible to know, however, what kind of perception ability the monsters now residing on the peak had. Some bosses did not attack unless challenged, but Shin was having a hard time deciding on whether to bring Kanade and Karin with him or not.

If the mysterious ninja squad had not attacked them he would have left them outside, but he couldn't rule out the possibility of the fireball shooting man trying something again.

Would it have been better to keep them within his sights, or to give them a defensive item and have Yuzuha guard them? While pondering this dilemma, Shin returned to where he had left them.

"How was the situation inside? It does not appear like there were any serious problems?"

"There is nothing in particular limiting movement inside. Rather than that, something else intrigues me."

Shin informed Kanade and Karin about the unmoving signals on top of Fuji.

"I assume they are the monsters ruling over Fuji."

"I see, I see...I find it peculiar that there are two though."

"Legend says that a divine blade rests on the peak of Mt. Fuji. Could they be there as its protectors?"

A legendary weapon in a place where no one dares tread...a pretty common tale.

However, as far as Shin knew, no hidden weapons such as the one Karin mentioned was supposed to be found on Fuji's peak.

"We have no intentions of fighting, so it would be ideal if they left us alone, but there's the possibility that they won't. I could go on my own, but the possibility of an attack like the one before is still present..."

"Is it possible for our senses not to be swayed by the mists, like yours, sir Shin? If so,

we could use it to hide our presence.”

“I also thought about doing that, but I don’t know how these mists confuse human senses. If we moved together, I could pull you forward if need be.”

If they didn’t move, they wouldn’t get lost either. If they simply focused on defending themselves, Shin could take them back after the fighting ended.

It was difficult to decide which method was safer.

“Milady, I propose we follow sir Shin. I shall handle any monsters that attack us.”

“We would make Shin worry, but waiting here is a possibility to consider too, is it not?”

“I am ashamed to admit that I could not perceive the magic attack that targeted us before. If something similar were to happen, I could not handle it by myself. It seems to be possible to perceive enemy signals even within the mists, so I think that the chances of being ambushed are lower there than here.”

All possible developments considered, Karin proposed to Kanade to go inside the mists with Shin.

“You are quite correct too. O Shin, could you allow us to accompany you?”

“Yes. We will avoid confrontations with monsters and use the shortest route available.”

Shin nodded to Kanade’s question. Just in case, he lowered his [Limit] to level II, bringing himself to a status close to the time of the Death Game.

They would stay away as much as possible from the bosses. In order to lower the chances of being found, they decided on the simple strategy that two would wait just before the herb’s location, and then they entered the mists.

“I cannot say I enjoy this kind of progression.”

“We cannot tie each other with the rope after all. Please have patience.”

In the mist, the three humans walked while holding hands. Shin was the lead, Kanade in the middle, and Karin took the rear. Because of this, both of Kanade’s hands were occupied.

Kanade, forced in the same situation as a child holding hands with her parents so as not to get lost, was understandably a little vexed.

“Just a little more patience.”

“Please do not worry. If any monsters come out, I will be your shield.”

“O Karin, that is not what I am talking about.”

It seems that Karin thought that Kanade was concerned by the fact that if monsters attacked, she couldn't wield her weapon.

It's true that it couldn't be pleasant to walk in an area where monsters could appear without being able to wield a weapon, but Shin thought that Kanade was really meaning something else.

“Oops, a monster is heading towards us. This way.”

Shin perceived the monster coming closer and headed to a nearby crag. A few minutes later, Kanade and Karin perceived the monster's signal too and hid in the rocks' shadow.

After a few more minutes passed, the ground started to shake slightly.

Heavy, rumbling steps gradually closed in on the crag where Shin's entourage was hiding.

(Must be a golem.)

The monster walking towards them with booming footsteps, possessing a large body measuring over 4 mels of height, was the Bullrock Golem.

Its appearance was simply roughly carved rocks assembled together to vaguely resemble a human shape, while its head resembled a bull's. As its rock-solid looks suggested, its physical attacks were extremely powerful.

Its level was in the range of 400-500; being hit by the metal bat-like rock slab it wielded would have meant sudden death even for frontline jobs, depending on the equipment. Basically, the apex of focusing on physical attacking.

Except in dungeons, it usually appeared on mountains and within mines.

Its perception skills are very low: as long as one didn't make loud sounds or attack it, it was easy to avoid.

The Bullrock Golem which had come closer to Shin's entourage disappeared again in the mists, without showing any signs of having noticed them.

"It's all right now. Let's go on."

After making sure that the Bullrock Golem was far enough, Shin stood up.

The three kept climbing the mountain at a fast pace, while avoiding all monsters.

After roughly 2 hours, they arrived just before the peak.

"Hm?"

Shin, who was in the lead, noticed that the mists disappeared at a certain point of the path leading to the peak.

"Sir Shin, did something happen?"

"It looks like the mists disappear a bit further ahead."

"Could it be?"

Kanade reacted to Shin's words. Looking at the peak from below, it looked shrouded in the mists like the rest of the upper side of the mountain.

What Shin noticed was that inside the mist there was a perfectly clear location.

"I see, if we proceed onwards we won't be hidden anymore."

Shin stopped a step before the end of the mists and guessed the reason why the mist would let up there.

"To not let any intruders in, I see."

"(Kuu, there's, something.)"

They were being watched.

Shin immediately noticed that several sets of eyes, which were not even trying to hide their powerful presence, were pointed at them.

Yuzuha's ears perked up and she looked towards the source of these signals.

"We are being watched, are we not?"

"To think that such a powerful intimidation was possible by simply looking..."

Kanade and Karin had also realized that someone was watching them.

Karin, with a stern expression, touched her blade's hilt, but Kanade seemed overwhelmed by the watcher's aura.

"Will you wait here?"

"No, I believe it is best to proceed together. I think they know that there are three of us. If we separate, they might become even more alert. I don't feel hostility coming from them. We did not come to fight, so I think it's best not to provoke them."

Karin spoke with a very serious expression, and Kanade nodded.

Shin and his entourage proceeded upwards, alert of their surroundings. After roughly 30 minutes, they reached what looked like a small shrine.

"Sir Shin, I feel a bizarre presence."

"The larger monster's signal is right before us, isn't it."

The map clearly showed the monster's signal, but what they could see was just rocks, the ground, and some plants. The smaller signal was deep within the small shrine.

As the three stopped, their ears picked up the sound of two hard objects rubbing against each other.

"Ah, so this is the source of the signal."

Shin looked towards the origin of the sounds and nodded, seemingly understanding

what its source was. His materialized [Kakura] was still hanging from his hips.

“Shin, isn’t this dangerous...?”

“Milady, if anything happens, I will buy time for you to escape.”

In complete contrast to the impressed tone of Shin’s words, Karin and Kanade turned pale and prepared to run away at any time.

Their reaction was very natural, as on top of the shrine were 8 gigantic snake heads, bent forward and glaring at them.

The snakes’ mouths were large enough to devour an adult human in one bite.

3 of the 8 heads had come closer, and the sound of the air hissing in their mouths reached the party’s ears.

What they thought was a boulder was actually the snake’s body.

“Eight-headed Orochi...isn’t it. It’s not a monster that’s supposed to dwell in these parts though. ”

“How can you be so calm?”

“Just as Karin said, I feel no hostility. If it wanted to attack us, it would have done so before we noticed its presence.”

The marker on the map was the green of neutrality. This eight-headed Orochi was not doing anything in particular and simply kept looking at the 3 humans and the fox.

“(Very, interested?)”

“(Looks like it. It surely doesn’t look like it wants to battle.)”

Maybe also because Shin and his companions were not wielding their weapons, the Eight-headed Orochi did not seem to be particularly wary of their presence.

It simply continued to stare at them, as if to look deep into their hearts.

“Do we have guests? Yachi, do not look at them so much, you’ll scare them. Step back

a little.”

The moment Shin thought to say something to it, a female voice was heard from within the shrine.

In response to the voice, the snake slowly drew back its heads, which rested back on its body.

After a few moments, they could see someone emerge from the shrine.

“We must have surprised you. If you don’t try anything funny, you will not be attacked. Be at ease.”

From the shrine emerged a beautiful maiden clad in a platinum armor with blue borders.

Her black hair, extending until her hips, glistened in the sunlight. Her right hand held a helmet, her left a katana.

----- [One of the Five Supreme Blades – Munechika – Level 929]

“...our apologies. We were just at a loss of what to do.”

Shin, after staring blankly for an instant at the name displayed by [Analyze] , muttered an apology.

“Hum. Generally, people either wield their weapons, thinking they will be attacked, or flee, but you are clearly different. What is your goal?”

Munechika spoke to Shin without showing any wariness of them herself. Her sharp look though, made Shin feel as if he was under interrogation.

“We came to look for an herb called Dead Snake Grass, as we heard it grows on the peak of this Mt. Fuji.”

“Oh, that. Indeed, it does grow here.”

“!!!”

Kanade could not help but gulp after hearing Munechika’s words.

Shin’s information was more than 500 years old. Relying on it and going to Mt. Fuji to find Dead Snake Grass was partly a gamble.

“Could you possibly share some with us? We have no intentions of harming you. As soon as we gather some Dead Snake Grass, we will be on our way.”

“It is not something of great value to us. Letting you have some is not a problem.”

Munechika’s words seemed to imply something else. Her eyes were aimed at Shin.

“T-then we can—”

“However. This area is under our rule. If you want to take away something from here, you will have to give something in return.”

Munechika cut off Kanade’s words and spoke clearly.

“...what do you desire...?”

Shin, feeling Munechika’s eyes on him, inquired her intentions.

Munechika was an NPC/Monster implemented in the 5th update “Banquet of Blades” main event, “Trial of the Noble Sword”.

The event consisted of defeating the human form of certain weapons; once defeated, one would obtain the original weapon. In her case, as the name suggested, the Ancient-grade katana [Mikazuki Munechika] would become available for use.

As the grade suggests, it was one of the weapons with the highest attributes in THE NEW GATE.

Its gender when facing it was random; it was impossible to know if it transformed into male or female before fighting it.

Incidentally, when Shin fought it during the game era, it was a slim, handsome young man. Every single time.

“An unused weapon can only rust. Finally, someone worthy matching blades against has appeared. I ask for a duel.”

“...what would happen if I refused?”

“I would not allow you the herbs. Do not fret, I do not ask for a duel to the death. I will hold back. I promise to stay my blade if it would inflict a fatal wound.”

Shin couldn't help reacting to Munechika's words.

Their genders were different, but Shin had fought against Munechika not once, but multiple times during the game era. Munechika's fighting power was so high that not even a fully maxed Shin could win.

His stats and equipment were not as good as they were now, and he tasted defeat many times.

He managed to win only once, by a stroke of luck, just before the event ended.

“.....Lady Kanade, Karin, please stay back so as not to be involved in the fighting. Yuzuha, I'm counting on you.”

“Kuu!”

Shin carefully checked for the presence of any attackers, then told the two women to stand away.

For added safety, he asked Yuzuha to watch over them.

“Your presence is different now. Better than I expected.”

“I've fallen plenty of times already because of you. This time, you won't say that I won out of luck.”

Shin drew out a card and materialized it.

“Fallen? But moreover....that is...?”

“I cannot lose with this. No need to hold anything back.”

What Shin was holding while he made his declaration was [Hakuramaru] .

He won't use [Kakura] . Or better said, he can't. [Kakura] 's attributes were not high enough to withstand Munechika's weapon.

The [Limit] was still II. If Eight-headed Orochi also attacked, he would need to go at full power, but this was just a duel, so he chose to face it in the state he could control best.

“To think there still were such weapons in this world...but now is not the time to talk.”

Munechika wore the helmet she was carrying in her right hand and gripped the hilt of the katana she held with her left.

Munechika herself drew the weapon which could be described as its clone: [Mikazuki Munechika] .

“Here I come.”

As the words left her lips, Munechika stepped right before Shin's eyes.



PART 3

The distance between the two was roughly 10 mels. For a boss monster on Munechika's level, a distance like that meant nothing. Her blade drew an arc while closing in on Shin, which he countered with his [Hakuramaru] .

Two silver lines clashed in the space between the two opponents.

"Karin, could you see what just happened?"

"It's frustrating to admit, but all I saw were after-images. But, aside from that, Milady, it's dangerous, so please stand back a little more."

Karin tried to pull back Kanade, who had become excited at the sight of the two warriors' rapid sword slashes.

Battles between opponents of high abilities were dangerous to watch, if one were too close.

Karin, who understood the power of the strike they just witnessed, was sure that they needed to stand further back or they would not be safe.

"Good response, and enough muscular strength to withstand my blade I see."

"I have trained you know."

"Show me your technique then."

After Shin's casual retort, Munechika crouched, as if sliding on the ground. At the same time, a sword slash flew at Shin from the lower left.

Shin, who had been observing Munechika's movements while standing still, parried the attacking blade with [Hakuramaru] .

The two blades grinded against each other, launching sparks all around.

"Not bad at all."

With a slight smile on her lips, Munechika deftly handled her repelled weapon.

Sustained by a strong sword arm fitting of a level 900, a storm of sword slices attacked Shin like a silver torrent.

“Fuuh!!”

Shin parried the slashes with his [Hakuramaru] , each powerful enough to rend the ground.

The continuous sound of clashing metal continued to reverberate in the surroundings. However, the clashes were so fast that, to Kanade and Karin’ ears, they arrived as one continuous sound.

Each time the blades clashed, the silver torrent produced fiery red sparks, while the ground around Shin was cleaved by traces of sword slices.

(She fights differently, after all.)

Shin analyzed Munechika’s fighting style as he repelled her attacks.

Not all weapons labeled with the name “katana” were the same length. Those like [Mikazuki Masamune] had blades roughly 80 cemels long. On the other hand, the category of katana [Hakuramaru] belonged to had blades 70 cemels long.

Munechika’s fighting style focused on attacks from a distance, taking advantage of the difference in length of the blades.

Even just 10 cemels felt much longer from Shin’s point of view during the battle.

Each of the female Munechika’s attacks were heavy, but generally she was more focused on quantity.

The male Munechika that Shin had fought in the past was more focused on the power behind each attack, using a fighting style focused on high attack power.

He, or she, had been programmed based on the movements of masters of the sword; Shin remembered that they were much stronger than their level implied.

“So you can match this too. But is defending all you can do?”

“Of course not. I will come very soon!”

Shin parried the opponent's blade with more intensity than before. He couldn't go as far as throwing Munechika off balance, but he succeeded in creating space between them.

Taking advantage of that space, lasting less than an instant, Shin slipped closer.

Partly in retaliation towards Munechika, Shin closed in the distance between them in one breath. In the opposite fashion from before, [Hakuramaru] turned into a silver flash and attacked, only to be stopped by Munechika.

[Hakuramaru] 's blade was shorter than [Mikazuki Munechika] , and the difference in their materials made [Hakuramaru] lighter too. On the other hand, this allowed it to be swung deep into the opponent's space with higher speed.

“Sssh!!”

Munechika tried to step back to gain distance and space. Shin however, stepped in even faster.

The scene of a few seconds ago was repeated, but attack and defense had switched places.

“Hnng...!”

Munechika grunted while parrying Shin's blow. She had barely managed to parry Shin's slash, which was faster than she had expected.

“As expected of you!”

Shin's attacks were fast indeed, but barely failed to reach Munechika.

Munechika, despite her inferior speed, could keep up with Shin simply thanks to her ability with the sword.

Maybe because of the way she had been programmed, or how much she had honed her skills in 500 years, Munechika's ability was higher than Shin's.

Shin's fighting style with the katana was born from the teachings he received from someone who actually practiced swordplay -not Kendo- during the game era. He honed it during the Death Game and all the way to the present.

He had made it faster, stronger, more efficient.

Honing his skills in actual battle gave Shin a new strength impossible to attain through simple training.

However, Shin had no particular talent in martial arts.

In many battles, he would come on top thanks to his higher stats; he had received teachings for less than a year, and even though it had been an intense period, he was far from those who could be called masters of the sword.

“To think you could do so much! Interesting!”

“Honored to satisfy your expectations!”

Shin’s slashes, most of which followed a straight path, were systematically parried by the arc-like motions of Munechika’s sword.

The deflected slashes failed to affect Munechika, carving the rocks behind her with their aftershocks instead.

In just a few seconds, they had already clashed more than 10 times, but both warriors were still unscathed.

The cycle of attack and defense seemed like it would continue unchanged, but Shin suddenly changed his attack pattern.

From a distance ideal to attack with [Hakuramaru] , he pushed even closer.

“Hmh!?”

The same moment Munechika noticed his advance, Shin’s right leg leapt forward.

Faced with a sudden kick, Munechika used her left arm to stop it.

The sound of clashing metal echoed, as Munechika slid 10 mels backwards, leaving two straight tracks on the ground.

“Who would expect a kick at that moment? Unpredictable fellow.”

“Relying too much on weapons would leave one defenseless if without one.”

Shin’s fighting style was never reliant on the katana. He had strictly practiced physical skills, especially in case he had been disarmed and lost his weapons.

It was also possible to combine this style with swordplay.

“You figured that even if we kept crossing swords, nothing would change, right?”

“You found me out. As far as technique is concerned, I am a step below you after all.”

“To realize the level of one’s technique is not something bad..... that is fine. It’s been a long time since I crossed swords properly. I shall bring you the Dead Snake Grass, wait a moment.”

She was satisfied, or so it seemed. Munechika casually sheathed her sword, so easily that it caught Shin by surprise.

Even if it was just a skirmish, he thought that even if skills weren’t used, a fiercer clash of swords would have been inevitable.

“Er...we are finished?”

“Yes, that will do. I haven’t had a worthy opponent for 100 years after all. And if we continued any more, I wouldn’t be able to hold back.”

Munechika spoke with a smile. Maybe because the battle’s excitement still lingered in her, she emanated an aura so bewitching that it was hard to imagine that she was a transformed weapon.

“I understand, if so I will gladly accept your kindness.”

Perceiving the aura and presence coming from Munechika, Shin took a step back. A duel was one thing, but if they fought seriously, the surrounding geography would change greatly.

“Here, this is what I promised.”

Munechika returned around 10 minutes later, holding a more than a sufficient amount of Dead Snake Grass in her hands.

“Thank you very much.”

“If you have the chance, come again. I wish to speak to you some more.”

“I see. We are hurrying right now, but one day I will.”

Shin rejoined Kanade and Karin, and together they quickly descended Mt. Fuji.

Kanade was happy and excited, the Dead Snake Grass in hand.

In a completely different fashion, Karin was staring at Shin’s back while he kept walking straight ahead.

Shin, feeling her eyes fixed on his back, wondered what reaction she would show.



After coming down from the mountain, they meant to return straight to the Kujou house to deliver the medicine to Kanade’s sister...but it was not to be.

Maybe because of the trying schedule of their journey, or because obtaining the Dead Snake Grass had relieved her, as they reached the foot of the mountain Kanade was unsteady on her feet.

“Let us go back to town and find an inn first.”

“My apologies...”

They could not make her walk any more, so Shin carried Kanade on his shoulders.

Yuzuha hopped down from Shin’s shoulders and walked on the ground alongside them.

After a few minutes of walking, the sound of Kanade’s sleeping breath reached Shin’s ears.

“She fell asleep. Fortunately it does not seem she has a fever, she must have been very tired.”

“She had been tense all this time, so that’s likely. At Mt. Fuji she had been glared at by

Orochi too, so she was probably at her limit mentally as well.”

During the descent from Mt. Fuji, Shin learned that Kanade could not see Eight-headed Orochi’s level.

It was not a mystery why: Orochi’s level was 833, enough to match a Grand Duke-class demon.

With the ability to perceive an opponent’s power, but utterly lack the power to defeat them, Kanade must have been unconsciously tense.

Add the appearance of an opponent at a totally different level like Munechika, and it was no wonder that her tension had reached maximum levels.

This also explained her unusual tone when she joined in Shin and Munechika’s conversation.

“Our first priority is to recover our strength, right. I will stand watch, so please rest Karin. You were tense too, weren’t you?”

Even if their levels of strength were different, Kanade and Karin’s positions were almost the same. On the contrary, it could be said that Karin’s duty of protecting Kanade had probably made her feel even more pressure.

“I am deeply thankful for your consideration. I am embarrassed to admit that I am not perfectly calm right now. The battle between sir Shin and Munechika...even just one aftershock could cause grave injuries, but I was filled with emotions I can’t describe...I suppose I am not normal.”

Karin voiced her inner thoughts, her cheeks slightly flushed.

As far as Shin could see, she was not unwell like Kanade. Being a samurai like him, she must have felt something special.

As they arrived in town, the group headed straight for the inn.

It was the same inn they used before heading for Mt. Fuji, and Yuzuha could stay the night inside too.

They paid for one night and went to their rooms.

“Is your companion ill? If necessary, we can call a doctor.”

The inn owner noticed the sleeping Kanade and asked out of worry.

“It’s fine, I think she is just tired because of the trip. If her condition worsens, we will bring her to the doctor ourselves.”

Shin refused politely so as not to offend the owner, laid Kanade down in her room, and let her sleep.

“I’m in the next room. Let us watch over her, and if she feels better we will depart. Make sure you rest well too, Karin.”

“Thank you very much.”

Shin turned his back to Karin and headed to his room. Using his detection skills to the maximum, he thoroughly checked the surroundings.

He had not felt the presence of anyone following them. The map did not show any red markers either.

If enemies did not clearly show hostility or attack, however, they were not regarded as such. Markers could not be trusted too much.

“Yuzuha, do you feel anything?”

“Kuu? Kuu...no, nothing.”

Yuzuha closed her eyes and perked her ears up, but apparently did not feel anything either.

It was already dusk.

Shin hesitated to leave the two women alone to go eat outside, so he decided to lie on the bed for a while.

Their inn was a high-quality one, so the bed was both large and comfortable.

“She didn’t ask anything in the end.”

Karin’s silhouette appeared in Shin’s mind.

Ever since they started descending Mt. Fuji, Shin felt Karin’s eyes on him...

Maybe it was because of Kanade’s poor condition, or that the timing wasn’t right, but it was a mystery to Shin why Karin hadn’t said a word on their way back from the mountain.

As if to interrupt these thoughts, while he was sprawled out on the bed, Yuzuha jumped up to dive straight on his chest.

“Kuu!”

“Oof!!”

She had turned again into young girl mode, so her dive forced a whimper out of the relaxed Shin’s mouth. The last time she had turned into a girl Shin had her put clothes on, so at least this time it wasn’t a naked dive.

The combination of Yuzuha’s shrine maiden robe, with its vivid contrast between red and white, and her shoulder-length silver hair and silver tail attracted Shin’s attention. There were 6 tails poking out of her crimson skirt. He began to wonder where and how they were attached to her body.

“What’s going on? Why the sudden jumping?”

“Shin, all mine”

Yuzuha answered in the slightly disconnected way that she had started talking in after taking this form.

Usually she would cuddle up in a ball on the side of the bed, but now she rested her head on Shin’s chest and closed her eyes.

When Shin was traveling with Schnee, Tiera, and Kagerou, Shin and Yuzuha slept in the same room, and sometimes she would sneak in the same bed as him, half-asleep.

It didn’t happen anymore after Shibaid joined them, but apparently it was because she

was holding back.

(She might look grown up, but inside she's still a kid. Well, this situation is barely acceptable though...)

It could be excused when she was in little girl mode, but now that her looks were those of a teenager, soon this behavior couldn't just be called "adorable".

If she grew any more, it would be difficult to just play with her as a "little sister".

(...little sister, huh...)

Yuzuha lay still on top of Shin, probably asleep. Shin found himself thinking of his little sister in the real world. As if triggered by that, he started recalling many other memories of his former world.

His parents, his grandmother, his other siblings. His high school friends, his university circle members. The faces that appear and disappear in his mind are, for some reason, all smiling.

".....atchoo! Hey Yuzuha! Don't poke my nose with your tails! Your fur! Up my nose!!"

The melancholic mood was destroyed by Yuzuha's sudden attack.

The ends of her wagging tails were poking Shin's nose.

"Kuu."

"No kuu-ing now, little lady. What's with you all of a sudden."

"You think, strange things."

Yuzuha retorted while puffing up her cheeks. Her tails' movements were meant to pull Shin's attention back to her apparently. She hadn't fallen asleep after all, and was not happy being ignored.

Shin's hands moved to calm her down, but were caught by her tails and brought over her head.

"Sorry, sorry. I just remembered some things...so, should I pat your head now?"

Shin gently caressed Yuzuha's head, thinking that she was still a little kid after all.

"Kuu...."

Yuzuha's tails zipped up, down, left, and right.

Shin couldn't help but think she looked like a puppy dog. It was a really soothing view.

".....crap, I got too relaxed...I'm getting sleepy."

Shin was also rather exhausted, so loosening his nerves let a powerful drowsiness come over him.

Because of a past habit, he instantly casted a barrier-type skill to secure the safety of the room.

"Kuu? Shin, sleep?"

"Sorry Yuzuha...we should get something to eat..."

"You can't, no good."

Saying this, Yuzuha returned to her fox form.

Yuzuha had grown due to her stat increases, and was now around 1 mel in length.

"Ah.....this is....bad....."

Shin was struggling against his heavy eyelids, but Yuzuha's fluffy fur gave him the coup de grace. Before her warmth and soft touch, it was only a matter of time before Shin drifted into slumber.

PART 4

“.....mwah?”

The next day, Shin woke up a bit before dawn.

Yuzuha, in beast mode, was sleeping next to him, her tails resting on Shin’s chest and stomach.

“Aah...yeah..I fell asleep.”

While enjoying the tails’ softness, Shin recalled what happened the previous evening. I must have been more tired than I thought, he said to himself while getting up and stretching.

“Kuu?”

“Ah, sorry, did I wake you?”

Yuzuha had felt Shin’s movements and opened her eyes.

One hour after the sun rose, he felt people moving in the next room.

Kanade looked like she felt much better, and Karin was relieved too.

“Well, let’s go ahead and bring the medicinal herb to your sister then.”

“Yes, let us make haste!”

Completely recovered after one night of rest, Kanade ran off ahead of the group.

Behind her, Shin and Karin started running too.

“Please do not push yourself too hard, Milady.”

Karin was worried because of what had happened the day before, so she warned Kanade.

Kanade regretted having worried her, so she replied “I know.”

The group proceeded on their way while taking breaks whenever needed. On the way, Shin used his detection skills to check the surroundings for threats.

To be robbed by thieves just after they obtained the Dead Snake Grass would have been a bad joke.

They would probably not be attacked in a place where people could see, but to be sure he chose to stay alert.

Maybe thanks to that, they could reach Kujou territory without any enemy attacks.

“From here, it would take maybe only another half day.”

“Are you not pushing yourself? Are you not doing anything unusual?”

“I am not. I am alright. We’ve come all this way, I will not collapse right at the end.”

While taking a break at a tea house along the road, Shin’s party discussed the route to their destination.

Kanade’s jinx was that obstacles would always appear right at the end.

The mysterious attackers, the encounter with monsters that shouldn’t have been there...all the events that had happened in the few days since they met Shin were all nothing to laugh about.

It was natural for Shin to be especially careful.

“We still don’t know anything about those assailants, we can’t let our guard down.”

“I have also pondered about them. If they attacked knowing that I am a Kujou, the main family could be on the move too.”

“Could it be that something happened while we were outside the country?”

“I cannot say. But we will know once we return.”

Shin didn’t know what had become of Kanade’s position within the main house, but

imagined that they would be able to gather some sort of information.

Shin himself planned to go on his way after he had seen them off at their destination. His face was already known though, so even if he parted with them, there was no assurance that he wouldn't be involved again.

"Well, we are almost there. Let's go."

"Understood."

"As you wish."

The group departed again, with Shin in the lead.

As Kanade had said, after half a day the castle's main compound came in sight. It was unmistakably a Japanese-style castle.

A group clad in armor stood on the path to the castle.

"Are those the castle soldiers?"

"Their flag's emblem...they're from the Toudou family."

"Kankurou, then. Toshiro could be there as well."

Kanade and Karin seemed to know the emblem depicted on the soldiers' flags and were not worried by their presence.

Shin also heard a name that was not new to him, so he was relieved and decided to ask about them.

"Do you know them?"

"Yes, not only them, but we have part of our soldiers patrol the territory. Thanks to that, damage and casualties due to monsters and thieves are kept to a minimum."

The soldiers they had met were apparently on their way back from a patrol.

"But because of that, there are a few branches of adventurers' guilds."

“What do you mean?”

“Quests for adventurers to take...especially ones about exterminating monsters that would offer high rewards...well, those monsters are eliminated by the patrolling soldiers. Their average level is 200, so they can handle any monster except extraordinarily powerful ones. Because of that, few in this country aim to become adventurers. Of course, there are powerful warriors belonging to Hinomoto’s adventurer guilds though.”

Karin briefly commented that she was very surprised after leaving the country.

Some people even called Hinomoto a “country of demons and barbarians”.

Even in Balmel, a fortified town always under the threat of the “Flood”, the average level of the soldiers was less than 150. Only a few elites went above 200, so Shin understood the reason behind that name or the people that didn’t know it.

“Hinomoto believes strongly that national matters should be handled within the country. We do not have a large territory like the mainland after all. Our country should be handled by ourselves, and we do.”

Hinomoto was also said to be safer than the mainland.

As they were talking, they caught up with the group of soldiers. The rear troops noticed Shin’s group.

“I am the first-born daughter of the Saegusa family, Saegusa Karin. I accompany Lady Kanade of the Kujou. Who is leading this platoon?”

As Karin introduced herself, the troops hesitated for a moment, then divided in two perfect lines, showing two men in the center.

Shin used [Analyze] to display the names and levels of the men that were slowly walking towards them.

One was Yaejima Toshiro, a level 190 samurai. He looked in his early twenties, black hair with white streaks and brown eyes, a proud-looking young man.

In contrast to the lead-colored armor the other soldiers wore, his was navy blue. His social status and standing were probably different.

The two katanas hanging from both sides of his waist suggested he was a two-sword style user.

The other man was Toudou Kankurou, a level 255 samurai and a man between 50 and 60 years of age.

His hair was white and his forehead wrinkled, but his sharply straight posture and stance did not show signs of old age. His eyes were thin almost to a slit, his expression soft and gentle.

He clearly stood out among the armor-clad soldiers, as he was wearing a dark green robe and deep blue, almost black, large-fitting trousers called hakama.

Shin understood the reason why he wasn't wearing armor. His hakama trousers' stats were higher than the soldiers' armor. What caught his attention even more was the katana hanging from the old man's waist.

"Lady Karin, noble Kanade. I heard you had left Hinomoto, but I am glad to see you are safe and sound."

"It brings me joy to see you in good health too, Kankurou. Are you returning from a patrol?"

The man Karin called Hinomoto's strongest warrior started talking to Kanade in a soft tone.

"Yes, we have just slain a monster that was reported to be difficult to subdue. Noble Kanade, if you have returned, does it mean that you have obtained the medicinal herb?"

Kankurou's expression shifted from smiling to serious. He knew the reason why Kanade had left Hinomoto it seemed.

"Yes, we have obtained a sufficient amount. How is my sister's condition?"

"Progressively worsening, albeit slowly. But there should still be time. We shall lead the way, your companion is.....!?"

Kankurou talked while shifting his eyes towards Shin. While talking, his expression clearly showed that he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

“Lord Kankurou, do you know this man?”

“N-no, I...my apologies. He simply resembles someone I used to know.”

“Ah, no, please do not worry.”

Kankurou shook his head to Toshiro’s question and apologized to Shin.

Shin thought that his reaction was somewhat exaggerated, but has nothing to inquire further, so he did not say anything in particular.

“This man is sir Shin. He assisted us in retrieving the medicinal herb. I shall lead him to the mansion. Lord Kankurou, Lady Kanade, please head to Lady Haruna’s quarters.”

“To the mansion? Hm, can he be trusted?”

“Yes.”

Karin looked straight at Kankurou and nodded.

“If lady Karin says so, then there should be no problems.”

“Sir, are you certain? At times like these, it is not advisable to welcome strangers of unknown background...”

“Toshiro, we bear a large debt of gratitude to Shin. I do not know what happened, but I personally vouch that he is no enemy sleuth.”

“.....if Lady Kanade speaks thus, then...”

Toshiro seemed dissatisfied with Kanade’s answer, but presented no objections. But, it could be said that in exchange for that, he glared at Shin sharply.

“If so, I would say we simply part ways here. My work is finished here, these gentlemen are surely more than suitable to guard you. If something is going on, it is not the best time to let someone suspicious in after all.”

He did not have to receive rewards or something similar either. It was not necessary to let him into the residence no matter what.

“After all you have done for us, to just send you back empty-handed would be more than ungrateful for us. At the very least, I wish you to spend the night here.”

“I shall lead him to the residence assigned to the Saegusa family. I understand well Toshiro’s concern. I will be responsible for sir Shin’s actions.”

“Hg, lady Karin, you do not need to go as far as guarding this man, I could do that-”

Toshiro objected at Karin’s intentions of taking responsibility for Shin.

“Toshiro, I doubt it is wise to continue raising objections. Lady Karin is one of Hinomoto’s Brave Ten, I am sure there is no need for concern.”

”That is true, but...”

Karin apparently held a title Shin was not aware of. The name suggested it was given to the most accomplished warriors of Hinomoto.

“Let us be on our way then. Sir Shin, I thank you for your assistance in this endeavor.”

”Ehm...yes.”

Kankurou gave a slight bow and headed towards the castle alongside Kanade.

After a while, Shin and Karin went to the castle town and entered the castle’s perimeter.

In the same way as Toshiro, the gate guards were not pleased with allowing Shin inside, but thanks to Karin’s intervention there was no commotion.

“It’s really huge.”

“There are many facilities within the castle after all.”

The Kujou castle was surrounded by moats, with the main castle compound at its center. The castle perimeter contained training facilities, a smithy, and many residences.

Its large size was the most remarkable feature. It was much larger than the Japanese-style castles Shin knew.

It looked like the castle contained a town, separated from the castle town, outside its walls. Around the main compound, there was another set of walls and gates.

The two walked down paths impossible to navigate without a guide, then arrived in front of one of the largest residences.

The gate guard hurriedly came towards them, but thanks to Karin they could pass without a hitch.

The guard seemed more surprised at Karin's sudden return than Shin's presence though.

"I apologize for the disturbance."

"Please don't, the guards seemed overjoyed too. They must love you and respect you."

"That's right! Our lady is kind to everybody, all the vassals love her."

Shin's words were answered with pride by Midou Chiyo, a woman serving the Saegusa house. She was Karin's caretaker, and undoubtedly the happiest person to see Karin return.

"Enough about me, where is father?"

"He is already waiting inside the residence."

"Thank you. Sir Shin, I ask you to join me for a brief introduction."

"Understood."

Shin and Karin entered the residence, led by Chiyo.

"Our lady Karin and sir Shin have arrived."

Chiyo announced their arrival in front of the room's sliding doors.

After hearing the response Chiyo opened the doors, showing a man sitting cross-legged in the center of the room and a woman at his side.

The man had a large and muscular physique, which clearly showed through his

kimono. A man shaped like a rugged boulder, or so Shin thought. The woman was sitting next to him with a proper posture, smiling gently. She was of short stature herself, but next to the man she looked even smaller.

“Father, mother, I have returned.”

“Welcome back. I have heard what happened to a degree. It appears you found what you were looking for.”

“Yes, now we only have to wait for the medicine to be made.”

The man Karin called father exchanged brief words with her, then turned towards Shin.

“I apologize for the wait. I am the 3rd head of the Saegusa house, Saegusa Kuyou. This is my wife, Kayo.”

“My name is Shin. This is Yuzuha, we are bound by a contract.”

“Kuu!”

Shin sat in proper posture next to Karin and introduced himself. Yuzuha was sitting on a cushion next to him.

“I was told you lent your aid to our daughter and lady Kanade in their search. Also that you attempted to leave without accepting any reward. You are aware of what lady Kanade was searching for, weren't you?”

“Only that it was an ingredient for her lady sister's medicine.”

“Indeed. The results are yet to come, but if Lady Haruna were to be healed, we would owe you a great debt. But even if it were not so, to save others from peril for nothing...that spirit is something I admire. You are welcome to stay in our residence not just one day, but for a brief period if you please.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Father, sir Shin has saved mine and lady Kanade's life, and—”

“I am coming in!!”

The brief greeting between Shin and Kuyou ended, and just as Karin was about to explain in detail what happened, suddenly Kanade opened the sliding doors and came inside.

“...lady Kanade. I thought you headed to the residence?”

“I gave the Dead Snake Grass to the concocter. There is nothing more for me to do. I wanted to tell my sister that we have all ingredients for the medicine, but we cannot be sure until we see it is really effective...father is busy in some meeting, so I came here first.”

“Lady Kanade. I understand your worry, but please do calm down.”

Kuyou said that she was not acting properly for a Kujou lady, but Kanade pouted and retorted.

“I cannot help this. At least between us, please forgive my behavior.”

Kanade’s worry wouldn’t disappear unless the medicine showed to be effective and her sister healed after all.

Kuyou understood her feelings and did not reproach her further.

“Anyway, what were you talking about?”

“I was going to ask about sir Shin. There was a bit of a commotion before you entered the castle it seems.”

“I have learned the reason why the atmosphere within the castle is not good. It is no wonder that Shin would be viewed with suspicion.”

Kanade had heard from Kankurou what happened as they headed together to the castle.

“Father, Milady, I still have not heard about that. Could you please inform me?”

“Hmm, I see.”

“Ehm, I apologize for interrupting, but is it alright for me to listen to such circumstances?”

Shin interjected while Kuyou was speaking. He felt that it was not something for an outsider to hear.

“That is quite all right, it is nothing more than a rumor after all. People speak about this throughout the castle town. It is but a rumor concerning suspicious movements of the Yaejima house, rulers of the west. Originally we have fought for the rule over Hinomoto: no matter the credibility of the rumor, or lack thereof, people cannot help but be worried. However, as far as I know, the current head of the Yaejima family is close friends with lord Kujou Tadahisa, head of the Kujou family and lady Kanade’s father. I very much doubt that the rumor is true.”

“If something was going on, it could be the Ichinose.”

After Kuyou spoke, Kayo participated in the conversation for the first time.

“The Ichinose?”

“That family has always been very concerned with the changes in balance of power between east and west, until a while ago they were talking about the unification of Hinomoto after all. About the succession matter too, they even went as far as saying that since Karin isn’t here, she should be removed, you know? Truly, nothing but disrespectful!”

“Mother, please calm down. But I understand, so that’s what happened.”

Karin calmed down the irritated Kayo and nodded in understanding of the situation.

Apparently Toshiro had suspected Shin of being sent by the Ichinose.

“Well, it’s not like they’ve done anything yet. There are nothing but rumors at the moment, so we are gathering information. By the way, I personally am more interested in Shin, can you tell me more about your journey?”

“Well...”

“Of course. We met for the first time on a ship, while we were heading back to Hinomoto.”

Kayo changed the subject, expressing high interest in Shin.

As he was thinking about how to respond, Kanade anticipated him by narrating how they first met.

“—then he saved us when we fell into the sea...by the way, what was the thing he did that time?”

“What thing, exactly?”

“Karin, he was kissing you and fondling your breasts, was he not?”

“W-what!? Sir Shin!! What did you do to me while I was unconscious!?”

Kanade’s words caused Karin to spring up and cover her chest with her arms. She quickly moved away from him towards the wall, using a cushion as protection.

“Ooh, do let us know more.”

“Yes, that is indeed very interesting.”

At the same time, Kuyou unleashed a powerful aura of intimidation, while Kayo’s smile completely left her lips. Shin’s expression became stiff under the influence of a pressure ignoring levels and stats.

“No no no it’s not what it seems! I acted like that as I feared that lady Karin’s breath and pulse had stopped! I assure you I was not thinking of anything improper!! Lady Kanade, please do not use words that could be misunderstood!!”

Shin tried desperately to defend himself from the damage caused by Kanade’s explosive words.

Shin explained how the kiss was to re-start Karin’s stopped breathing and he wasn’t fondling her breasts, but using cardiac massage to make her heart beat again, recalling the limited knowledge he could muster.

That’s how terrifying Kuyou and Kayo’s atmosphere appeared to Shin. This was what they called “irrational fear”, probably.

“Hmm, so it was all to save my daughter, is that so?”

“Exactly. These actions are to be performed as quickly as possible. I am not a true

expert, but I thought that there was no time to think about that. I assure you, I absolutely assure you that I had nothing improper in mind.”

“I vouch for him as well. I woke up first, and remember how Shin was desperately trying to help Karin.”

Shin told Kanade “Say that first, will you!?” in his mind, but he refrained from voicing his thoughts in front of Kuyou and his consort.

“In that case, I must give my thanks to sir Shin then. If it weren’t for you, both my daughter and lady Kanade would have drowned in that storm.”

“I am just glad the circumstances are clear now.”

Shin, freed from the parents’ intimidating aura, wiped cold sweat from his forehead. Their presence was even more overwhelming than a boss monster.

Karin, who had moved away from Shin, sat back next to him after hearing his explanation. Her face was bright red.

After that they talked about how they climbed Mt. Fuji and arrived back at the castle, when Chiyo came in to announce that Kanade’s entourage had arrived to pick her up.

“The meeting is finally over then. I shall go now. I will see you tomorrow.”

Kanade said so and returned to the castle. She had arrived suddenly, dropped a powerful bomb and caused a commotion, so after her departure the residence felt extremely quiet.

“Well, we have talked long enough. Let us offer you a meal.”

After dinner, Shin was informed that the bath was ready, so he went to the bathroom as instructed.

After Shin left for the bath, Kuyou, Kayo and Karin remained in the residence to talk.

“In any case, was there really a person like the one Lady Kanade described on top of Mt. Fuji?”

“Yes. I believe that if they did not just match their skills, but fought to the end, only sir Shin would have survived. He called the giant snake “Eight-Headed Orochi”, but I do not know the woman’s identity. To be honest, I am not sure if she was human or not.”

The tone of the conversation was now completely serious. Kuyou himself could not neglect to ask about important information such as what the Mt. Fuji mists were hiding after all.

“The monster legends say devoured entire countries, and a girl who tamed it...if they will not leave the mists, I assume it will be wise for us not to bother them either. I think lord Tadahisa will summon you tomorrow: be sure to let him know as well.”

“I will.”

Kuyou, in the role of head of the house, gave Karin specific orders.

Even now there were people attempting to enter the mists, albeit few. If, by chance, they reached the peak and instigated those dwelling on it, there was the possibility to cause massive damage and casualties.

Kuyou was sure that Tadahisa would understand the risk after hearing about the journey from Kanade, but he opted for added safety.

“Are the difficult topics finally over?”

“They are. Today was quite a surprising day though.”

“That’s true. To think that Karin would bring a man in the house! And that they even kissed already.”

“M-mother! Please do not bring that up again!”

Karin hurriedly tried to put a stop to the return of that embarrassing topic.

“But isn’t it very important? With you away from Hinomoto, I had to refuse all invitations of marriage interviews. Isn’t it time to think about settling down? So, what do you think of sir Shin? He seems polite, and is quite able with the sword too, isn’t he? I don’t think he would be a bad marriage prospect.”

“Hmgh!! That is all too sudden to talk about!!”

“T-that’s right! We barely know each other too!”

Both father and daughter objected to Kayo’s sudden marriage talk.

Kuyou was simply against the idea, but Karin’s words seemed to suggest that things could be different if they came to know each other better.

“You don’t seem to be totally opposed to it, are you. I see we need to know more about sir Shin.”

“Mother! I beg of you, please do not do anything weird!”

“Kayo! M-marriage! It’s too early!”

Such conversations continued in the residence while Shin was in the bath.

PART 5

The next morning.

Shin was swinging [Kakura] in the garden in front of the room assigned to him.

The reason was that he had painfully learned the limits of his technique during the battle against Munechika.

“I know that I can’t compare to a master, but...”

Shin was aware that he did not possess a natural talent for the sword. Even so, he could improve with effort. Imagining an enemy standing in front of him, he was sometimes dodging, sometimes swinging down [Kakura] in slow motion. It was a training method he learned from the person that taught him the sword.

“Fuuuuh...”

This training’s movements might be slow, but they placed a burden on the body. He had lowered his stats on purpose, so [Kakura] weighed heavily on his whole body.

Sweat dripped down Shin’s cheeks.

“...I focused too much.”

Shin noticed that Karin’s presence was close, stabbed [Kakura] in the ground, and took a deep breath. The shirt he was wearing as a training suit was drenched in sweat.

“I apologize for disturbing your training.”

“No, I had lost track of time, so it’s good that you came.”

Karin looked apologetic, but Shin replied that there was nothing to worry about.

She had come to call him because the meal was ready.

Shin wiped his sweat, changed and had his meal; as he finished, someone knocked at the Saegusa gate.

“I see, so that’s how it is.”

The visitor was a messenger from the Kujou house.

Shin, led by Karin, went to the main compound of the Kujou house, castle Kujou. Yuzuha was left at the Saegusa residence.

In the residence where he was led to, Shin found Kanade, Kuyou, and Kankurou waiting.

Kanade had pleaded for Shin to stay because she was grateful to him, but also because she knew he would have been summoned for an inspection.

Kanade herself explained so when she went to meet Shin along with their guide.

Some time later, a man appeared and sat on the seat reserved for the person with the highest standing. The man had shaved hair, thick eyebrows, and a katana scar in the middle of his face. His physique was not bulky, but well trained.

The man was the head of the Kujou house, Kujou Tadahisa.

“Raise your heads everyone.”

All the guests present had bowed their heads when the man appeared, and now raised them back. Shin had followed the others’ example as well, and calmly raised his head again.

“Your name is Shin, yes?”

“Yes.”

The deep voice addressing Shin echoed.

“First of all, I must give you my thanks. I am grateful for everything you have done from the bottom of my heart.”

Seeing Tadahisa thank and bow his head, Shin and all vassals present-except Kankuro-were restless.

For the head of the house to bow his head to a stranger was something normally unthinkable.

“Thanks to the medicine, concocted with the herb we could obtain through your assistance, my daughter has dramatically recovered from her illness. The doctor says that as long as she recovers her strength, she will be able to return to her normal lifestyle.”

“Ooh!!”

Tadahisa’s words now caused a new type of restlessness among those present. The vassals had not been informed yet, apparently.

Kanade’s sister must have been really loved by her subordinates; some vassals could not resist and broke out in tears.

“Sir Shin, I wish to express my gratitude to you somehow. Is there anything you wish?”

“No, I do not wish for anything in particular. If I had to ask for something, it would be for a roof to use until my comrades arrive here.”

“Hm, exactly as I heard from Kanade, you truly have no material desires.”

“I had planned to part ways as soon as we arrived in this land after all. As you may have heard, a person dear to me died because of an illness. I helped just because of that, you do not need to worry about me.”

The conversation between Tadahisa and Shin caused whispers among the vassals.

Shin talked while recalling the historical dramas he had seen. He thought he might have said something disrespectful, but could not think of anything in particular.

“If so, you may continue to lodge in the Saegusa residence. Kuyou, Karin, I entrust him to you.”

“Understood.”

Kuyou and Karin lowered their heads after receiving Tadahisa’s order. They were not surprised, probably because it had already been decided who would have taken care of Shin.

“Personally, I would gladly welcome you to serve in my household though. I have heard of your prowess with the sword. You and your companions as well. What do you

think?”

“Sir, my physical abilities are all I have, there are many much more skilled than me with the sword. I have no intention of serving anyone.”

No matter how promising the conditions might be, entering into someone’s service was not an option for Shin. He stated his refusal clearly.

“Then, could I ask for the chance to match my strength against yours?”

As the conversation between the two had died down, Kankurou suddenly joined in. His expression was as peaceful as always, but his aura suggested he was trying to find out more about Shin.

“Oh, now this is unusual, for Kankurou to spontaneously speak in a situation like this.”

“I am aware of my lack of manners. There is, however, something that drew my interest.”

“Hmm, sir Shin, what do you say? I shall prepare a separate reward for this.”

“...there is no need for rewards. If I am allowed to speak my mind frankly, there is something that drew my interest as well, and wished to ask for a match myself.”

This match had no particular merit for Shin. But even so, he accepted Kankurou’s plea.

Shin himself was interested in something about the man.

“How should we set the victory conditions?”

“Both have said to be interested in something about the other. I say we continue until that something is grasped.”

After changing locations to the soldiers’ training area, Shin and Kankurou faced against each other, surrounded by soldiers and vassals.

Considering that they were both Chosen Ones, the spectators to their match gathered at the edges of the training area.

As he had done before the battle with Munechika, Shin set his [Limit] to II.

“Shall we take the first move?”

Kankurou took the initiative. With a step as light as if he were simply going on a walk, he reduced the distance between himself and Shin in an instant. He was wielding a special wooden sword made for Chosen Ones.

Kankurou’s swing was parried by Shin with the same wooden sword – after which, he took a step back.

“As good as expected.”

Saying so, Kankurou changed the arc his wooden sword was drawing in the air into a thrust and aimed it at Shin.

The wooden sword, attacking again without the slightest delay, gave Shin the impression that it had a will of its own.

“I have taken the first strike, but I shall let you have the first question.”

Kankurou spoke to Shin in a calm tone that hardly matched their ferocious sword clashes.

“I will go straight to the point then. How did you acquire the katana at your waist?”

“Oh my, you must be a connoisseur to pick this up. I have received this from the former lord, its name is...”

“ [Black Moon] , isn’t it? The stronger version of [Ripple Blade] , with all capacity points used in enlarging the attack range.”

“!!! So you really found out...!”

As Shin talked about the sword in detail, the speed of Kankurou’s swing increased. His smile now was different than the usual, he seemed to be enjoying the situation.

From the speed of his swings and the impact created from their skirmish, Shin thought that Kankurou was the person with stats closest to his among all the people he had met until now. At the very least, his stats were much higher than Rionne’s.

They were still lower than Munechika, the boss of Mt. Fuji, but other than his

technique, his experience in fighting other humans was incredibly rich. Shin had not felt much difficulty in fighting Munechika, but against Kankurou he felt it vividly.

Shin had heard from Karin that Kankurou was a powerful warrior born before the “Dusk of the Majesty”. He had undoubtedly experienced many battlefields.

“To think that you would know so much. Nowadays, such details are known only by me and the former lord...no, now that I think about it, there was someone else too.”

Kankurou spoke while knowingly adding pauses between his words.

“The Dark Blacksmith...the man that forged my beloved blade would naturally know such things.”

The words hinting at Shin’s real identity were spoken at the same time of a more powerful clash of the two men’s swords, and did not reach anyone else’s ears.

As their swords were still locked, Kankurou asked Shin.

“Well, sir Shin. May I ask something too?”

“What is it?”

“Have you ever heard of the name Jinkurou?”

“...yes, I have. As a samurai myself, we went along rather well.”

Jinkurou was the name of the guild master of a Japanese-style guild during the game era, “Kachou Fuugetsu”. As they were both samurai, he and Shin were well acquainted.

More than anything, he was the person Shin had given [Black Moon] to. He would never forget him.

After hearing all that, Shin remembered Kankurou.

As Schnee was Shin’s main support character, Kankurou was the first name to come up when mentioning Jinkurou’s support characters.

Kankurou’s species was High Lord. He had survived the age of natural catastrophes and was a living witness of its history, the same as Schnee.

“I was under the command of that person. Thus sir Shin, I know very well who you are. I remembered your face, yes, but considering the disappearance of Tsuki no Hokora, sir Girard’s death, sir Shibaid’s departure from the empire...it could not be just someone acting like you.”

Thinking of Kankurou’s expression when he first saw Shin, it was clear that he had figured out his identity from the start.

“Lord Jinkurou gave me this before passing away. Sir Shin, why have you returned?”

“I haven’t exactly returned...to be honest, I would also like to know the reason why I am here.”

Shin knocked away Kankurou’s diagonal slash and answered with a sigh.

“Is that so. It could be that there is something you yourself do not know, sir Shin”

“Something, you say?”

“Yes, did you know, sir? The people that served those once called players forget those they served after a certain time passes.”

“Eh?”

Shin’s sword arm slightly trembled after hearing Kankurou’s words. He forcibly parried it thanks to his stat advantage, but could not deny to be shaken.

“What does that mean?”

“Memories, they grow fainter and fainter. Or rather, I should say that one does not focus on them anymore. The memories do not fade away, but the loyalty, affection, everything previously felt becomes of little to no importance. I too must say I am subject to this. I would have never thought of serving the Kujou house in the period following Lord Jinkurou’s departure.”

Kankurou spoke matter-of-factly, but with a tinge of sadness.

The sound of their clashing swords became slightly fainter.

“Why did you tell me all this?”

“I had the chance of meeting lady Schnee around 50 years ago. I thought she would be in the same situation as me. Her feelings towards you, however, seemed unchanged. Wondering about it, I went to meet others that were in your service, sir Girard and sir Shibaid. But the result was the same.”

No one had lost their feelings towards Shin....as he spoke about this, Kankurou’s eyes gleamed with jealousy.

“In my travels outside Hinomoto, I had the chance of meeting others who served “Rokuten”. Their lifestyles might have been different, but all of them were invariably loyal to their masters. That might be tied to the reason why you returned, sir Shin.”

“.....”

“Sir Shin. Please, do reward their loyalty. That is all I wanted to say.”

As he stated these words, Kankurou stopped swinging his sword.

Shin followed suit and stopped his sword arm as well. This unexpected truth had left his expression sour.

“Let us conclude the match here.”

“Yes, let us. You have really surprised me though. I had never heard of any of this before.”

“I doubt anyone would realize it, without being aware as I was....but rather than that, I shall keep your identity hidden for now. Revealing it could cause unneeded trouble. You have no intention of openly stating it, do you? ”

“Yes, it would be a great help if you did so.”

Shin headed towards Tadahisa while talking with Kankurou. He was feeling conflicted within.

They received words of praise from Tadahisa for their battle, then Shin left the Kujou house.

Karin, who was walking next to him, spoke first.

“Sir Shin, during the battle you were talking about something with sir Kankurou, weren’t you?”

“Yes, well...I thought I had seen the katana at his waist somewhere before. But I was wrong.”

“What katana did you think it was?”

“The [Ripple Blade] , a katana with the effect of extending the range of its slashes. Sir Kankurou said that it was its enhanced version. I was really surprised...what did he say its name was? Maybe [Black Moon] ?”

Shin had no intention of talking about his conversation with Kankurou, so he decided to talk about his katana while avoiding the subject.

“They say that no other katana in Hinomoto can surpass it. It is indeed a sword among swords, some even call it a divine blade. Lord Kankurou said that the legendary Dark Blacksmith forged it, but because of that, there have also been troubles.”

“Trouble you say? Yesterday I heard about some succession problem, is that related maybe?”

“Lord Kankurou said that he should soon hand it down to the next generation...they say that the greatest sword arm in Hinomoto will inherit it. Of course, lord Kankurou excluded.”

Karin added that the title “Hinomoto’s Brave Ten” is given to the best katana users of Hinomoto. Shin had heard this term from Kankurou before.

Among those awarded with the title, their position was designed with the term 1st seat, 2nd seat, and so forth. Currently, Kankurou was the 1st seat, while Karin was 3rd seat.

“Hinomoto’s Brave Ten” was a title given to those excelling in the use of the katana, so there were lower members of the Brave Ten that were more powerful than their superiors, if total fighting prowess was considered.

The separation between higher and lower members was around seat 5. But even among them, Kankurou was a special case.

“He is famous for episodes of bravery such as charging by himself into an enemy battalion and cutting down 1000 enemies for example. From his silhouette wielding the black-sheathed white katana [Black Moon] , some call him the ‘White Haired Sword Demon’.”

“White Haired Sword Demon, huh...”

Once one becomes famous, such nicknames cannot be avoided apparently.

Shin, whose nickname of “Dark Blacksmith” had spread far and wide, could understand.

“Who is the favored candidate at present?”

“The 2nd to 4th seats are evenly matched for now. As defeating someone carrying a seat would let you make your name known, I have been challenged several times.”

Karin looked at the sky, as if she was remembering a distant memory, and sighed. It was a rather troublesome situation for her it seems.

As the news of her return to Hinomoto spread, such duels would probably increase once again.

As the two arrived at the Saegusa house while talking, something flew towards Shin.

“Kuu!!!”

“Whoa there, what’s wrong Yuzuha?”

What had flown toward Shin’s chest was Yuzuha in fox mode. Her fur was wet for some reason.

“Oh my, that’s no good little Yuzuha. I have to wash you—oh, lady Karin, Lord Shin. Welcome back.”

Chiyo came out of the residence after Yuzuha, carrying a brush.

“What were you doing Chiyo? This poor thing is all scared.”

“My, I was just giving it a bath.”

“What are those suspicious hand movements...?”

Chiyo replied, surprised and hurt to be accused, but Karin looked with worry and voiced her concern.

The fingers of the hand not holding the brush were repeatedly bending then extending again, at very high speed.

Shin also agreed that hands didn't move like that when giving baths.

“(The hands, the haaaands!)”

“Calm down Yuzuha. Well, I'll do the rest. These things should be done by the one she is bound to via the contract after all.”

Shin made his proposal while calming down the almost weeping Yuzuha. He felt things could turn ugly if he let Chiyo handle it.

“Oh no...!!”

“Chiyo...why do you look so desperate.”

Chiyo looked thoroughly disappointed, and Karin talked to her with a tired sigh. Judging from Karin's expression, Shin imagined that similar episodes had happened before too, and laughed wryly.



While Shin and the others were engaged in this small commotion, in the Kujou residence all vassals except Karin were assembled.

“Thus, Kankurou. I trust you will explain why you requested a duel with that man.”

Tadahisa's aura was not as peaceful as when he met Shin, but was instead strongly intimidating.

In a way, Tadahisa's daughter Haruna owed her life to Shin, and Kankurou had challenged him to a duel in that situation. Anyone other than Kankurou would have been thrown out of the residence.

“Yes. There was something I absolutely had to confirm. I am deeply thankful for your permission.”

Kankurou replied to Tadahisa in his usual calm and collected tone.

He had made such a proposal out of confidence; Shin would not be angry over something like that, as Kankurou well knew.

“Both his appearance and aura closely resembled a friend of my late Lord Jinkurou, so I suspected he might be that very friend...and I was right.”

“A friend of your former lord...judging from how he fought, that is not surprising.”

Tadahisa included, all vassals present nodded.

Many of those who witnessed the battle watched Shin with a bitter expression as he not only parried, but even easily beat back Kankurou’s attacks.

Even among the experienced ranks of the Kujou house, few could take Kankurou from the front in training. The speed at which Shin and Kankurou crossed swords exceeded their abilities.

“He is quite a unique young man, at that level of skirmish it is still possible to talk. This and another reason, a more important one.”

“And what would that be?”

“That young man will definitely serve no one. If anyone among those present here was thinking of putting him in his service, it is not advisable to use coercion. In the worst case, all of Hinomoto could crumble.”

Kankurou’s words caused surprise in all present, because of how great the consequences could be. Some of them looked jaded, thinking that it was some bad joke.

Even if his sword arm was on par with Kankurou, it was overly exaggerated to put him above the whole country of Hinomoto others thought.

“...I do not think you would joke in a situation like this.”

“Lord Tadahisa, you have met Schnee Raizar and Girard Estaria in the past, yes?”

“I have, before becoming head of the clan.”

“You do know how powerful they are, do you not?”

“I have been witness to a battle where Schnee Raizar participated. Her annihilation of a swarm of monsters by herself was truly impressive, even terrifying. I do believe her power surpasses human ability. It is certainly not folly to think that she could take down an entire country.”

Maybe because he was recalling that past episode, Tadahisa’s already strict expression had become even more bitter. He had been witness to Schnee destroying a whole swarm of monsters without receiving a single wound.

“Sir Shin’s power is on the same level...no, even superior to theirs. I might have some advantage over him with the use of the sword, if he fought with all his means there would be no way of stopping him. If he fought seriously, simply stalling him for a few minutes would be a great success.”

“You would go so far?”

“Without a doubt. Lord Tadahisa, you know of the High Human legends, yes? The vast majority of those legends as they are narrated today is true. As they say, the world before the Dusk was populated with warriors so powerful it was incomparable to the world now. In the same way, sir Shin cannot be contained in our current parameters and common sense. Lost skills, hidden arts...I doubt he knows only 10 or 20 of those. Fortunately, his personality would not let him draw the sword unless something really serious happened; as long as we treat him normally, there is no concern of provoking his anger.”

The words of Kankurou, the man considered Hinomoto’s strongest even before the Dusk, were nothing to laugh at. His expression did not contain the slightest hint that he could have been joking.

For a while, no one spoke a word.

No one could take the situation lightly after hearing such serious words from the 1st seat of Hinomoto’s Brave Ten.

Shin was not to be touched. This conclusion was already set in stone.



At the same time that Shin's party arrived in Kujou territory, in a certain residence, two men and one woman were talking.

The higher seats were occupied by a large Type Bear and a beautiful woman emanating a certain decadent atmosphere.

The other man, clad in black robes, was kneeling before them, his head down.

"So you failed. They shouldn't have had high defenses against magic though...did they have some countermeasure?"

"No, but a man was traveling with them as well. It appears that he detected the danger."

The man clad in black reported on what had happened.

"Who was that?"

"An adventurer called Shin. He is becoming more known recently for greatly damaging a swarm of monsters that attacked a city in the mainland. He is a Returned Ancestor, without a doubt."

Rumors of Shin's feats in Balmel were spreading wider than he thought. Information regarding powerful ones spread without their knowledge, as always.

"I tried observing him while blending into crowds, but he is surely dangerous. His appearance is that of a good-natured man, but the stench of blood lays heavy upon him. He is closer to us."

The man in ninja clothes slightly trembled as he spoke. His unique senses as an inhabitant of underground society had made him feel how dangerous Shin can be via his smell.

"Oh my, the great Kai, the Rokuhara's number one man, fears some adventurer?"

The woman next to the man sitting in the higher seat spoke in his place. As she slightly turned her neck sideways, her long white hair and animal ears rustled.



Behind the woman, six white furred tails, extending from her behind, were moving gently.

“If I am allowed to stake my life on the line, I shall take him.”

“Do not fret, it is still not the right time to use your life. If we cannot eliminate the successors of the Kujou house, it is all meaningless.”

With a chilling tone, the man sitting on the higher seat curbed the words of the man called Kai.

His body, 2 times larger than the average Type Bear, and the scars carved on it, reinforced his intimidating aura even more.

Kai bowed even more deeply after hearing his words.

“Tamamo. Can’t your techniques do anything? If they enter the castle, we cannot act easily.”

“Lord Juugo, I will gladly lend you my power.”

Tamamo showed a bewitching smile while leaning coyly towards the man. Her smile had charming properties, and was influencing both Juugo’s and Kai’s thoughts, little by little.

If she hadn’t, they would never think that her 6-tailed appearance, impossible for a Type Fox, was normal.

“Heh, after the death of their precious daughter, the Kujou house won’t be able to keep their peace. The sister is not long to this world either, right?”

“Yes, the illness will surely claim Kujou Haruna’s life very soon. I would have loved to eliminate the first born brother too, but regretfully there are no chances of getting close to him.”

“Let’s start from the closest targets. Hinomoto cannot stand divided forever.”

Juugo’s eyes began to sparkle with something resembling madness.

Tamamo and Kai both noticed, but said nothing.

Sparks of fire began to smolder within Hinomoto...

C h a p t e r 3

それぞれの思い

THE NEW
GATE

CHAPTER 3

PART 1

The day after the visit to Kujou Tadahisa.

Shin had been swinging [Kakura] since early morning, with his [Limit] completely removed.

“Fuuh!!”

His abilities were now completely unrestrained, but he was obviously careful not to damage the surroundings.

If he used his full strength it would be more difficult to control himself, but as long as he relaxed it was easy enough. His [Limit] had also been removed when he fought Barlux, Bayreuth’s guild master, after all.

Little by little, he put more strength into his swings, carefully monitoring any changes. He still couldn’t grasp it completely, but between understanding and not understanding how to control the blade, a small difference in power was born.

At that moment, he wasn’t thinking if, in the future, he would have had to hold back his strength at full release mode.

“Kuu.”

“Oh, is it time?”

Shin had told Yuzuha to check the time so he could put things in order and change before breakfast.

“Ehm, you may come out, you know?”

“.....so you noticed.”

Shin spoke towards the edge of the veranda, and an embarrassed Karin showed herself.

“I did all I could not to bother you...”

“That’s all right. I just noticed that you were there, you didn’t distract me.”

Just like the time before, Shin had noticed that Karin was close. And just like the time before, she had been careful not to bother him.

“I think it’s still early for breakfast though?”

“Yes, well, I was just curious to see what kind of training you did. After all, your match yesterday against sir Kankurou was truly impressive.”

“Oh, I see. I didn’t do anything special though...by the way, what did you think of my fighting style?”

Shin was concerned about it, so he took advantage of the opportunity to ask Karin’s opinion.

“What I think?”

“My sword arm, I mean. I have to admit, I have received some training in the art of the sword, but most of it is self-taught.”

As a player, Shin was more than powerful enough.

However, in a sword fight with no stats differences, he would not have matched Kankurou or Karin, who had spent much more time honing their technique.

The basis of Shin’s strength was not only his extensive experience in battles against monsters and other humans, but also the great variation of magic spells and skills at his disposal.

His job did not have any weapon limitations, so he could use many main weapons: swords, spears, bows, etc.

This is because he generally battled solo. He would quickly change weapons to strike the opponent’s weak points and conduct the fight in his favor.

Some think that mastering one type of weapon would make one stronger, but Shin did not choose that path.

To learn without being taught, and increase one's ability by leaps and bounds...Shin had not been blessed by such an overwhelming form of talent.

In a way, it could be said that Shin's sword was the fruit of his great talent in studying.

"...I think it would be presumptuous and arrogant of me to talk, but...well, something that concerned me was your body's movements."

"My movements?"

"Yes. In the Saegusa style handed down in my family, we focus our whole body in each swing of the blade. A precise, flowing slash, under the full control of our will, is considered the apex of the Saegusa style. In comparison, your blade seems to waver, following your body's movements. I suppose you probably did not make your body remember each technique's form, but only fought in actual battles?"

"Amazing, that's completely true."

After being taught the sword, Shin spent little time training. Most of his technique had been honed on the battlefield. After all, since he was within a game, even if he didn't perform the best, most ideal movements, as long as the system judged it effective he could cause damage.

Soon Shin's movements became more refined, and he stopped caring about the techniques' form.

"Sir Shin, your physical abilities are exceptional. Slight unsteadiness has never been a problem, I'm sure."

"But from here on out, I can't keep saying that, can I."

In the current world, the old damage judgement system is gone. The slight unsteadiness that Karin pointed out would influence the damage inflicted.

"Here on out?"

"I can't have my body be in control forever."

He had no intention of defeating any master of the sword, but simply becoming able to fully handle his own power.

Since he felt he was not using his strength properly, Shin wanted to perfect his control over his power, now that he had the time.

“Well...if you would be satisfied with me, I could teach you some of the basics. You will stay in our house until your companions arrive, so I think it could be useful to you.”

“I would be more than grateful, but is it alright to teach an outsider?”

Shin cast doubt to Karin’s sudden proposal.

“I believe that you would not use my teachings for any wrong purpose. What sir Shin needs now is understanding and control of his physical abilities. I would not impart to you teachings concerning our school’s techniques, and doubt anyone would be outraged at just some private lessons. I teach the basics at other dojos too, after all.”

No, someone probably would...thought Shin. Though to be trained by the 3rd seat of Hinomoto’s Brave Ten was something he hadn’t even hoped for, so he chose to not worry about small things.

“Well then, let us start training right after breakfast then.”

“Thank you very much.”

After breakfast, the two moved to the Saegusa dojo. The place Karin led Shin to was a quiet dojo: apparently the lessons for their students were held in another one.

Shin lowered his stats with [Limit] and had Karin point out where he was lacking. Probably because he had been self-taught for a long time, Shin had more weird quirks than he thought.

“You use many other weapons other than the katana, I think that is one reason too.”

Karin explained that using many weapons had created a hotbed for the birth of quirks in his fighting style.

“Kuaaa...”

Yuzuha yawned as she watched over the two.



One evening, a few days after Karin had started giving private lessons to Shin.

Sitting on the veranda outside the room assigned to him, Shin was listening to Schnee's report.

"(...I see. So there weren't any major troubles after that.)"

"(Yes. We could escort lady Hermie safe and sound. For safety, Wilhelm is with her, but I'm sure she will be alright unless something extraordinary happens.)"

Milt had been sent to attack the Summit Faction base, so only Wilhelm had remained to guard Hermie. He was the one she had opened her heart to the most during their travels, so excluding battle prowess, he was the best choice.

"(That's reassuring. Nothing in particular is going on here at the moment, but I have a few concerns. Don't let your guard down when you come, just in case.)"

"(I know. See you soon.)"

Shin cut the Mind Chat after Schnee's last words, spoken with a cheerful tone. It also depended on the winds, but their arrival to Hinomoto would be about one week later.

Shin gazed at the sky, thinking that it would be nice to use this opportunity to do some sightseeing in Hinomoto. A beautiful full moon was hanging in the darkness.

"A garden in the moonlight...not bad at all."

"It's a beautiful moonlit night."

Shin had talked to himself, but he heard someone answer. He had noticed it already, so he wasn't surprised; it was Karin, wearing an indoor kimono. Her silky black hair gleamed in the moonlight.

"Father gave me some good sake, so I thought of bringing you some."

Karin was carrying a tray with a bottle and small cups.

"I see. We have a beautiful moon out too, let's enjoy some moonlight sake then."

Shin was not a big drinker in the real world, so this was his first time to enjoy the tradition of drinking sake while gazing at the moon.

“Here you go.”

“Eh? Oh, thanks.”

Before Shin could take the bottle to pour himself a cup, Karin did it for him. There were two small cups, so she would probably drink too.

After she poured the sake for him, Shin did the same in return.

It was probably “THE NEW GATE’s” type of sake. Its sweet aroma reminded Shin of the Ginjo style of flavor.

Recalling how he had tried it at a gathering in university, Shin put the cup to his lips, feeling a faintly sweet aroma and a firm, clean taste. Shin was not an expert by any means, but thought it was really delicious.

The moonlit sky seemed to make the sake even more pleasant. Maybe it was also because a beautiful girl like Karin was pouring it too.

“So beautiful.”

“Yes!? Ah, er, that’s right! The moon is really beautiful!”

“?”

Karin’s surprised reaction made Shin turn to look at her, but she was looking straight at the sky.

“What’s wrong?”

“No, nothing at all....”

She seemed really nervous. The graceful, elegant demeanor she had until a moment ago had gone away somewhere.

“Does it have anything to do with the two people behind the pillar?”

“.....so you had noticed.”

“Well, I think it would be harder not to...”

Shin had detected that, at the edge of the veranda just behind a corner, Kuyou and Kayo were hiding. Kuyou’s eyes emanated a faint killing intent. Anyone who had experience of battle would have realized.

“Did something happen?”

“.....actually, mother told me to get to know you more.”

“Know me more?”

The sake served the purpose of facilitating conversation, probably.

“I wonder why, did I do anything disrespectful?”

“Not at all, actually....what I’d like to know is....what food you like, what things you like, what kind of....women you like.”

The last words left Karin’s lips in a whisper.

“Aaah...I see, that’s what it is? She wants me to do a marriage interview?”

Why would Karin’s mother Kayo ask her daughter to gather that information? Shin had guessed the reason, but avoided saying it outright.

During his stay in the Saegusa house, Shin had had the chance to learn more about Hinomoto’s warrior families.

As it had been the case with Kayo, Hinomoto women tended to marry young, and it was not strange to give birth in their late teens.

For someone like Karin, who was female and part of the Brave Ten, it would be natural to have a fiancé.

The Saegusa house however, placed a great focus on battle ability: Kuyou wouldn’t approve of a lacking candidate, but to find someone that he, 2nd seat in the Hinomoto Brave Ten, would accept was a difficult feat.

“Mother, well, she said that sir Shin would surely pass.....and father also seemed to accept....”

It seemed that thanks to his duel with Kankurou, Shin had satisfied their expectations. Judging from Karin’s words, Kayo was the main instigator behind it all.

“Did he really accept? The killing intent coming from him is getting gradually stronger...”

Kuyou’s killing intent was gradually growing as time passed. Even if he had accepted, his feelings as a father were a different thing.

“Well, you see...I am really sorry, but I already have a fiancée. I’m afraid I cannot accept that proposal.”

“Eh.....? Oh, I see. Of course! A man like you would surely have at least one fiancée!!”

After hearing Shin’s reply, Karin opened her eyes wide for an instant, then showed an exaggerated reaction.

She was partly surprised, partly relieved...mixed feelings swirled inside her, and for Shin it was difficult to read her expression for a while.

“I’m sorry for bringing up something so weird. It’s a beautiful night, and I almost ruined it.”

“Personally, I feel honored to have you serve me sake.”

“Oh, I’m glad to hear that.”

Karin bowed, then walked away in Kuyou and Kayo’s direction. Their presence disappeared too, probably thanks to Karin.

“Marriage, huh...”

In the former world too, there existed the concept of marriages focused on households or bloodlines, but Shin had never had anything to do with such things.

If Karin had really fallen in love with him, it would be understandable for them to talk to Shin about marriage, now that he knew about the Saegusa house’s circumstances.

Shin, however, had no recollection of any episodes that could have turned her “like” into “love”.

There were happenings that might have made her think of Shin that way, like when he performed CPR and a cardiac massage on her.

“It’s too early for a student like me to think about that...”

Shin’s original “status” was university student. Marriage wasn’t something too far off in the future, but still it didn’t feel realistic yet.

“...sigh”

After leaving Shin, Karin shoved Kuyou and Kayo in their bedroom, then returned to her room.

Her body, which felt strangely heavier than usual, lying in the futon, she stared at the ceiling.

“A fiancée...”

Shin’s battle prowess is extremely high. Outside Hinomoto, he could be a very successful adventurer.

Karin knew that Shin’s name was actually starting to become known.

Tadahisa had forbidden anyone to forcibly pull Shin to their side, but in case of mutual affection there would be no problem.

“I should be happy that a troublesome thing has been taken care of, and yet...”

Karin had always focused on swinging her sword, without caring to practice bridal duties. She had left Hinomoto as an adventurer, so she could cook and sew to an extent, but Karin had never considered the possibility of marriage.

...at least, that’s how it was supposed to be.

“.....sigh.”

She wouldn't stop sighing after going back to her room.

Maintaining one's condition was also a warrior's duty. Yet after talking with Shin, she found herself unable to.

She knew what this feeling was.

The identity of the weariness enveloping her body. It was "loss".

A sensation felt after losing something of importance. A sensation similar to powerlessness.

That was strange, though. She hadn't lost anything.

"Beautiful, huh..."

Shin's words were looping inside Karin's mind.

Looking at Shin, it was clear enough that those words had not been directed at her. Despite that, she was almost comically surprised by them.

Her face still felt flushed.

At the same time, she could feel a clenching pain, deep in her chest.

Karin knew this sensation too.

"Am I....attracted to sir Shin...?"

She had seen him for the first time on the ship they had boarded to return to their homeland. She understood he was a man of great ability, but he was still just another passenger.

As they talked, she simply had the impression that he probably wasn't a bad person.

She was surprised at his strength during the battle against the Gale Serpents.

Then, after diving into the sea to follow Kanade, when she regained consciousness the first thing she saw was Shin's back.

“It was really big...”

Karin could faintly remember when he was carrying her. Shin was of rather lean build, but his back was bigger and larger than she thought, and she didn't feel uneasy at all when leaning against him.

Then, he helped them look for the medicinal herb for Lady Haruna; on top of Mt. Fuji, he stood fearlessly before a giant 8-headed snake monster, and won the herb with his sword.

Karin remembered the burning sensation in her chest as she watched Shin face the female warrior clad in platinum armor.

However, she thought that it was a sensation born from watching two powerful warriors engage in battle...

“To fall in love while watching him cross swords in battle...there's something wrong with me.”

She was starting to worry about her sensitivity. She had been focused on the sword all her life, that's true, but even so that was too violent a beginning.

Something else that could have triggered it all...

“Ah...”

She came up with something else.

The decisive episode that made her think about Shin.

Karin lightly passed her fingers on her lips.

“The kiss.”

Shin had desperately explained that he had done that to save her, and Karin did not doubt his words.

But it was still true that she had been kissed. And according to Kanade, he had touched her breasts too.

She knew she was more developed than other people her age. She also knew that when she was out adventuring with Kanade, men would often gaze at her chest.

She felt nothing but disgust then, but in Shin's case the disgust disappeared.

Rather, she even...

“Aaaah!! What am I thinking about!?!”

Karin couldn't help but raise her voice.

Her heartbeat was getting annoyingly noisy. Her thoughts refused to be put in order.

The more she tried not to think about it, the more Shin's silhouette occupied her mind.

The slightly silly expression he had when they first met.

The brave expression he showed when he blew away the Gale Serpent's head.

His kind expression when he was worrying about her.

His serious expression while he swung the sword.

“To realize it after being turned down...there really is something wrong with me...”

She would barely sleep that night.



3 days after Karin talked about marriage to Shin, a letter was delivered to the Saegusa house.

Chiyo, who had received it, said it had come from the Kujou.

“It's for me?”

“Yes, lady Haruna expressed the wish to meet you. The sender is lady Kanade.”

I am aware of the rudeness of my request. But could you make it possible to meet my sister once...was the content of the letter.

Considering Kanade's personality, she would rather show up personally to talk about it, but as she had been absent from Hinomoto for a long time, she likely had been caught by a servant on her way out.

"Lady Haruna is a very reasonable person. She surely would not think well of requesting the person she owes her life to to come visit her. But just ending things with a thank-you letter isn't something that she'd accept either."

Shin had already received a letter of gratitude for the assistance he had lent.

It was rich in old-fashioned expressions and hard to read, but her feelings of gratitude were clearly expressed.

"I have already been thanked by lord Tadahisa too, I don't think she should concern herself with it though..."

"She's also unusually stubborn you see. Sir Shin, wouldn't you give lady Haruna a chance to express her thanks?"

"Well, I don't have much to do until my comrades arrive after all. If she will be relieved, then it's fine for me. To be honest, I'm the one feeling nervous though..."

Kuyou wrote the letter of acceptance and handed it to the waiting messenger.

They would go visit lady Haruna the following day.

"Ehm, I think it is best to review the visit protocol..."

"Y-yes..."

As they were walking towards the Kujou residence, Shin talked to Karin, but received an awkward reply.

The day after their marriage conversation, Karin was too restless and they couldn't continue their usual training.

Now, after a few days had passed, she seemed more calm.

By the way, Yuzuha had stayed back at the residence.

As they arrived to the residence where Haruna was said to be, they showed the gate guard the proof of passage they had received with the reply to their letter.

The proof of passage had half of a seal; combined with the other half, which the gate guard had, it matched perfectly and emitted a faint glow. In order to avoid counterfeiting, a magical defense mechanism had been placed on it as well.

As they were waiting for someone to guide them into the residence, Kanade herself appeared.

“I thank you for coming. Come in, this way.”

“Lady Kanade. The noble daughter of the Kujou house should not behave like that in public!!”

A lady in her 40s, who arrived right after Kanade, reprimanded her. She was Kanade’s tutor and her name was “Ei”.

“I apologize for my rudeness. I shall accompany you inside. Only several days have passed since our lady Haruna rose from her sickbed, thus I pray you not to tire her too much.”

“Understood.”

Ei bowed deeply to them, and Shin nodded in reply. Her illness might have been cured, but Haruna had been sick in bed for a long period, naturally they did not want to be a burden to her.

After they walked for awhile, Ei stopped in front a room with a veranda. Kanade, who had gone back before them, was already inside.

Ei kneeled on the floor and called to who was beyond the sliding doors.

“Lady Haruna. Lord Shin and Lady Karin have arrived.”

“Let them inside.”

After Haruna’s reply, Ei opened the sliding doors. Shin and Karin were encouraged to

go inside and complied.

“Let me thank you for coming all the way here to visit me.”

Alongside Kanade, in the room there was another young woman, adorned in a gorgeous kimono.

Shin’s attention was caught by the woman’s captivating waist-length black hair and her eyes, black like polished obsidian gems.

Her facial features were very Japanese-like, with a reserved kind of elegance typical of traditional Japanese beauty.

“Don’t just stand around like that, have a seat. You shouldn’t make my sister wait.”

“You have even less restraint than usual I see.”

There was no doubt that the young lady before them was Haruna.

As Shin sat on the cushion prepared for him, Haruna adjusted her posture, then deeply lowered her head to him.

“I wish to give you my deepest gratitude for saving my sister and her friend’s lives. Thanks to you, the illness afflicting me has been cured as well. I shall never forget the debt of gratitude I owe you for the rest of my life.”

“Raise your head, please. I simply followed my heart. Your feelings of gratitude have already reached me very well.”

Shin felt a bit uneasy, doubting that it was proper for the daughter of the family’s head to bow like that to a mere adventurer.

He appreciated her gesture of thanks, of course, but being treated so formally had the inverse effect of making him nervous.

Being born and raised in modern times, Shin found Haruna’s reactions exaggerated.

“I also wish I could show my gratitude to you somehow...”

“No, please, you really should not concern yourself with that. Er...oh, yes! Seeing Lady

Haruna smile would be more than sufficient!”

“My smile?”

“I do not know how you normally are, of course, but your expression now is, how should I say...stiff, lady Haruna. I do not need things or glory, nothing like that, but if possible, I would like to see a more cheerful expression from you.”

Shin went with an idea that had suddenly come to mind, but while talking he was almost annoyed with himself at that totally out of character request.

He knew that when he would recall his actions and words later, he would want to kick himself.

“I say, I also love my sister’s smile very much.”

Saying so, Kanade hugged Haruna.

“I do not know how valuable my smile can be, but I shall not refuse such a request. I have not had much to smile about after being bedridden, so I hope it is not too awkward.”

While caressing Kanade’s head, who had jumped on her lap, Haruna replied to Shin. Her words gave him a small relief.

Haruna’s expression as she cuddled Kanade appeared as if illuminated by sunlight.

“...lending my help has been worth it.”

Thanks to the warmth he felt from looking at Haruna cuddling Kanade, Shin’s uneasiness was gone too.

After explaining briefly what had happened in their travels, they excused themselves from Haruna’s quarters. The tutor Ei had reminded them not to stay too long after all.

Karin had not spoken much, but apparently she had already met and talked with Haruna, whom she counted as a close friend.

“I have been steadily recovering, but everyone’s such a worrywart.”

“I heard you have been bedridden for a long time, so it can’t be helped.”

After consoling the disappointed-looking Haruna, Shin stood up. Haruna didn’t want to see them go yet, but there was nothing else they could do; A presence was clearly sending a “It’s time to let the lady rest—” message from outside towards Shin, probably Ei.

“I shall take my leave then. Please take care not to push yourself too much, as you just recovered.”

Realizing again how loved she had to be by those around her, Shin bid farewell to Haruna.

“Will it be possible to meet again? I am eager to know more about the world outside Hinomoto.”

“I am imposing in the Saegusa house until my companions arrive, so it will be possible until then. Although I fear the vassals will be opposed to the household’s lady meeting a mere adventurer like me.”

“It will be wise to do it without creating any unpleasant rumors, by having someone else with you during the visit, I think.”

The Kujou house was the ruler of east Hinomoto. If people started rumoring that its first-born daughter was intimate with an unknown adventurer, Haruna’s reputation was more at risk than Shin.

Karin thus suggested that they avoided meeting by themselves.

“I understand, but it is truly regretful.”

“Alas, it is how Shin and Karin said. Now that you have recovered, the storm of marriage proposals will start again too.”

Shin thought that Kanade’s prediction was surely on the spot.

Her household and appearance were excellent, talking to her showed a person with a serene personality, clearly quite intelligent too. With so many excellent conditions all together, there will surely be multitudes of men willing to marry her.

As she had just recovered, it was likely that no such topic had been mentioned to her, but sooner or later they surely would. It wasn't something Shin could do anything about.

"Well then, if there will be the chance, let us meet again."

"Thank you again for coming."

"Yes, come again!"

Ei, who was waiting outside Haruna's quarters, led them back to the entrance gate.

"Thank you very much for sparing your precious time for Lady Haruna today."

"Not at all, a mere adventurer like me was unworthy of such honor."

Normally, an attendant would accompany guests from the small gate in the hedges surrounding the residence until the large gate at the entrance of the Kujou estate, but this time Karin assumed that role.

Even if it was a person they owe great gratitude to, they wouldn't let strangers walk on their own around the main compound after all.

While thinking about this, Shin realized that since he had entered the Kujou domain, every time he left the Saegusa residence he was accompanied by someone.

"Well, I guess that's obvious."

He whispered this to himself and looked towards the large gate, when he saw someone other than the guard before it.

"It's been a while, sir Shin."

"Sir Kankurou...you have business with lady Haruna as well?"

Kankurou, who was dressed the same way as when he fought Shin, shook his head.

"No, I simply had some free time, so I was taking a walk, and I perceived your presence. I do not have very much time, but would you join me for some conversation?"

“No problem for me, but what about you Karin?”

“That is fine for me too. I see sir Toshiro is here too, what about you?”

“I do not have any pressing duties either.”

In the direction, Karin looked at stood Yaejima Toshiro. He was not wearing armor, but only grey and deep green formal wear.

“However, if time allows it, I would like to ask sir Shin for a match.”

“A match?”

Ever since they first met, when Shin was with Karin and Kanade, he hadn't felt any amity coming from Toshiro. What he felt almost made him feel like he was considered an enemy instead.

He was slightly surprised, then, to be challenged to a duel in such a direct manner.

“I have heard the rumors. You are receiving lady Karin's teachings in the way of the sword, yes?”

“There are such rumors?”

Shin raised his eyebrows at Toshiro's words.

Karin was the Saegusa family's first-born daughter and the 3rd seat of the Hinomoto Brave Ten. If word of her teaching a stranger the art of the sword spread, it would definitely cause a commotion. Shin would have hated to return Karin's favor with trouble.

“I don't think I spoke about it with anyone though.”

“I have not heard a word of it either. By the way, Toshiro, recently you seem to strangely disappear rather often, don't you?”

After hearing Karin and especially Kankurou's comments, Shin casted a suspicious glance at Kankurou, thinking that he might have been spying on them.

“I just heard it from lady Chiyo! I was told not to say it to anyone else, nor have I any

intention to!! I am just all too env-ahem!!!”

The more they talked, the more Shin’s opinion of Toshiro changed.

“Ehm...sir Toshiro?”

Karin looked puzzled at Toshiro, she didn’t seem to have noticed his affection for her yet.

“In any case!! I shall put you to the test and see how much your skills have grown!!”

“My apologies. Toshiro is infatuated with lady Karin, and you see...”

“Oh, yes, I kind of realized it too.”

“T-that has nothing to do with this!!!”

Toshiro yelled at Kankurou and Shin’s whispered conversation.

“?”

Karin, who had not heard the conversation, looked even more confused.

Shin thought that maybe, this Yaejima Toshiro wasn’t a bad person.

PART 2

As they did not have anything urgent to do, Shin and Karin followed Kankurou to the Toudou house's dojo.

It was a separate compound, used only by Kankurou, Toshiro, and a few others.

In the same way as the Saegusa house, the dojos were separated between teaching use and personal use.

"Some wish to focus on personal training without being bothered by their surroundings. This dojo is also used sometimes for matches such as this."

"...I suppose they don't want to be seen."

"Well, yes, that would be better."

Shin and Toshiro then both wielded wooden swords.

As Kankurou had told Shin on their way to the dojo, Toshiro was close in level to the Hinomoto Brave Ten. The aura Shin felt emanating from Toshiro convinced him that it had to be the truth.

While they were talking, Shin regarded Toshiro as a guy he couldn't help but like, but now the man before him was nothing but a proud swordsman.

"Here I come."

With this short declaration, Toshiro stepped forward. Without any pre-emptive movements, he closed in on Shin as if sliding on the ground.

Toshiro's sword arm might have seemed to be moving leisurely, but an instant later it was already penetrating Shin's space.

"Shah!!"

Shin swung his sword in response to Toshiro's strike. The clash of the two wooden swords produced a dull sound that echoed through the dojo.

"Hmm..."

Looking at the two fighters, Kankurou was deep in thought, his chin resting on his hand. He felt that Shin's movements had become much sharper compared to when they fought a few days before.

(...he's already changed so much?)

Even more so than Kankurou, Shin was surprised at his own movements.

Karin's teachings resulted in Shin eliminating unnecessary motions from his movements.

They didn't do any training for actual fighting, she had just observed him swinging his sword and re-enacting skills with his body movements.

"I see you have grown damn well already."

"I'm surprised myself."

Shin was so surprised by the results that he answered exactly what he was thinking.

Toshiro's first strike was meant to be a test; the second and third strike that followed were much heavier and faster.

They might have been inferior to Kankurou's, but most Chosen Ones would have had trouble parrying them.

Shin, however, deflected them all with ease.

It was also thanks to the speed boost granted by his high stats, but more than anything, his body felt really light.

He had not changed the [Limit] on his status, but he felt the distance linking each one of his strikes had shrunk. The speed of his swings had increased. Each strike's weight had changed too.

"To think that it can all change this much."

He might have felt the change more clearly thanks to his high stats.

Even so, the clear results showed that, he had to admit, his former movements were

riddled with unnecessary motions.

The sound of the impact between the two men's wooden swords grew progressively louder, the pause between clashes shorter.

(Slash downwards from the right, then slash up right away from the left...no, stop halfway and thrust forward!)

Shin dodged, parried, blocked the wooden blade attacking him.

The two blades clashed again, this time locked, grinding against each other.

“Fuuh!!”

Toshiro tried to push forward by pressing his weight into the sword, but, after a brief moment, suddenly retreated.

His rapid movements gave the illusion that the floor under Toshiro had slipped away. The distance he had retreated was the exact distance needed for the tip of his sword to reach Shin.

The blade formed an arc in mid-air and swung down, aimed towards Shin's left side.

“Not so fast!”

Shin didn't dodge or parry, but stepped in closer to Toshiro before his blow could land. He charged forward, with the intent of shoving Toshiro away.

“Guh!!”

Toshiro probably judged he couldn't make it in time; he pulled back his sword at the same time as Shin's tackle.

Shin accelerated his charge against the swing while Toshiro was retreating. Naturally, the former won.

Toshiro avoided the fate of losing balance and falling down, but because of that he couldn't defend himself against Shin's following attack.

Toshiro tried to twist his body to avoid Shin's wooden sword aimed at his neck.

Shin, ready to intercept such struggle, brought down his sword on Toshiro's neck, then stopped just as the blade touched it.

"...what?"

Toshiro regained his balance and questioned Shin.

Shin answered while looking not at Toshiro, but the dojo entrance.

"Someone is coming. Two people."

"Hm, looks like it."

Kankurou had also perceived it, and nodded at Shin's words. Karin too felt the new presence, and turned to look in the same direction as Shin.

After a little while, two men appeared at the dojo's entrance.

"Did we interrupt something?"

"Brother! Why are you here!"

Toshiro yelled to one of the two men, who looked apologetic.

According to [Analyze] , his name was Yaejima Shiden, a young man in his late twenties.

He had black hair mixed with white, red eyes, and was around the same height as Shin, about 180 centimeters. In contrast to his soft speech and gentle expressions, both his arms and legs were very thick; to Shin they looked like bundles of steel.

His job was samurai and his level, quite high, was 238.

"I thought that you would be here Toshiro. I have sir Tadahisa's permission to move within the castle compound. Lord Kankurou, I am glad to see you too. Lady Karin, I see you have returned from the search for Lady Haruna's medicine."

"I am glad to see you in good health, sir Shiden."

"It has been a long time."

Kankurou and Karin each answered the man's greetings. Obviously enough, the three all knew each other.

"Sir Kanezuka, I trust you are well too."

"Hmm."

After greeting Shiden, Kankurou spoke to Kanezuka Araki.

He was a man between his late thirties or early forties. He seemed to be of rather short stature, maybe because he was standing next to Shiden.

His job was blacksmith, as manifested by the very developed muscles on his arms. His level was 166. His grey hair was cut short, his black eyes fixed on Kankurou's [Black Moon] .

"This man is sir Shin, correct?"

"That's me, but why do you know my name?"

Shiden looked at Shin and inquired about his identity. His expression was very serious as he did so.

"I have been informed that you have assisted in the search for the medicinal herbs to cure lady Haruna's illness. Oh, I have yet to introduce myself, have I. I am the first-born of the Yaejima house, Yaejima Shiden."

"Er, as you already know, my name is Shin."

He was apparently aware of Shin's status as guest, and had been informed about what Shin looked like.

"What brings you here today then? As sir Shiden came in person, I can imagine what the matter might be though."

"I think many are aware of the whispers that there are suspicious movements in the west. I would like to say that they are all groundless rumors...but I received a report that the Ichinose house, one of our vassals, is making suspicious moves. I came to inform sir Tadahisa that our Yaejima house, along with 3 other houses, are investigating this matter at the moment."

After Shiden finished talking, Toshiro interjected.

“The Ichinose house!?”

“Yes, that house always sought to unify Hinomoto. But would they move only by themselves, I wonder?”

Kankurou, after pondering for a moment, voiced his doubts.

“Our investigation being still underway, I cannot say anything yet. However—”

“Ehm, excuse me!”

Shiden and Kankurou were continuing to discuss the matter, ignoring the surprised Toshiro, when Shin interrupted them.

“Is anything wrong?”

“Sirs, please, you know you can’t talk of such delicate matters with an outsider like me around!”

Kankurou looked at Shin as if he had a question mark over his head, without the slightest concern on his expression.

“I have heard from sir Tadahisa and lady Haruna that you are a man worthy of trust, sir Shin. You have no intention of talking about this to anyone, correct?”

“That’s true, but...”

Shin regarded this excessive trust with suspicion.

“Sir Kankurou says that you are someone that can be trusted. I have no reasons to doubt you. Moreover, sir Shin is someone even sir Kankurou said he cannot win against...I would never want such a person to think of us as enemies. I know sir Kankurou’s strength very well after all.”

Both the eastern and western families trusted Kankurou’s word apparently. The reason for this trust came from Shiden’s own experience. No one would want to turn a powerful warrior into an enemy for no reason after all.

“I see that you have crossed swords with Toshiro too. How did my brother fare?”

“He was quite strong, I think. I wonder if it is wise to trust so easily though.”

“I have heard the sound of your swords clashing. Your sword swings straight and true. Sir Kankurou’s words and the sound of those sword clashes, as a samurai myself I cannot mistrust you.”

“.....”

Shin was somewhat at a loss for words.

He had heard that masters could communicate without words, through their fists or their blades.

During his battle against Girard, Shin had understood his feelings. But that time, his mental state was in a kind of extreme condition, and he managed to do it because he knew his opponent very well.

To understand someone he never met before only through the sound of sword clashes was something utterly impossible for Shin.

“You are trusted, isn’t that enough?”

“Well, it is better than to be suspected.”

Araki spoke to the speechless Shin. His expression told him to “stop sweating the small stuff.”

“By the way, I haven’t introduced myself yet, right. I’m Kanazuka Araki, a blacksmith. Today I came here to admire sir Kankurou’s [Black Moon].”

“Yes, here you are.”

Kankurou nodded, took [Black Moon] from his waist and handed it to Araki.

Araki sat down on a corner of the dojo and, using a cloth to be sure not to touch it directly, stared intently at [Black Moon]’s blade.

The user limitation had been removed apparently.

“What is he doing?”

“I am collaborating with sir Kanazuka in order for him to forge a divine blade like [Black Moon] . I suppose you have heard that I am looking for someone to inherit [Black Moon] , yes?”

“Only in passing. I know that lady Karin, my host, is a candidate too.”

“At present, [Black Moon] is the only katana bearing the “divine blade” moniker. I do not know who will inherit it, but there have been squabbles about it...if it will be kept by the eastern or western forces. Of course, it will be the side the inheritor belongs to, but many worry that it could tilt the balance between the two forces.”

It might be just one blade, but it was not to be underestimated.

The stat bonuses given from the katana to the owner were high, but the long-range attacks it could unleash, paired with high stats, could easily surpass average skills in power.

“Thus I thought that having another divine blade could be a solution, but apparently even for sir Kanazuka, Hinomoto’s finest blacksmith, forging an Ancient-grade katana is no easy feat.”

He observed [Black Moon] to find hints, researched documents and oral traditions and continued to forge, through a process of trial and error.

“Do you know what the materials are? It’s quite difficult to obtain them.”

“We have some of the materials left by lord Jinkurou. We don’t know, however, how more than half of them should be used. I am a complete novice in the blacksmith profession after all.”

Shin whispered to Kankurou, who he thought would be knowledgeable in the art of forging. Shin thought that it would have been a very difficult, if not impossible, feat; as expected, success seemed very far.

“Personally, I hoped we could receive some words of advice...”

Kankurou, who knew of Shin’s real identity, hoped that Shin, a blacksmith himself, could offer some advice.

Looking at Araki's bloodshot eyes, Shin had already understood that he was close to a dead-end.

"If I just said something out of the blue, would he believe me? He looks like a hardcore artisan type, I doubt he'd pay any mind to a youngster like me."

"Those of relatively high social status already know that you are a Returned Ancestor, what the Adventurers' Guild calls Chosen Ones. Because of this, I think he will listen to you, at least a little. Even the tiniest hint would suffice."

Kankurou wasn't ordering Shin to show all his skills and knowledge as a blacksmith.

It would be far too easy if it was possible to forge an Ancient-grade weapon only after hearing some advice.

Looking at Araki, desperately trying to draw the tiniest bit of information from [Black Moon], Shin felt solidarity as a blacksmith. Thus he decided to give him some help.

"I might be able to say something if I saw him forging. Blacksmithing techniques vary greatly from school to school, and the methods I know are influenced by one's ability. I would at least be able to understand if there are techniques that could be used in this case."

"Let us do just that then."

Kankurou went closer to Araki and explained the situation. Araki looked at Shin first with surprise, then with a glare so sharp Shin felt like he could be sniped down any moment. After staring at Shin for several moments, Araki gave a small nod.

".....you're knowledgeable about blacksmithing?"

Toshiro, who had been excluded by the recent developments, asked Shin.

"I don't think I can do anything special, but I might be of some help."

Shin's techniques were instinctive, born from his experience during the game era. It was difficult for him to explain crafting processes with words, so he decided to think after looking at Araki's forging first.

Shin was capable of forging strong weapons not only because of his technique, but also

because of his magic powers, so he wasn't absolutely sure he could be of help.

"Our match ends here then."

"Is that alright with you?"

"I couldn't care less about what that man said about balance or whatever. But sir Kanazuka is betting his own life on the order he received. Holding you back here would mean being in his way. Who could do something so uncouth?"

"...I see."

He was more reasonable than expected. Despite his frustration, he managed to keep his feelings under control.

Shin's opinion of Toshiro changed yet again.

"What will you do now brother?"

"Return to the Yaejima house of course. I have duly delivered father's message to sir Tadahisa and could also observe your growth. I could say that my objectives are fulfilled."

Shiden, saying that his duties were over, went towards the castle town with the Kujou soldiers waiting outside the dojo.

Shin's group of 5 moved to the smithy.

Kanazuka Araki was the chief blacksmith of the Kanazuka school; they would use his personal facility this time. It was equipped with the highest quality furnace and tools.

They arrived at a smithy equipped with a single furnace. It was not very wide, and apparently had been built with the sole purpose of forging the divine katana.

Araki told his disciples to not get close and beckoned Shin to enter.

The other 3 were told to wait outside. The smithy is a territory with the sole purpose of passing down blacksmithing techniques. When forging weapons, only the blacksmith and those in the same field were allowed inside.

“I will forge trying to create the divine katana. When I finish, tell me what you thought.”

After saying only that, Araki started swinging his hammer.

Shin was looking at him silently, and realized that Araki used next to no magic power when swinging his hammer.

As he had expected, the magic power contained in the katana came only from the materials and the slight quantity present in the surrounding atmosphere, the moment the hammer hit the materials.

The speed at which the mass of iron changed shape was also much slower than that of Shin. Araki appeared to be using skills, but they weren't at the level of Shin's, who could make ingots change their shape at will.

Looking at the way the man crafted, Shin estimated that Araki's crafting level was around VII. If he could use the same techniques as Shin, he could easily create Mythology-grade weapons.

Shin, however, had heard that Araki's masterpiece was a Legend-grade weapon. The reason was the way he forged. If one focused only on the ability to strike iron, the stats of the produced weapon can only go so high.

Shin didn't know if the Legend-grade weapon Araki had forged was Higher or Lower, but to forge that sword without using magic, as Araki did, would have been impossible, at least in the game era.

(Either he's a genius, or it's a product of his life-long focus on blacksmithing and techniques...possibly both.)

Some use the expression “to breathe life in one's work”, but in Araki's case saying “to pour one's own lifeblood in one's work” would have been more accurate.

The energy and aura he infused in every swing of the hammer was so powerful, one would think that he was shaving away his own lifespan to do so. “To work as if possessed,” an expression that fit him perfectly.

After the whole process ended, what remained was only to polish the blade.

He would leave this work to an expert polisher.

After the polishing was completed, a katana with a beautiful blade was born.

Its appearance was average, but its grade was middle Unique. For Shin, to be able to forge such a blade from imperfect materials made him understand how Araki forged a Legend-grade weapon.

“...I failed.”

Araki spoke with a sour expression.

He was aiming at forging a blade on par with the Lower Legend-grade katana [Black Moon]. Considering this, he had not only failed to reach the peak, but didn't even come close to the foot of the mountain. Araki's expression remained sour not only because of the katana's quality.

“What do you have then?”

“A few things concerned me. I would like to ask you a few questions first, if that's possible.”

“As long as you won't ask me to teach you my secret techniques, say anything you want.”

“I will, then. First, why don't you pour magic in the katana?”

“What?”

Araki's eyes became slits after hearing Shin's question.

“If a blacksmith pours magic power into the katana, its sturdiness and sharpness increase. As far as I know, there is no other way to forge a katana of Legend grade and above.”

“Just honing one's skill of striking metal is not enough, you say?”

“Yes. It is also not enough to simply pour in magic power. It's difficult to put in words, but one must first pour magic in the hammer, then pour it into the katana as the hammer strikes it. That's a very general way to explain the process. To be perfectly honest, being able to forge a Legend-grade katana in this situation makes you, sir Kanazuka, truly exceptional.”

Without a certain level of blacksmithing skills, of course, one could not forge good weapons, no matter how they poured their magic.

But if one considered only the ability in manipulating magic power, Pixies and Elves would have been more apt at blacksmithing.

“...that is probably a technique that was lost before being handed down. I hear that when Hinomoto was still engulfed in the flames of war, there were many more skilled blacksmiths than today. There were also weapons with much higher quality than the present ones as well.”

Many techniques had been lost during the war apparently.

Blacksmithing techniques never left their respective schools after all. If a whole school disappeared during the war, their techniques refined through the generations would vanish alongside them.

“I would never have thought to hear about one of the lost secret techniques...I swear on the honor of the Kanazuka that I will speak of this to no one.”

“Sir, I have no intention of keeping techniques hidden; as long as you do not mention that you heard it from me, that is enough. It’s a technique that existed in the past, so someone, somewhere, could revive it at any time, or rather, it could be still alive somewhere.”

It would be not be strange if someone like Kankurou, formerly serving a Player, could use it.

Shin also felt that Araki’s seriousness and focus were not inferior to theirs.

“It would be hard for me to explain in detail with words, so I think it will be faster if you just watch me. May I borrow your tools?”

“...use anything you need.”

Practice more than theory, watch and learn. Techniques such as those could not be explained fully just through verbal explanations and theory.

That is why Shin decided to show his craft.

He only performed several strikes, using the “Tamahagane” steel he found in the smithy. Before it could be called complete Shin heated it into the furnace, hammered it and gradually formed the katana’s shape.

He was infusing his magic power in the hammer, so after every strike sparks of different colors burst from the Tamahagane.

“.....”

Araki stared at Shin’s movements, not missing the slightest motion. The aura he emitted was as if he was swinging the hammer together with Shin.

“...I’ve finished. Now it only needs to be polished.”

The blade had been completed, at unnatural speed. Shin could have completed it to the point that it didn’t need polishing, but that would go beyond simply being a capable blacksmith, so he didn’t go that far.

Through the work of the same polisher who had handled the katana that Araki forged before, Shin’s katana gained its shine. It was a middle Unique-grade, the same as the katana that Araki had just forged.

“You forged this on purpose...?”

“No, that’s just a coincidence. But it’s better for us. I would like you to see what’s different between them, but would it be alright if the katana you forged before became unusable?”

“...that is fine. Let me see just how worthy it is.”

Shin took his newly forged katana and held it still, with the blade pointing upwards.

He told Araki to stand back, then swung the katana that Araki had forged onto the blade he had made.

“!?!”

Araki looked wide-eyed at the result.

The katana Araki had forged, which Shin held firmly in hand, had been cut off in the

middle. The katana Shin was holding still, on the other hand, did not have the slightest cut.

“To be of the same grade, and yet be so different...”

“Sir Kanezuka, you arrived to this level without using magic. I am sure you can forge much superior katanas. The weapons called “Magic Swords” are called such because magic envelops their blades.”

After saying so, Shin handed the blade he had held still to Araki. As Shin had said, its blade was covered in faint magic power.

According to the game rules, Unique-grade weapons could not really be called “Magic Sword” or “Magic Katana”. It was probably because Shin had forged it, that the katana now in Araki’s hands had specs worthy of the “Magic” moniker.

“A true Magic Katana, huh...it is true that both the katana I forged once and [Black Moon] have magic power shrouding their blades. I felt something different than just a Magic Katana from [Black Moon] though.”

“I think that the materials might be the reason. I used Tamahagane as the material this time, so only the katana’s specs as a weapon increased. But I have heard that different materials can add all sorts of effects. I don’t know what that means in detail though.”

“That’s more than enough. Young man...no, sir Shin, I owe you very much. If you need my help in anything, just say the word.”

“First of all, as I said before, I would like you to keep the source of all this information a secret. Other than that, there is nothing I need at the moment.”

He had been seen by several Kanezuka disciples, so he knew of the possibility that they would guess that the information came from him.

He didn’t think that Araki would blabber about Shin being the source, but he wanted to be sure.

“You may pass this technique to anyone you deem worthy, sir Kanezuka. It is not something I obtained on my own after all.”

“Is that really alright?”

“Even if I hid it, someone might be spying, and it was a technique commonly used in the past after all. I just hope that the katana built this way will be used to protect others.”

Katanas were nothing more than tools. Depending on the user, they could become blades of protection or of slaughter.

Shin gave some more pieces of advice to Araki, who said he would forge another blade, then left the Kanazuka residence.

He returned with Karin and Toshiro. Kankurou had been called by Araki and stayed back in the Kanazuka residence.

“...did you teach him something?”

“I told him about some techniques I know. The divine katana’s creation will progress a bit, I think.”

Toshiro inquired about what had happened in the Kanazuka residence while they were going back to the Saegusa house.

“Uhm, I have heard that such techniques are kept secret though.”

“I do not belong to any particular school or tradition, so I do not have any intention of keeping techniques for myself. Though, I would not spread them to just anyone.”

Karin still flushed slightly when talking to Shin, but he tried to talk with her as normally as he did before.

“I have never seen sir Kanazuka make that expression before though. It must have been quite an impressive technique.”

“...is that so? I couldn’t tell, to be honest. I just meant to give him some advice, but then I saw him swing his hammer so intensely...as a blacksmith myself, I couldn’t stop at just a word or two.”

Shin could have given a plausible explanation, but chose not to.

For someone who had seriously trained in the art of blacksmithing, the techniques that Shin acquired through the game would seem like cheating. That was partly why Shin respected the blacksmith Kanazuka Araki, who had reached that level of skill while being a normal person.

“What are you, anyway?”

“Just an adventurer and a busybody, nothing more.”

“I, I think he’s a good man...”

“What the...ggh....”

Karin’s comment following Shin’s words made Toshiro’s teeth grind. He must have realized that Karin looked quite different from the usual.

“Then, can I ask something too?”

“Hm....what?”

“Sir Toshiro, you belong to the Yaejima house, correct? I have heard that the Yaejima are a great clan ruling over west Hinomoto. If so, why do you stay alongside Kankurou, a servant of the Kujou house?”

Shin felt this after hearing about the two forces ruling over Hinomoto.

Shin, who had studied Japanese history in school, for a second thought that he might have been a hostage, but Toshiro seemed far too free to be one.

“I am one of sir Kankurou’s disciples. He’s a man who imparts his teachings without care for social status, and lord Tadahisa gave his approval as well.”

However, if the Yaejima house did something to stir conflict in Hinomoto, Toshiro’s life would be forfeit.

“I believe that neither my father nor my brother would ever do something so foolish. But if it ever happened, I would simply offer my life.”

Toshiro spoke every word with conviction, without turning away his eyes.

If they were planning something, having him go on a rampage within the Kujou house would be an ingenious plan.

In case of real danger, one might suddenly hold on to dear life.

Shin, however, did not think Toshiro capable of any such things. That could be said of everyone following Kankurou, too.

In Hinomoto, there was a trust that went beyond reason. That's what Shin felt looking at Toshiro.

After Shin left, in the smithy where now the furnace did not burn anymore, Araki and Kankurou were talking.

“Did sir Shin say anything helpful for crafting a divine katana?”

“Yes, I can tell you because I feel you know already...but he imparted to me one of the techniques that had been lost in history.”

Thanks to his experience as a support character, Kankurou knew of such techniques, even without detailed explanations from Araki.

“With this, I will probably get closer to the divine katana, however...”

“Is there any problem?”

Kankurou noticed that Araki's expression looked even more bitter than usual.

The blacksmith's reply arrived in a feeble tone.

“The divine katana is not something I can forge. Not only me, but no other blacksmith in Hinomoto could I fear.”

“And for what reason would that be?”

“Probably...no, definitely, sir Shin knows techniques we do not possess. And not only one or two...sir Shin would surely be able to forge a blade on par with [Black Moon]. I heard he's a samurai, but I know that he is not a man on the side of those who “use”

weapons. He's someone who "makes" them."

Araki, thanks to a life spent crafting weapons, understood.

During the game era, in fact, Shin's nickname was "Dark Blacksmith". The other Rokuten members also had aliases such as "Red Alchemist", "White Cook", and "Golden Merchant".

They all came from the fact that, like Shin, their true nature was that of "creators".

"Even among Returned Ancestors, only very special individuals could manage it. He might think he was only forging something simple, but his craft was so refined that I clearly understood how I could never compare with him."

"Is that so. In that case, we can not postpone the inheritance ritual any more than this."

"Yes. Discounting the miraculous birth of a Returned Ancestor extremely specialized in blacksmithing, I conclude that the divine katana could not be forged even 100 years from now. It would be pointless to delay the inheritance further."

Araki gave his conclusion with an expression void of spirit, as if what possessed him had now left him emptied.

Then, without thinking, his hand grabbed his hammer.

"Oh, even if you reached the conclusion, you temper swords again?"

Kankurou spoke to Araki as if to a young warrior focused on his harsh training.

"Because I could catch a glimpse of the peak. Even if I know that I will never be able to reach it, I cannot stop climbing...that's what a blacksmith is. Haha, to think that I would become a challenger again even at this age...I would have never expected it, that's for sure."

Araki lit the fire in the furnace, with a completely serene expression on his face.

"Well well, looks like I need to thank sir Shin again."

After this, the sound of hammered iron echoed from the smithy for a while.

PART 3

“(Schnee here. I have arrived at the town ruled by the Kujou. But, where are you at Shin?)”

At noon the day after Shin taught Araki about infusing magic power when forging, Shin received a Mind Chat from Schnee.

“(I will explain the situation and come meet you. Please wait near the castle gates.)”

Shin thought that they would need more time, so he was a little surprised. He explained the situation to Karin, who was coaching him as usual, and headed to the gates.

Once he passed the gate, Shin found Schnee, wearing the equipment she had used in Falnido. As soon as she noticed Shin’s presence, she ran up to him smiling.

Her tail, provided by the transformation set, swayed left and right.

“You arrived quite fast. Where are the others?”

Schnee was waiting beside the gate by herself. The other members were not present.

“I came ahead of others. You would get involved in all sorts of unnecessary troubles on your own, after all. Filma and the others agreed too.”

She had come by crossing the sea with [Water Passage] . The wind and waves meant nothing to her.

Shin was a little hurt at this lack of trust.

“...looks like I need to reconfirm what everyone thinks of me.”

“Kuu?”

Yuzuha’s cry sounded like she was saying “That’s not how it is?” to Shin.

Truthfully, he had climbed Mt. Fuji and his identity had been found out by Kankurou, so the situation could not be called exactly peaceful, so Shin could not completely deny Schnee’s words.

“You are Saegusa Karin, yes?”

“Yes, your name is lady Yuki, is that right?”

The two women had barely met before, but they remembered their respective names and faces.

They seemed to be talking in a friendly way, but there was a certain tense atmosphere between them.

From Schnee’s conversation with Shin, Karin had instinctively perceived that the woman harbored some affection towards the man.

Schnee, on the other hand, found that Karin’s expression while looking at Shin was different from before, and now contained a sort of affection.

“You have taken good care of Shin. Now that we are reunited, we will stay at an inn in town.”

“There is no need for concern. Since you came all this way, please stay at my residence until your other companions arrive.”

“.....”

Schnee was trying to take Shin out of the Saegusa house, while Karin was trying to keep him in.

Shin was unsure about what to do with the two women and the figurative sparks darting from their eyes.

He knew that a careless intervention would have made him the new target of their battle, but he couldn’t leave things like that.

“(Yuzuha, help!)”

“(Impossible.)”

Shin pleaded to Yuzuha for help, but her refusal came instantly. She knew how dangerous the situation was.

“H-hey, Yuki. Even if I were to leave the residence, I think we should at least thank the master of the residence, don’t you agree? Even after that, it would not be too late to leave, right?”

Shin gathered his courage and spoke to Schnee.

It didn’t have to be decided then and there whether he would leave the residence or not.

“...that’s true. Understood.”

Schnee nodded, then they returned to the Saegusa house.

Kuyou would not be back until late at night, so Kayo welcomed them in his place.

“Oh my, what a beautiful lady. Being Shin’s companion, I imagined you would be his lover.”

“It is true that she is my fiancée, but there are other companions coming. She is Yuki, she just arrived before them.”

“My name is Yuki, pleased to meet you.”

“I am Kayo, wife of the head of the Saegusa family. If your other companions are not here yet, please stay in our house.”

Schnee had greeted Kayo politely, and was invited to stay in their residence together with Shin.

“It would not do to impose for such a long—-”

“My daughter’s life has been saved by him, this is barely enough to express my gratitude.”

Kayo’s words were spoken with a completely innocent tone: it was difficult to think that she was the same person that tried to make a couple out of Karin and Shin.

Her feelings of gratitude towards Shin were genuine. Shin too, through his experience staying in the Saegusa house, had no reason to doubt that. Kayo would sometimes show a humorous side, but deep down she was an honorable person, who would not

leave debts of gratitude unpaid.

“.....understood. Allow me to be your guest.”

“I am glad to hear that.”

After a brief exchange, Schnee agreed: the two companions and their fox would stay in the Saegusa residence together.



The situation evolved that very night.

“The inheritance ritual?”

“Yes, it was supposed to be postponed, but we have decided to hold it 10 days from now.”

At dinner, Kuyou mentioned that a formal match would be held to decide the inheritor of the divine katana [Black Moon] . The Hinomoto Brave Ten would gather at the Kujou residence and engage in battle until one victor remained.

For a tournament battle there would be one competitor without an opponent, so Kankurou would participate and allow his opponent to pass if they had shown a sufficient degree of ability. Kuyou also added that several candidates had already expressed that they would not participate.

Kankurou’s species was one of long life expectancy, but most Hinomoto citizens were the opposite. They must have thought that even if they inherited [Black Moon] , they would not fight with it for long.

Kuyou, though, hoped Karin would do her best in the tournament.

Kuyou was the 2nd seat of the Brave Ten. He might not match Kankurou in ability, but his sword arm was not to be underestimated.

His advanced age, however, meant that he was long past his physical peak. Thinking about the future, he decided to leave room for the younger generations.

“Tomorrow the notice will reach all the territories. It’ll be like a festival.”

When events like this are held, all sorts of kiosks and stalls are set up, creating a festival-like atmosphere. It's one type of entertainment.

Ordinary people can't watch the formal matches. The battles' results are announced immediately, and they say that some people bet on predictions of the results.

As it can serve as stress release for the citizens, many lords turn a blind eye.

"It's a bit of a shame that we can't see it though."

"Hmm, so would you come too, sir Shin? I could reserve seats for you."

"No, I would prefer not to stand out, so allow me to decline."

Receiving special treatments would not be an advantage for him. He knew that because of his match against Kankurou, he was already talked about.

"Hmm. If you came, I'm sure that Karin would truly give her all though."

"F-father!? What are you saying!?"

Karin's face grew bright red after Kuyou's words. Maybe because he now knew that Shin wasn't interested, Kuyou teased Karin from time to time. It was never in bad humour though, just a kind of communication between father and daughter.

To see that reaction from Karin after refusing her put Shin in a tight spot though.

The next day, news about the formal matches had already spread throughout the castle town, and part of the town was already in a festive mood.

Spectators from the houses serving the Kujou already started gathering.

Shin proposed to go walk around the castle town because of the occasion, and Schnee agreed to accompany him.

Karin wanted to join them too, but Kuyou brought her to the dojo to practice for the formal matches.

Shin changed and waited at the gate for about 15 minutes, when Schnee arrived.

“...Kimono and animal ears combination. Fantastic.”

“(Schnee, so pretty!)”

Shin let out a mumbled comment, charmed by the sight of Schnee in a kimono. Yuzuha cried in agreement.

“Shin?”

Schnee looked at him, slightly puzzled. Her dog ears shook.

She was wearing a brilliant blue kimono with a design of scattered white petals which stressed its elegance.

As they walked side by side, her hair tied behind her head would sometimes show her pale neck, a sensual glimpse inside her neat appearance.

“No, nothing. The kimono looks very nice on you, and...well, I-I was charmed, that’s all.”

“...oh, thank you.”

Schnee smiled, her cheeks slightly flushed. Needless to say Shin was charmed again.

“Now that I think about it, I haven’t been to the castle town since the day I first arrived here.”

While walking through the town, Shin was surprised at how bustling it was. The first time he came, he barely had time to look around, since they went straight inside the castle walls.

“Oh, really?”

“I didn’t want people looking at me suspiciously, and I used all the free time I had for training.”

The Saegusa residence was located inside the Kujou castle walls. The mood inside was not so light as to allow him to take walks at leisure.

He knew there was someone watching over them, but Shin decided to use this opportunity to look around a typical Hinomoto town.

He knew that wearing adventurer clothes would have made him stand out, so he changed into something fitting of Hinomoto.

Shin was wearing a traditional garb, deep green in color. It was a very common attire in Hinomoto. The color combination was pretty somber, so Schnee's brilliant elegance stood out even more next to him.

"Well, let's make the best of this opportunity and enjoy the festival."

"Yes, let's."

The festival meant a great number of stalls. The two walked around at leisure, stopping at Hinomoto's characteristic stalls.

The people around them looked bright and cheerful. Shin didn't know how far the rumours of the west's suspicious movements had spread, but the people were in a truly festive mood, as if they wanted to dispel those ominous whispers.

"(By the way, do you know anything about the Five Supreme Blades?)"

Shin recalled his encounter on top of Mt. Fuji and inquired to Schnee via Mind Chat. Looking at a stand selling swords had reminded him of Munechika.

He had already talked to Schnee about his battle with Munechika, but had forgot to ask her if she knew anything.

"(I'm afraid I have never heard of that name. If they appeared in town they would certainly cause a big commotion, so, like the Munechika you met, maybe they dwell in uninhabited locations? Their usual stance is to wait for those coming to challenge them after all.)"

"(Now that you mention it, that's true. She looked like she was protecting something, and there might also be a reason why Kagutsuchi wasn't there anymore.)"

Shin nodded, thinking that Schnee might have had a point. There was also the possibility that Kagutsuchi was inside the small shrine on the peak, after all.

As Schnee had answered, anthropomorphized blades such as them did not go around searching for challengers.

It was a theory based on the game era, thus they couldn't be completely sure, but if there weren't any rumors about them in 500 years, it was likely to be as Schnee said, or so Shin thought.

"Well, no need to think about that. Oh, sir, you have some nice goods here."

Thinking that it was not a topic to bring up while enjoying a festival, Shin changed the subject by talking to the owner of the stall they happened to be in front of.

The 40-something man, wearing work robes, sold all sorts of accessories.

"Er, Shin?"

Schnee was a bit confused by Shin suddenly striking a conversation to the store owner, but Shin signaled to her to wait a moment.

"Oh! You have a good eye, young man! I made all of these with my hands, carefully picking what materials to use! They're a wee bit more expensive than the other shops around here, but the quality's guaranteed!"

As the man had said with a tone full of confidence, the accessories here were of higher quality than the similar ones sold in the nearby stalls.

Shin picked one of the displayed items.

"Let's see...I'll take this."

"You really have keen eyes to go and pick that one. But it's a bit more expensive than the others, you know?"

"That's all right. I think this one fits my companion best."

Saying this, Shin looked at Schnee. The stall owner followed his eyes and nodded as in agreement.

"Haha!! I see! For that beauty over there, this one fits the most indeed! Okay then, normally I'd ask 5 gold jul, but I'll let you have it for 4."

“Is that alright?”

“Accessories like this can end up standing out even more than the one who wears them, but your companion is not inferior in terms of presence! She’s fitting to wear it. I like her!”

The stall owner was rather pleased.

Shin thanked him and paid, then turned again towards Schnee.

“And so, will you wear this?”

“Ehm, is it really ok for me to?”

“Honestly, you’re not allowed to refuse. Please do!”

“...understood.”

Schnee couldn’t hide her surprise at the sudden present, but she was certainly happy.

What Shin had chosen for her was a two-pronged hairpin with a transparent blue pearl as decoration. From the base of the pearl hung a flower-like ornament made in silver.

Schnee removed the simple pin she was using to hold her hair and replaced it with Shin’s present.

“How...how do I look?”



Schnee's was slightly embarrassed as she asked her question.

"Just wonderful, If I say myself, miss."

"I didn't think it would have looked so beautiful myself."

The words popping up in Shin's mind were all too simple: "it looks good" and "pretty".

Those who had witnessed their purchase at the stall looked at the two with celebration (20%), envy (50%), and jealousy (30%) in their eyes. The two quickly left the scene and mingled among the crowd.

"I didn't think so many people would be looking at us. I was focused and didn't notice."

When Schnee replaced her pin, they heard voices from the crowd and realized they were the center of attention.

"(Shin, charmed. Focus, scattered.)"

"Mmgh!"

"The stand owner was rather loud, too. I suppose he meant to attract customers too."

"I see. Using you to promote himself...he's got guts! But good choice!"

"Ehm..."

"(We lost Shin.)"

Shin spoke with conviction, but Schnee wasn't sure if he was angry or complimenting her. To her it seemed obvious that they would attract attention.

Yuzuha was kind of annoyed at this Shin, though.

"Hm? What?"

He pretended not to hear Yuzuha's last comment.

Accepting that they couldn't avoid the fact that Schnee attracted people's attention, they resumed their walk. As they were passing through a large avenue, they heard a

commotion from the front.

They looked beyond the crowd with a skill and found a large horse carriage slowly proceeding in the middle of the street. In Hinomoto, horse carriages were probably the main means of transport.

Among the voices they heard, some were mentioning the name “Ichinose”.

Inside the carriage was a large bear beast, a female beast next to him, with a human man sitting across from them.

“Schnee, can you see?”

Shin asked his companion. Schnee felt that Shin’s mood had changed and looked towards the carriage, understanding what he meant to say.

“Yes, it appears it was true that something is going on.”

“Kuu?”

Yuzuha, the only one incapable of using [Through Sight] , couldn’t follow.

“Ichinose Juugo, Rokuhara Kai, no problem here. But that Tamamo is different. She’s not human.”

“Tamamo?”

Yuzuha reacted before Schnee could. Still in fox mode, she spoke not via Mind Chat but through her voice.

“Do you know her?”

“...I think, I’ve heard the name.”

Yuzuha tried to remember, but then whimpered as she ultimately couldn’t.

“Well, we know that things probably won’t end peacefully.”

Tamamo’s species was White Tail. Like Yuzuha, it had a human form, but it was without a doubt a monster.

As far as they could see, however, the other passengers of the carriage -Juugo and Kai- had no status ailments.

“They’re not being controlled...I suppose?”

“Certainly doesn’t look like it, they’re not affected with [Charm] .”

Seeing a monster mingling among humans was a bad sign, but they couldn’t do anything at the moment.

Shin knew that certain monsters, like Yuzuha, coexisted peacefully with humans.

“We can’t confirm anything now, so I’ll talk with Karin later. There are more important things to do now.”

“That’s true.”

Shin talked while looking away from Juugo, and Schnee nodded in response.

On Shin’s map, there was a symbol heading in a straight line to the Kujou main compound, ignoring people and buildings. It was a neutral green color, but the fact that it was hiding its presence was terribly suspicious.

“At first glance, it does not seem too fearsome, but what should we do?”

“Let’s go after it. It would be great if it was just a spy, but for it to come right after seeing that White Tail...I have a bad feeling about this. I’m sorry to say this during the festival.”

“We looked around a bit, and you gave me a present. It’s enough.”

Schnee understood that it could be troublesome later to ignore it, so she had no objections. Thanks to the present, her mood was perfectly happy too.

From the symbol’s movements, they predicted that it was moving on the rooftops: Shin and Schnee then went to a solitary alley and used [Hiding] to conceal themselves.

They didn’t change their clothes, but Schnee replaced the hairpin with the original one.

As they followed the symbol, they saw a group clad in very similar clothing as the ninja squad that had attacked Shin before. Ninja clothing often have similar designs, so at first glance it isn't possible to distinguish them.

"Hm? This isn't the way to the main compound."

Shin was following the ninja group, but realized that they were not heading towards the main compound. The most important building in that direction was the residence where Haruna was resting.

"Their target is lady Haruna!?"

The first ninja group had targeted Kanade and Karin. It would not be strange if they targeted Haruna, a daughter of the Kujou house like Kanade.

Shin's prediction was correct: the ninja group drew their weapons and a 3-cemel wide spherical object, then penetrated the residence without a sound.

"Don't let even one run away. We're hunting them down."

"Understood."

One of the group pointed a blade at Ei, who happened to be passing.

Before the weapon could strike her however, Shin appeared behind the attacker and struck him down, burying him underground.

At the same time, he released an aura of crushing intimidation towards the other invaders, to oppose their infiltration of the residence.

"W-what!? S-sir Shin!?"

"I will explain later. I'll go crush the attackers, please gather everyone in the residence and protect lady Haruna!"

"!! Understood!! Intruders here in the residence!! Come out, men!!!"

Ei was wide-eyed in her astonishment, but quickly grasped the situation and loudly called for help.

They probably had a fixed protocol for emergency situations: less than 30 seconds after Ei's call, armored men came out in a rush.

"No need to capture them alive—cut them down!"

As soon as the commander-looking man spoke, the men around him assumed the look of warring demons.

Shin thought that they might have had a difficult time against the enemies' smokescreens, which had the effect of causing poison and paralysis, but the residence's soldiers dealt with them without trouble.

Some men matched the intruders' blades within the smokescreens, then countered and sliced the enemies' necks.

Others launched their spears to pierce the intruders' torsos.

Others would face intruders, protected by their ninja blades and gauntlets, and cleave them in half, protective gear and all: the difference in fighting power was overwhelming.

Maybe because of Haruna's presence, it appeared that seasoned veterans had been stationed there.

Some of the intruders with higher levels had been defeated by Shin and Schnee, so the attack by this mysterious group was quelled in an instant.

"We thank you for your assistance."

"I have had the honor of meeting lady Haruna once. I could not stand by and ignore these people's foul plans. I must ask though, would you not have wanted to capture at least one alive?"

"Preserving lady Haruna's wellbeing is of higher priority. In Hinomoto, no assassins that knew their sender's identity would ever operate like this."

Some would even allow themselves to be captured, then use skills to explode within enemy lines. Even if captured, they wouldn't leak information and could cause damage and casualties, so they were always cut down on the spot.

After Shin and Schnee explained why they were tracking the attackers, Karin arrived. She had apparently rushed there as fast as she could, so her breathing was slightly ragged.

“Lady Haruna!?”

“She’s completely safe and sound.”

Shin felt that this information had arrived too quickly, but chose not to say anything.

Because even after the battle ended, the man he thought to be the commander of the residence’s soldiers kept his eyes on Shin, without letting his guard down one second.

Shin had explained that their presence was a coincidence, but the commander was still wary of them.

It certainly wasn’t pleasant to be doubted, but for men in charge of security as they were, keeping the stance of never letting one’s guard down was important.

“What about the intruders?”

“We have dealt all of them. We could not find anything to determine where they came from.”

They had already checked if there was any information to be extracted from the corpses. They only used equipment and tools that could be found pretty much anywhere.

Shin heard that it was not possible to find out where the ninjas had come from by using the [Listen] skill. He talked about what happened to Karin, then Shin, Schnee, and Karin returned to the Saegusa house.

According to Kuyou, despite the attack on Haruna’s residence the inheritance ceremony would be held without delays.

“I think they will increase security though.”

Few ruffians would think of targeting the Kujou, but still few was not zero. It was an unavoidable fate for such a large clan.

No matter the era, there are always those dissatisfied with the people governing.

In Hinomoto there existed an organization specialized in assassinations, which would target anyone upon request.

Shin heard about such criminal groups in the mainland too, so he wasn't surprised.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, he asked about Ichinose Juugo.

"Sir Juugo, huh. You have heard that the Ichinose family holds the ideal of a unified Hinomoto, yes?"

"Yes, I've heard it mentioned..."

"After the Kujou and the Yaejima divided the country under their respective rule, for a while the Ichinose showed intentions of becoming independent. The Yaejima and other houses of the west restrained them, but it looks like the current head is planning something. We have received reports that soldiers in the Ichinose domain are on the move. They might be planning to do something during the inheritance ceremony."

"And it will be held even if you know that?"

"Expert warriors from all over Hinomoto will gather for the inheritance ceremony. Average soldiers wouldn't hold a candle to them. Even if something happened, it wouldn't even become a battle."

In the past, during a similar ceremony, someone had similarly planned dirty deeds. According to Kuyou, the plot had been squashed immediately.

They were not acting out of arrogance, but excessive security would be a burden. They had no proof that the Ichinose were really plotting something after all.

Just in case, Shin decided to tell them about Tamamo.

"Hmm, I never heard that sir Juugo had a female partner."

"Really. I only saw this with a skill, so I have no actual proof of her presence, but I am sure that I did not see wrong. I thought that it would be better for you to know."

"I am grateful for your advice. I will try to look into this too."

Kuyou did not doubt Shin's words.

"Oh, on a different subject, is [Black Moon] usable by anyone? I heard that certain high-grade weapons choose who can equip them, so this was on my mind."

"You are truly knowledgeable. I heard that once there was such a limitation, but not anymore."

Having stats higher than a certain level or ignoring the decrease in the weapon's power due to insufficient stats would allow anyone to wield it.

After talking with Kuyou, Shin gave four cards to Karin, who was walking beside Schnee.

"Sir Shin? These are..."

"Please keep them with you, just in case. After what happened today, I have a bad feeling."

".....understood. I will definitely return them to you."

Karin checked the cards' illustrations, then held them against her chest while nodding. Her cheeks were slightly flushed.

"!?"

The next instant, a severe chill ran down Shin's spine. What he saw after slowly turning around was Schnee smiling and looking at them.

"(Just in case! Just in case, okay!? I don't have any weird intentions!!)"

"(Oh my, I haven't said anything, though?)"

Schnee's smile was terrifying. As they say, eyes can speak as clearly as the mouth...but in Schnee's case it was not only her eyes: her Mind Chat, expression, and presence all showed how bad her mood was.

Shin, almost panicking, shook his head left and right and explained himself frantically. He could have given the cards to Karin in secret, but the situation would have turned even worse, or so he instinctively felt.

“Kuu kuu...”

While looking at the three, Yuzuha cried as if saying “there we go again...”.



5 days after Schnee’s arrival.

Shibaid, Filma, Tiera, and Kagerou also arrived at Shin’s location.

As they had now become a large group, they thought of moving to an inn in town, but after Kayo’s plea, it was decided that they would all stay at the Saegusa house.

They planned to stay in town until the inheritance ceremony was held, so that time limit was the condition. They could not impose on the Saegusa forever after all.

“So that’s what happened! Aah, we sent Schnee first for nothing!”

“What do you mean?”

“You were always traveling as 3 people or more, right? So I thought to let you two stay by yourselves for a while. I should have told Schnee to take it more seriously.”

Filma sighed, looking disappointed. She had no intention of hiding her plan apparently.

“It was Filma that proposed I come here first, to be clear.”

“Just what do you have in mind!?”

“I heard that she waited 500 years. Is it bad for Schnee to have a good time once in awhile? Or do you have some other maiden in mind?”

“I don’t, but the situation here is complex and... but if we really were by ourselves, I cannot say that nothing would have happened...”

“Oh, you don’t deny that?”

All party members knew of Schnee’s affection towards Shin. If they had stayed in an inn by themselves, the chances of something happening between them was not zero.

Shin had expressed his plans to return to his original world, but it was not something he wanted to achieve no matter what.

Only the gods would know if he would be able to dodge Schnee's approach.

"I think I know the kind of person I am. I couldn't say that I would never go with the flow in such situations"

Shin was not insecure or undecided, but his will wasn't unshakable steel either.

"Oh, now that's a good thing to know."

"You're planning something again, you've got it written all over your face..."

"Definitely not a wholesome plan."

"She never learns, does she."

"Hey!! Shibaid, you too!?"

Shibaid spoke through a sigh, probably tired of their conversation.

"So, when will that inheritance ceremony thing start?"

Shin had already informed Shibaid and the others of the inheritance ceremony. Also because the divine katana Shin had crafted was the final reward, Shibaid was interested in the outcome.

"5 days from now. I'm sorry to say this after you just arrived, but some trouble happened. A battle might break out."

"Eh, what? I heard that Hinomoto's a peaceful place though?"

Tiera was surprised to hear the word battle. She had heard about how safe and peaceful Hinomoto usually was.

Shin explained about the circumstances.

"I just don't understand. Why are they so fixated on uniting the country?"

“Who knows. Even if they did so through military power, it’s not like governing it would become any easier. What do you think Shibaid?”

It was not exactly like Japan’s Warring States period, but as Hinomoto was now in a similar situation, Shin asked for Shibaid’s opinion, who had participated in the founding of the Empire.

“Without understanding the head of the Ichinose family, I cannot say anything. Such things change depending on who is leading the various groups. In the era after the natural disasters wrecked the land, many countries were founded, but each underwent a different fate.”

According to Shibaid, several countries had tried invading others hoping to unify the continent under their rule.

The areas where monsters spawned and the natural barriers formed by mountains, however, led to the current situation. Despite this, some countries still haven’t given up their ambitions apparently.

Some countries governed while thinking of their citizens’ well-being, others had become military states, so it was not possible to give one single answer.

“Well, I have just heard that the Ichinose are acting suspiciously, but I don’t know anything decisive. It would be great if nothing happened, but please stay alert.”

“Hmm, understood.”

Both Filma and Tiera nodded to Shin’s words.

In the end, the identity of Haruna’s attackers was a complete mystery.

Shin, however, did not think that Juugo, Kai, and the monster Tamamo would simply sit back and do nothing.

C h a p t e r 4

妖 狐 襲 来

THE NEW
GATE

CHAPTER 4

PART 1

The inheritance ceremony.

As the name suggests, this ceremony seeks to determine the person fit to inherit the relics passed from generation to generation in Hinomoto.

This time, the relic to be inherited is the divine katana [Black Moon] , a national treasure of Hinomoto.

The challengers are the valiant warriors whose names are included in the Hinomoto Brave Ten.

Excluding the 1st seat and current owner of the katana, Kankurou, and those-such as Kuyou- who declined to participate to give the opportunity to the new generations, the participants are 6.

The 3rd seat, Saegusa Karin.

The 4th seat, Yaejima Shiden.

The 5th seat, Kujou Akitaka.

The 6th seat, Ichinose Juugo.

Lastly, the twin sibling swordsmen: the 7th seat Shijou Tsugumasa and the 9th seat Tsuguho.

“The formal matches will start now. Show your prowess in battle and prove your worth as rightful successor of the divine katana!”

The participants silently nodded to Kujou Tadahisa’s words.

The first round was 3rd seat Saegusa Karin VS 9th seat Shijou Tsuguho.

With black hair tied behind their head and a sharp piercing look, the two female

warriors even shared a similar physique. Without a word, they headed to the center of the arena, then took their respective stances.

Both used the “Seigan” stance, holding their swords at waist height, the blade pointed at the opponent’s eyes.

Their aura, one with their weapon, exuded a certain refinement that would cause all spectators to feel chills down their spines.

“Fight!”

“!!”

As the signal of the start of the battle was sounded, the two duelists’ silhouettes blurred, the arcs drawn by their wooden blades in mid-air crossing each other.

Both contestants performed one single swing.

They now stood in the opponent’s starting point, as if they had switched places, their backs facing each other.

A few seconds pass, then the wooden sword fell from Tsuguho’s hand.

“Match finished! The winner is Saegusa Karin!”

The battle was decided in an instant.

Tsuguho’s strike had barely scraped Karin’s shoulder, while Karin’s strike had cleanly hit Tsuguho’s right arm.

3rd seat and 9th seat. They were respectively in the higher and lower positions in the hierarchy.

Even if they were both part of the Hinomoto Brave Ten, the difference in ability was evident.

“I could not reach you, after all.”

“You have improved again.”

Karin expressed praise for the dejected Tsuguho. The Tsuguho Karin knew wouldn't have been able to touch her shoulder.

“No, I still have much to learn. I will keep improving and temper myself again.”

Because of her youth and straightforward personality, Tsuguho showed both frustration and peace of mind at the result.

The two bowed to each other and left the arena.

The 2nd round was 5th seat Kujou Akitaka versus 7th seat Shijou Tsugumasa.

They were both young, but in Tsugumasa's case it was more evident.

Compared to Akitaka's virile looks and well-built physique, Tsugumasa appeared very young and physically lacking.

Even without considering their difference in ability, Tsugumasa appeared childish before his opponent.

However, the two swordsmen were unconcerned about being young. Beyond the impression given by their appearances, the clashing of their swords' auras was stinging the spectators' skin.

“The rumored genius swordsman, huh. This is our first bout face to face, isn't it?”

“I have often heard rumors about you too. I am eager to see how much my blade can match yours.”

After a brief exchange, they took their stances.

Akitaka used an upper stance, while Tsugumasa a lower one.

“—fight!!”

“!!!”

Just like the first round, their blades also pierced the air at the same time as the start signal. The difference was the loud clashing sound produced by the wooden swords, which repeated 3 times.

Each fighter had drawn three arcs in mid-air. Akitaka and Tsugumasa's wooden swords were grinding against each other, sending wooden fragments dancing around.

"To be so skilled at such a young age. I'm looking forward to your future."

"Well, thank you very much!"

In contrast to Akitaka's confident tone, Tsugumasa raised his voice loudly while charging at him again.

Akitaka parried each and every attack coming from Tsugumasa, attacks different than what was taught at the dojo.

Even though he was constantly attacking, Tsugumasa's expression gradually contorted. It was the result of both duelists understanding the extent of their respective abilities during the first exchange.

Tsugumasa's sword arm was fast, its patterns difficult to read. Despite being just over 16 years old, his sword arm was worthy of being called genius: Akitaka acknowledged it too.

However, it was not enough.

He might have been able to match an ordinary soldier or a swordsman with some skill, but to reach Akitaka, strictly trained as the Kujou family's first-born son, Tsugumasa needed experience in actual combat —especially against opponents stronger than himself, which he severely lacked.

"Sssh!!"

The connecting point between two slashes.

Akitaka did not miss the small gap in Tsugumasa's barrage created by his impatience.

Akitaka's wooden sword blew Tsugumasa's away. Tsugumasa's weapon spun in mid-air, then landed behind him.

"Match finished!! The winner is Kujou Akitaka!"

Kankurou announced the winner.

The two duelists assumed a proper stance and bowed silently.

“Good fighting style. Let us battle again one day.”

“Yes, absolutely.”

After nodding at each other, Akitaka and Tsugumasa left the field.

The 3rd round was the 4th seat, Yaejima Shiden, versus the 6th, Ichinose Juugo.

Different from Karin and Tsuguhō or Akitaka and Tsugumasa, this time the spectators felt prickled by the turbulent aura coming from the contestants.

While they both held wooden swords, the tension hanging in the atmosphere was as if they were using real swords.

“You’re even more intense than usual.”

“I might be a servant of the Yaejima, but today I fight as a swordsman. I will not hold anything back!”

“That’s all right. I too would hate to make people think that I didn’t give it my all.”

As in response to the murderous intent emanated by Juugo’s sword, the aura of Shiden’s blade grew sharper and sharper as well.

Differently from the two previous duels, which contained a certain pure aura, the current contestants seemed to be participating in a duel to the death.

They both took upper stances, sharing also the trait of holding the sword slightly bent to the right.

“—-fight!!”

The signal of the start of the duel echoed throughout the surroundings.

The beginning of this match is very different from the two previous bouts.

There was no clash of swords, thought to start as soon as the signal was sounded: the two contestants did not move an inch. They both stared at each other, their bodies

moving ever so slightly, searching for something in their opponent.

The Yaejima house, rulers of the west, and the Ichinose studied schools of swordplay which shared the same roots. Because of this, they could both predict what the opponent's moves would be.

The wooden sword's angle, leg motions, the position of the center of gravity, how to use space in battle...everything.

They could predict the opponent's strike from looking at their movements, thus mentally preparing how to counter.

If the tip of Juugo's sword was slightly lowered, Shiden took half a step backwards.

If Shiden stepped in range, Juugo lowered his center of gravity.

Though it was not visible to the eye, the small, almost imperceptible movements comprised a formidable series of exchanges taking place between the two of them.

Those gathered for this ceremony were warriors capable of such feats.

"The contestants with the least difference in rank. Will sir Juugo match sir Shiden though I wonder?"

"Now, Tsugumasa. Don't speak out of line."

Shiden's strength was known throughout Hinomoto. His title of 4th seat in the Brave Ten was not for show.

Juugo was the 6th seat, but the fact that there was a large power gap between the seats smaller and bigger than 5 was also well known.

"Hmph, as I thought, I am not one to play reading battles."

"Saying that means that you could lose winning battles, you know?"

"None of—your business!!"

It wasn't clear if he had talked before moving, or vice versa. That's how quickly Juugo had stepped in, close to Shiden.

The movement itself reminded of the 1st round of Karin versus Tsuguho, but the speed was definitely higher.

“!?”

Shiden, who had sparred against Juugo in the past, was taken aback by his opponent’s speed. He blocked the swinging sword with his, but was pushed back.

Juugo was a bear-type beastman, and the wooden sword he wielded was thicker, in accordance with his build. However, it simply added mass and could not fill the gap in their muscular strength.

Juugo’s swing, however, had enough power to cause Shiden’s feet to sink into the ground for blocking it.

“Gh...! How heavy...!”

“...so this is all you can do.”

His voice now filled with self-assurance, Juugo withdrew his sword and, at the same time, moved behind Shiden’s back. Before Shiden could react, the tip of Juugo’s sword had been thrust at his neck.

“Match finished!! The winner is Ichinose Juugo!”

The inferior in rank bested the superior.

It was not something unheard of, but those that knew of Juugo’s abilities were astonished of the performance he showed in the battle.

Bear-type beastmen generally focused on power rather than speed. Even considering that Juugo was a Returned Ancestor, the speed at which he had moved behind Shiden’s back had been excessively fast.

“Hmm, it does not look like you used status boosting herbs or magic.”

Considering the possibility of foul play, Kankurou viewed him with [Analyze] , but there was no sign of boosted stats.

Thanks to the game’s system still existing, any status boosts via herbs or other

methods would be discovered immediately.

“I never neglect my training. That produced results, I suppose.”

“Well, there is nothing I can say to that.”

Kankurou knew, however, that there were things that his [Analyze VIII] could not display, based on the target’s status.

They had performed tests to prevent illegal activities, but despite the suspicion aroused by Juugo’s exceptional increase in ability, there was no concrete proof to denounce it.

The matches continued: the remaining three contestants would fight until one was left standing.

Because of her high rank in the hierarchy, Karin was treated as seed.

The 4th match was Akitaka and Juugo. But exactly as it happened to Shiden, Akitaka could not adapt to Juugo’s movements and suffered defeat. There was a clear difference between the Juugo of the past and present.

Juugo, after all, was one of Hinomoto’s Brave Ten. Even without this mysterious increase in power, he was a warrior of considerable power.

The formal tournament reached the final match.

Karin and Juugo faced each other.

“—fight!”

After the signal for starting hostilities, Juugo moved first. He swung down his sword with the power that had overwhelmed Akitaka.

Karin reacted by striking the side of Juugo’s blade with hers, to deviate it from its course. She could not parry the full power of the swing, however, and slightly lost her balance.

“Kh...”

Juugo followed with another attack, a storm of air-rending blows which Karin withstood with her solid guard.

Watching Akitaka's match made her understand that she was at a disadvantage in terms of strength and choose a strategy of looking for an opening.

"What's wrong, daughter of the Saegusa. Staying on the defense will not make you win."

"I have no intention of losing, so no need for concern."

Juugo talked to Karin during his barrage of attacks, but she replied without changing her expression. It could be said that she was forcing herself, but she kept a poker face, not wanting to show any weakness.

"Heh, impertinent little girl."

As the words left his mouth, Juugo's silhouette disappeared. Karin however, could react to his strike coming from behind.

"I have seen this already."

The speed was unthinkable for the past Juugo. But in terms of speed, Karin still had a chance of winning.

She parried the swinging blade while spinning and thrust her blade at Juugo's stomach while moving to his side.

"As expected from the 3rd seat, I should say."

Karin's strike was supposed to have struck its target, but Juugo had parried it while jumping to the side.

He was superior to Karin in both speed and power. It was now clear to everyone watching.

From then, the match became -while not overwhelmingly one sided- a clearly unbalanced one.

Karin withstood Juugo's fierce attacks and used any openings to counter.

Juugo dodged her counters and resumed his storm-like barrages of slashes and thrusts.

The match continued for 20 minutes, when finally, Karin's wooden sword was broken by Juugo, who thrust his at her neck, ending the match.

"---match finished! The winner is Ichinose Juugo!"

The two contestants bowed to each other and left the arena.

The winner was now decided, leaving only the conferment of the divine katana.

Ichinose Juugo was the head of the Ichinose family, recently subject of suspicious rumors; his victories in the matches, however, meant that he was to receive the divine katana.

"Ichinose Juugo, I confer to you the divine katana. Come forward."

"Yes."

[Black Moon] would be presented by its current wielder, Kankurou.

Juugo accepted the katana with both hands and...

...proceeded to unsheathe [Black Moon] , then and there.

" [Infiltrator Blade] !"

[Black Moon] was swung down and unleashed a red slash.

The long range slash created by the Katana-type martial skill [Infiltrator Blade] , powered by [Black Moon] 's effects, turned into a crimson killing blade.

The target of the slash was the head of the Kujou house, Kujou Tadahisa.

"Hmgh!!"

While all stood frozen by the unexpected happening, a shadow leapt between Juugo and Tadahisa to stop the flying slash.

“You could parry that?”

“Well well, now I would have never expected you to take such a direct approach here.”

Kankurou spoke to Juugo with a jaded expression, holding his short sword in a backhand grip.

“There is no better opportunity. With that blade you could only stop me one more time. Do not stand in my way.”

“I’m afraid I cannot comply. Allow me a question instead, how did you think you could escape this place, after everything you did?”

“As I am now, that much is nothing.”

Juugo put something in his mouth after talking. The next instant, a white, bright aura rises from his body.

“Sir Juugo. That cannot be...!?”

“So you know of this. You must also know that you cannot stop it then!!”

Juugo’s [Black Moon] turned into a blur. A red slash appeared in midair, causing severe damage to all who were charging towards him, weapon in hand.

Akitaka and Shiden suffered wounds on their arms, their katana broken. The same had happened to Tsuguho and Tsugumasa.

Kuyou and the other Brave Ten who had avoided the slash hesitated to attack, as they knew of [Black Moon]’s abilities.

In such a situation, Karin charged in to attack from behind, a step after the others.

Her speed was much higher than what she had shown during the match.

“Nngh!!”

[Black Moon]’s dark blade clashed against the white blade of Karin’s katana.

Even when clashing against [Black Moon] , which could slice even Legend-grade

weapons in two, Karin's katana did not suffer even a single scratch.

"This can't be!?"



PART 2

“Lord Kankurou!! I will deal with him!!”

Karin was wielding a katana of the Ancient grade, like [Black Moon] : [Hakuramaru] .

[Black Moon] , crafted as a test blade when creating [True Moon] , was a weapon with high specs. However, [Hakuramaru] had been upgraded by Shin and possessed abilities high enough to match it.

“This weight!? Just what is going on!?”

“Do you think I would answer?”

Karin chose to mock the growling Juugo.

The weight of Karin’s slashes was growing not only thanks to the status boosts provided by [Hakuramaru] .

The status boosts were also provided by another card that Shin had given her, the Morning Star Hairpin. It was an Ancient-grade item which boosted STR, VIT, and DEX.

After hearing the rumors concerning the Ichinose, Shin had made Karin get used to the item while receiving her training, so she wouldn’t be overwhelmed by the status boost.

Karin stepped back for a moment, then used her speed to go back on the offensive.

[Black Moon] and [Hakuramaru] clashed again, scattering sparks all around.

“A katana that does not suffer damage even if struck by the divine katana. So you did not leave Hinomoto simply to go looking for herbs!”

Karin did not answer Juugo’s frustrated shouts. Wondering if he expected her to deliberately divulge where the blade had come from, she added power to her grip.

Every time the two blades crossed, sparks danced around the two warriors.

The tournament’s arena was already nearly destroyed by the long-range slashes Juugo would sometimes unleash. The ground was carved, the buildings cleaved from front

to back.

The soldiers who had rushed to the location because of the commotion could only stand and watch the formidable exchange of blows.

The people around them had prioritized their safety, so no one wounded was present, but there was no one that could join in Karin and Juugo's battle. Their physical abilities were not sufficient, but more than that, they had no weapons capable of matching them.

It did not mean, however, that everybody simply stood there wringing their hands.

“ [Shadow Bind] !”

“ [Arc Bind] !”

Amidst the clanging sounds of the crossing blades, clear voices resounded. At the same time, a shadow writhed at Juugo's feet, and a chain of light reached down from the air.

“Nngh!?”

The binding spells had been cast by Kayo and Haruna. Hinomoto favored direct combat strategies, but magic was not in disuse.

Juugo, locked in battle with Karin, had reacted to the spells, but could not avoid them completely and was affected by the binding.

One chain of light and three shadow bindings were clinging to Juugo's body. Two of the shadow bindings already showed cracks.

The light chain was almost shaken off.

[Black Moon] did not have any particular special features, in fact it was almost featureless, but being an Ancient-grade weapon, it could somewhat influence magic skills in its natural state.

“That was not something to try here, was it.”

Karin slipped in close to the restrained Juugo.

Focusing on the binding chains had created a decisive opening.

[Hakuramaru]’s blade cut through Juugo’s abdomen in a rising diagonal slash. The cut sliced across his chest, above his heart, and through his shoulder.

The samurai job usually does not possess DEF bonuses.

Generally, average defense gear is mere paper before Ancient-grade weapons, but the participants to the formal matches wore nothing but formal wear.

Even for a Returned Ancestor, one slash would prove fatal.

“Gwaahh!!”

Juugo fell down backwards, screaming in pain. The spraying blood doused Karin and the arena.

“——a——n——”

The sound he whispered as he drew his last breath failed to form into words, remaining just vibrations in the air.

[Black Moon] fell from Juugo’s now powerless hands. The conclusion had arrived suddenly and unexpectedly.

That too was one of the possible ways for a battle between masters to end though.

Considering the weapon’s power, it was impressive that the beastman’s abdomen had not been sliced in half.

“Sir Juugo. Was this world so unbearable for you to live in?”

Kankurou whispered while picking up [Black Moon] and returning it to the sheath.

No answer would, however, return.

(The flames of war, once again...)

Juugo’s last thoughts, who failed to form into words, had reached Kankurou.

“In any case, what caused sir Juugo’s incredible strength?”

“That is a forbidden medicine that shaves away one’s own lifeforce. However, I do not know the reason behind his power before using it. Maybe he knew of a reinforcement method unknown to us.”

Kankurou answered Toshiro’s doubts about Juugo’s strength. It was another question they could not know the answer to now.

“Rather, lady Karin, that—-”

“Report!!! A messenger just came in saying that a large battalion of Ichinose soldiers has invaded our domain!!”

A soldier had come shouting in the arena, as to interrupt Kankurou’s question.

“Ichinose soldiers? Is this true?”

“Yes! We have confirmed the presence of an estimated 5000 soldiers and several 3-mel tall large beasts. The beasts appear to be monsters, but they do not seem to be attacking the Ichinose troops.”

Tadahisa had interrogated the soldier, whose words in reply left all present with troubled expressions.

The country of Hinomoto typically had few Tamers, and even fewer could control large monsters as the ones reported.

Furthermore, the Ichinose house was known for valuing individual strength. They would focus on improving themselves rather than learning to tame monsters.

Because of this, they could not help but doubt the report stating that there were monsters among the troops.

“Truly bizarre. Are those troops really from the Ichinose?”

Kuyou expressed his doubts that the described troops really belonged to the Ichinose house. No one else had said it, but everyone had thought the same question.

“Are there any known characteristics about the monsters?”

“Yes, their bodies are colored differently, but their appearance is unmistakably that of the demon fox species. The number of tails is different for each unit, usually 4 or 5.”

“I see, that’s pretty clear.”

After hearing about the monsters’ characteristics, Kankurou seemed to have reached a conclusion.

“Kankurou, do you know anything?”

“Yes. During the past unification wars, there was one member of the demon fox species who tried to take control of Hinomoto. It happened more than 100 years ago, so I suppose few remember it anymore.”

“The disaster-bringing demon foxes spoken about in the chronicles...I thought they were extinct.”

Tadahisa replied to Kankurou’s words.

Among everyone present, only Kankurou was alive at the time, but those events had been reported in chronicles.

“It could be a survivor, or someone with a different goal. The mastermind then had 7 tails, with 6-tailed foxes at its service.”

“How much difference does it make?”

“Against the beasts mentioned in the report, the Brave Ten would be enough. Against a 6-tailed one, at least 3 would be necessary. Against a 7-tailed one, I and 6 other people on my same level could maybe win. In the past battle against one of those, 4 of us died.”

Kankurou’s words caused everyone present to swallow their breath.

4 people out of 6 died, 4 people as strong as Kankurou, whose ability was unmatched in Hinomoto. It meant clearly that even if the Brave Ten fought all together, they would not stand a chance.

“Is there a possibility that such powerful beasts are being kept out of battle for now?”

“I could not rule it out. In the previous conflict, we were attacked from the front, but if they know that, they could be using a feint to strike from the rear. But this is also just a guess.”

“Is that so. In any case, we must do something. Everybody—-”

“Report!!! We received an emergency report of a large army of monsters approaching the Futaba and Shijou domains!!”

“!!!”

Tadahisa’s orders were interrupted by another soldier who rushed into the arena.

A shiver of unease ran through everyone present.

“3 locations attacked at the same time...are the monsters demon foxes?”

“The reports tell of 6-tailed demon foxes leading large numbers of monsters. There is one fox per group, apparently.”

“Kuyou. You said that the demon fox woman who was with Juugo disappeared, yes?”

“Yes.”

Tadahisa had already been informed of Tamamo’s disappearance.

“The name is different, but a demon fox capable of transforming into a human...is likely connected to the past disasters. The units leading the monsters are probably high-ranked ones, close to the mastermind. If they knew that we would gather here, they might have chosen to strike this location.”

The 6-tailed monster that, as Kankurou said, 3 of the Brave Ten would be necessary to fight. The possible presence of a 7-tailed monster loomed in everyone’s minds.

“Would it be impossible to stop a 6-tailed beast without the Brave Ten?”

“I would not say impossible. But considering that together with the 6-tails, other monsters are also present...”

There is no telling of how much damage and casualties there would be.

“...there is no other way out. The Brave Ten will have to be split.”

Even if concerned with the possible existence of a 7-tails, Tadahisa chose not to abandon the other domains.

To the Shijou domain would go the 10th seat, Futaba Akara, Kujou Akitaka and Shiden of the great clan of the west, the Yaejima.

To the Futaba domain, the Shijou house's Tsugumasa and Tsuguho with Karin.

“What shall we do if a 7-tails appears?”

“Survive as long as you can. I will not allow you to die in vain.”

The possibility of a 7-tails appearing in the Kujou domain, the most prosperous in Hinomoto, was not low.

Even so, Tadahisa spoke without hesitation.

Even if the 7-tails appeared and the Kujou domain ravaged, every house's bloodline would still survive. For the Yaejima, Toshiro would stay.

“All of you, to your duties!! Give it your all!”

“Yes sir!!”

After Tadahisa's order, all reinforcements headed to the domains they had been assigned to.

The ones who remained made preparations to attack the approaching Ichinose Army, composed of soldiers and monsters.

“Lady Karin. Could that katana be...”

“It is as you imagine, sir.”

“I see, there is one more thing I must thank him for then.”

He did not say the name outright, but Kankurou had realized who had given [Hakuramaru] to Karin.

“Karin. I am going to send people too, but if you see sir Shin on the way, please ask them to lend us a hand. If they helped us, we could even take down a 7-tails.”

“Understood.”

Karin nodded to Kuyou, then ran off.

Tsuguho and Tsugumasa followed after her, taking replacements for their broken katana from the Kujou armory.

“Lady Karin, who is this Sir Shin that Sir Kuyou spoke about?”

Tsuguho asked about the name she heard in Kuyou and Karin’s conversation, completely new to her.

“He helped us during our search for the medicine to cure lady Haruna. He’s someone Sir Kankurou says to be stronger than himself. His companions are very skilled warriors as well. If we could obtain their assistance, as father said, even a 7-tails would not be a threat.”

“Such a person is in the city now!?! Please do tell me what he looks like. I will go look for him too. If he helped us, the casualties would surely decrease.”

Tsugumasa’s expression lightened up after hearing Karin’s confident words. In the west, only Shiden knew of Shin at this point.

“We cannot spend too much time looking for him though.”

“Father said that he would send people from the Saegusa house to look for him. Our first priority is the reinforcements to the Futaba domain. Let’s just look around us carefully as we go.”

After these words of caution to Tsuguho, Karin raised her running speed.

Running on the rooftops, they cross the main avenue in a huge leap.

Karin said to look for Shin only if they could, but her eyes darted everywhere to find him.



While the inheritance ceremony was being held, Shin and Schnee were looking at the results posted in the main avenue.

“The higher ranked seats won in the first two matches, I see. In the third...Ichinose won, hmm.”

Looking at the results, Shin thought that something might have happened. The results for the 4th match, posted shortly later, reinforced his suspicions.

Because Juugo had defeated two superior Brave Ten members in a row, Shiden and Akitaka.

“Unexpected results?”

“Yeah, as far as I’ve been told, the two that lost to that Ichinose Juugo are both ranked higher than him. His opponents should have been stronger.”

Shin answered Filma’s question about Juugo, who he had seen in town before.

“I see, that’s intriguing for sure.”

“Maybe he took some kind of boosting device? Here you go.”

“Thanks. I think Kankurou would notice something like that though. But seeing that the matches are continuing, I suppose they didn’t find any trace of foul play.”

Shin took the dango offered by Schnee and waited for the results of the next match.

Most matches until now had been brief, so he expected the next results to come soon too.

Shibaid and Tiera were also looking at the result postings, while munching on dango.

“I expected it all to last longer, but it’s been surprisingly quick.”

“It depends, but... Ichinose’s movements were probably different than what his opponents expected. Kuyou also said that there’s a clear difference in level between them, so I guess they got caught by surprise?”

Shin tried to put together a plausible explanation. If the cause was Juugo's real ability, then the items he had entrusted would not be needed.

"It's taking longer this time."

"...that's true. It's already been a while, though."

Shibaid talked while looking in the direction of the arena, as the results from the 4th match onwards did not arrive.

20 minutes had passed already. The other people around them seemed to be thinking the same thing: voices of expectation and curiosity about the results reached Shin's ears.

Shin checked the map and saw two light dots repeatedly getting closer and farther from each other. The battle seemed to be still going on.

Shin looked away from the map after confirming just that.

"Oh, the results are out...!? Ichinose won, huh."

Many in the surrounding crowd expressed their disappointment at the result. As they lived in Kujou territory, they probably wished for Karin's victory.

"That doesn't look like a good sign."

"I agr...bingo. Something's coming."

"Something is...coming?"

"It'll reach your perception field in a minute or so, Schnee. It's monsters and a large crowd of people. Seems like we can't take it easy anymore, folks."

Shin talked while looking towards the opposite direction of the results' postings board.

As he had predicted, after about 1 minute an army-like group entered Schnee's perception field.

At the same time, they heard the sounds of something crumbling and a cloud of dust

arose from the arena.

“Kuu! Kuu kuu!!”

“Yuzuha? What’s wrong?”

As to sound the alarm to the already alert group, Yuzuha started barking all of a sudden.

After they calmed her down, Yuzuha said that a powerful force was drawing closer to Mt. Fuji.

“(Something bad!! There!!)”

“(Something bad? A demon?)”

“(No. But the presence is nasty!!)”

Yuzuha talked frantically while beating on Shin’s shoulders.

Yuzuha’s unusual behavior made Shin think that she had perceived a special opponent, so he looked towards the direction she mentioned. He could not detect anything in his range, but Yuzuha seemed absolutely sure that there was something.

“The Kujou soldiers are on the move. Perfect, someone that should know what’s going on is coming. I’ll be right back.”

Karin was not by herself, so Shin told Schnee and the others to wait and jumped on a roof. He was looking towards Karin, hastily moving on the rooftops like him.

Two other people were following her.

“Sir Shin!!”

“You seem in a rush, did something happen?”

Karin was relieved at seeing Shin.

He already had an idea of what could have happened from the sounds and clouds of dust coming from the arena, but seeing that [Hakuramaru] was dangling at Karin’s

waist, his suspicion became certain.

“I am really glad I could meet you. There is something I must ask you.”

Karin talked about the reports she had heard in the arena.

“I see, the Ichinose. Tamamo was not there, right?”

“Yes, if possible I would like to request you and your companions’ assistance...”

“No problem for me, but let me talk about it with my companions first. There’s something that concerns me. I will catch up with you later.”

The Futaba domain Karin mentioned was close to Mt. Fuji. Shin was concerned about the monster forces drawing closer to it, but he could not put Yuzuha’s words aside.

The direction was the same, so Shin decided to solve Yuzuha’s concern, then join Karin’s reinforcements.

“I heard what happened. Listen up, everyone.”

Shin reported what he heard to Schnee and the others. He used [Silent Domain] to soundproof the area around them, so the surrounding crowd did not hear anything.

“Monsters, is it. Could the “bad thing” Yuzuha talked about be the now disappeared Tamamo?”

“Could be. I’m going there. I would like to ask you all to go to each domain as reinforcements.”

“I will go to the Futaba domain. Once things have been taken care of, I will come to Mt. Fuji.”

Schnee chose the location close to Shin’s, without hesitation. As she boasted the highest speed in the group, she could act faster than anyone else regarding the matter of Yuzuha’s worry, the most unpredictable element.

“I shall stay here. It is shameful to say, but I am the slowest among us.”

As Shibaid expressed his intention of staying, Filma made her decision.

“Okay, I’m going to the Shijou territory with Tiera then. If we physically reinforce Kagerou’s legs, we’ll arrive there quickly.”

“Un-understood!”

Shibaid also had concerns. He mentioned the reason for staying behind is his slow movement speed. However, with Filma’s cooperation they avoid getting Tiera involved in a war between humans.

If the Ichinose soldiers had started their march on their own free will, a different kind of battle than the simple survival against monsters would take place.

It was also different than fighting thieves or bandits. It would be true war, a bloodbath, multitudes of people killing each other.

Shibaid and Filma thought that Tiera, who had only experience fighting monsters, should not be exposed to a war between thousands of people just yet.

“Things might turn harsh here, but will you be alright, Shibaid?”

“I have experienced this type of battle plenty of times. I do not know if they come of their own will or are being manipulated, but if it’s the latter I will save as many as possible. I despise this way of doing things, after all. If they come at me with intent to do battle, however, I will have to react accordingly.”

Shibaid’s statement implied that he would not hesitate to cut his opponents down, would their actions demand it.

“That is perfectly fine. Everybody, we’re off!”

With Shin’s words as a signal, the party of four (plus one fox) set on their respective tracks.

PART 3

The first one to reach the battlefield was, obviously enough, Shibaid.

The Kujou soldiers were in formation, ready to meet the Ichinose-monster allied army.

Alongside the Ichinose troops there were 6 monsters in total. They included 3 Green Tails around level 500 and 3 Yellow Tails around level 400.

There were no other monsters to be seen, maybe because they were acting alongside humans.

“It does not seem like they are being manipulated either.”

Shibaid, who had survived countless battlefields, knew very well the taste of the air on the field of battle. He had cut down manipulated soldiers, and those who were fighting on their own will.

Because of this, he instinctively felt that the Ichinose troops were not manipulated when he looked at them. He also confirmed it with [Analyze] .

They appeared to be in the typical excited frenzy soldiers felt before battle, but no one was affected by status ailments such as [Charm] or [Confusion] .

“Are they possessed by the battle?”

Shibaid whispered after looking over the troops. They were a mixture of many different races and species, but they had one thing in common.

No one young was among them. Even Elves and Lords, who typically did not change much as they aged, looked like they had already passed middle age.

Among the others, there were many who appeared to be in their early elderly years. Their eyes, however, sparkled bright with the intent to battle.

Shibaid was reminded of berserker warriors who would not stop fighting until their last breath.

“Hmm?”

He saw one man from the Kujou camp head towards the Ichinose troops. He was carrying a katana, but no armor.

It was an unthinkable thing to see on the battlefield, but Shibaid knew who the man was.

“Hinomoto’s strongest swordsman, huh.”

The man’s name was Toudou Kankurou.

As Kankurou was walking towards the Ichinose army, a man on horseback, clad in superb-looking armor, galloped closer to him.

“That’s quite a large entourage you came with. Unfortunately, we received no announcement of your visit.”

“Of course you haven’t. This is war.”

Kankurou knew the man well: he had once been appointed battalion commander in the Ichinose army.

“Why are there monsters with you? Are they not beasts to be defeated?”

“Who knows what those creatures think? They have their own plans too, I assume. Nothing that concerns us.”

The man answered clearly and boldly. He did not seem to be lying.

Kankurou thought that they were allied probably just because they shared similar goals.

“Why would you do something like this?”

“We were born among the flames of war. With large battles ceasing to exist, some of us simply pass away in silence. But we wish to die on the field of battle! We will not just wait to pass away in our beds!”

“You plan to kindle the fires of war in Hinomoto for such a reason?”

“You may laugh and call us foolish. All who came here today are such fools. Battle-crazy fools who cannot accept these times of peace.”

The man then laughed. A pure, clear laugh, without a shade of doubt in it. A ferocious smile on his lips.

The men behind him shared the same expression.

“The Ichinose house originally formed and grew from a gathering of such people. If not now, then in the near future, but this day was inevitable. Personally, I thought I was going to find some understanding from you.”

“I don’t have the slightest idea of what you mean.”

“In Hinomoto, no man has seen as many battlefields as you, killed as many as you have. O “White haired sword demon”. I give thanks to the heavens that my last battle will be against you.”

The man held up his spear, readying for battle.

His fighting spirit and murderous intent mingled together, prickling Kankurou’s skin.

“...so this is a warrior’s way of life?”

“Hah. Nothing more than complacency.”

The man’s lips sealed shut after those words.

We shall speak through our blades now, is what his eyes expressed..

“So be it then. I, Toudou Kankurou, shall be your opponent in this final battle!”

Before men who viewed death as a righteous boon, Kankurou’s atmosphere changed.

Waves of murderous intent silently spread throughout the battlefield.

“Here I come!!”

Although pressured by Kankurou’s murderous intent, the man unleashed a thrust enveloped in violent winds.

A single sharp thrust, which did not betray the man's old age. It was his coup de grace, a powerful blow which had felled many an opponent in the past.

This time, however, his spear...did not meet its target.

"Won...derful..."

As the man fell from his horse and into the ground, the tip of his spear, which had been cut off and blown away, stabbed the ground beside him.

The arc [Black Moon] had drawn in the air disappeared, the metal sound accompanying the katana's return to its sheath was overwhelmed by the trampling sound of the approaching cavalry troops.

The men rushing on their horses, the men marching on the ground, no one bore expressions of sorrow on their faces. Their expressions well fit battle-crazy warriors, as the man had called them.

"Well well, to face such numbers of soldiers ready to die will be quite troublesome."

The Kujou soldiers were not weak by any means. But against soldiers who do not fear death, or rather, soldiers heading towards death, even the most powerful soldier will be burdened with exhaustion.

For Kankurou, it was a group he could easily defeat, provided he had the time.

However, considering the possibility of the 7-tails' presence, he wanted to avoid both using too much time and exhausting his troops.

"Let me offer my assistance then."

Kankurou was pondering how to break through the situation, when a Dragnil carrying a black halberd appeared before him.

The fighting spirit he emitted casted an overwhelming pressure on the surroundings.

"Well now, you are sir Shin's..."

"Sir Kankurou. I shall participate in this battle."

“My, it is a true honor to fight side by side with one of sir Shin’s companions.”

Kankurou naturally knew of Shibaid and his position in Shin’s service. Kankurou had witnessed him fight during his travels in the continent.

“I believe you have more speed than me, sir Kankurou. I will hold the soldiers back, I ask you to deal with the monsters.”

“That is a very welcome proposal. I shall go hunting then, please wait a while.”

Kankurou nodded at Shibaid’s proposal and quickly ran off.

He was running among thousands of troops searching for just a few monsters, but his expression was not clouded.

“Be ready.”

Kankurou’s path was opened by streaks of red slashes, created by the same skill Juugo had used, [Infiltrator Blade] .

Its power, however, was much different. Maybe because of his stats, or because of his expertise. The army was torn apart, as the armored men and horses on Kankurou’s path were cleaved in two.

“It’s the blade demon!! The blade demon is coming!!”

Crimson Slash. That was another name for Kankurou on the battlefield.

His sword arm alone could decide the fate of a battle. That was the symbol of Hinomoto’s strongest swordsman.

“Do not enter the path of his sword!! Surround—”

“I beg your pardon.”

A captain-looking man tried to give out instructions, as Kankurou’s slashes cut through the army’s formation.

But before he could finish barking his orders, Kankurou appeared behind him.

At the same time, the man's body was ran through by the same crimson slashes.

"!?"

The man's torso, cut off from the rest of his body, slowly fell to the ground.

His dying expression, much like the spear-wielding man Kankurou had cut down before, seemed satisfied.

"So strong..."

"A truly worthy opponent!!"

The army was losing its officers one after the other, but its morale was not falling, instead rising even higher. A phenomenon that normally would never happen when facing an overwhelmingly superior opponent.

Kankurou, slicing through the enemy formation, now pointed his blade at one of the monsters, a Green Tail. The monster was swinging its tails towards Kankurou.

Before a beast so huge one had to look up to see properly, Kankurou swung [Black Moon] without a word. The monsters' tails, sweeping through the surroundings- Ichinose soldiers included- were sliced away.

The instant after, the Green Tail wailed in pain, Kankurou was at its feet, the monster's blind spot, holding the sheathed [Black Moon] at his hip, ready to attack.

"First one."

[Black Moon] was unsheathed, once again crimson slashes flew.

One slash was enough to cut off the Green Tail's head: soon after, the beast's huge body, much larger than a horse's, crumbled to the ground, causing a small tremor.

A cloud of dust rose, the soldiers stopped in their tracks for a moment. But even that would not stop them. As their actions showed, they did not count on the monsters from the beginning.

"Are you looking for a place to die? The country and age might not be the same, but those who live by the blade all share the same destination, don't they?"

Shibaid quietly whispered while sweeping away those who aimed to strike Kankurou from the back.

Even if he was not using any skill, the soldiers around Shibaid were blown away as if an explosion had gone off right next to them.

In the 500 years of Shibaid's life, he met many who thought of nothing except how to die.

Girard, who had battled and died at Shin's hands, was not too different, a berserker who only thought about himself.

One of the destinations of those who live by the blade was now spreading before Shibaid.

Witnessing his formidable sweeps, many soldiers recognized Shibaid's great ability and gathered around him.

While silently countering their assaults, Shibaid shot a skill towards one of the Yellow Tails.

“Hnngh!”

[Placid Moon] was held high, then came crashing down.

Spear/Wind combination skill [Storm Hammer] .

Differently from Kankurou's [Infiltrator Blade] , the spherical hurricane born from [Placid Moon] 's tip blew the soldiers far away, carved into the ground and through the battlefield, also damaging those outside the skill's range.

The hurricane, ravaging the battlefield in a fan-like shape, claimed the lives of 2 Yellow Tails, which happened to be close to its path. At the same time, Kankurou finished off his second Green Tail.

Then, among the chaotic ranks of the Ichinose soldiers, the Kujou troops finally arrived.

“To battle!!!”

The cavalry broke through the enemy troops, then the foot soldiers struck the separated groups of enemy soldiers. Their well-planned movements were the clear sign of the strict training they went through.

Corpses piled upon corpses on the reddening ground, riddled with broken weapons and crushed armor.

In such a scenery, the two oldest veterans of the battlefield simply continued to swing their blades in silence.



The second to arrive to the battlefield was Schnee.

After joining with Karin, Schnee separated from Shin -who was heading to Fuji- and went on to ambush the monsters approaching the Futaba domain from the rear.

After self-introductions, Schnee had explained that she would fight alongside them.

When Shin said that Schnee would come with them instead, Karin was not exactly convinced, but after hearing that there was something unusual going on at Mt. Fuji, she did not inquire further.

“Well then, as we discussed, I will take the first move.”

“Please do.”

After this exchange with Karin, Schnee raised a hand in the direction of the large monster army.

They were about 1 kilometer from the monsters. Tsuguho and Tsugumasa furrowed their brows, wondering what Schnee was planning on doing, but the next instant the twins' expressions were filled with surprise.

“Wooh!! W-what's that!?”

Tsugumasa let out an exclamation, startled by the cold wind that had suddenly started to blow.

His eyes were fixed on the plains before his eyes, now covered in platinum white ice.

“Lady Karin, just who is she...?”

“—an ally. You do not need to think any deeper than that for now.”

Karin gave a matter-of-fact answer to Tsuguho’s question, pronounced with a mixture of fear and awe.

She was not as surprised because, during the battle on the ship leading to Hinomoto, she had been witness of Schnee’s crushing victory over the Gale Serpents.

The skill Schnee used was the Water-type magic skill [Cocytus] , a spell with a wide area of effect.

It was not magic exclusive to battles against guilds like [Blue Judgement] .

However, its caster was Schnee, who had undergone a power-up during Filma’s rescue. The spell’s power was something beyond the imaginations of Karin and the others, who were running beside Schnee.

Naturally, she had adjusted the spell’s effect in order not to cause damage to the Futaba forces.

“With this, the enemy army’s rear has been taken care of. Let us go assist those fighting on the frontlines. I will take that White Tail.”

“Regarding that one, we could—”

“No, I believe it is best if it is you who informs the Futaba soldiers that we came to help, lady Karin. I do not wish to cause confusion in their ranks. My apologies, but now let us prioritize a speedy extermination of the monsters.”

Karin realized that it would be faster and more people could be saved if Schnee used her magic, rather than if Karin’s group of three went around slaying monsters.

However, due to the abrupt use of [Cocytus] , a considerable amount of confusion was produced on the frontlines.

Just like what Schnee said, if the messenger announcing that reinforcements arrived was between Karin, one of the Brave Ten, or a nameless adventurer, there would surely be different reactions.

The present problem was that the frontlines were already engaged in a chaotic battle. It would be difficult even for Schnee to eliminate only the enemy monsters.

“...Understood. I leave that to you then. Please be careful.”

The Futaba soldiers were not weak troops that would be trampled without resisting, but they were in severe numerical disadvantage.

Karin, who had heard the approximate numbers of the monster units, feared that they would bypass the Futaba troops and directly invade the towns.

Because of this, she swallowed her pride and agreed to Schnee’s proposal.

“You too.”

Schnee replied to Karin with a small nod and headed in a different direction. Using the frozen monsters as footholds, she closed in on the White Tail, which was heading for the frontlines.

“Too slow.”

Schnee unsheathed [Blue Moon] and released a skill.

It was the Water/Katana combination skill [Frozen White Arc] .

A platinum white slash sprang forward from [Blue Moon] .

The crescent moon-shaped blade of ice, which had frozen even the arm of raid rank 3 demon Scoruas, cut off 2 of the White Tail’s tails: the monster had reacted at the last moment at Schnee’s slight killing intent.

The tails froze in midair before landing, while the freezing affecting the other tails was expanding towards the monster’s legs.

“———!?!”

A scream, which failed to become words, made the surrounding air tremble.

The White Tail wildly swung its remaining tails, attacking humans and monsters without distinction.

“...just what is this supposed to be?”

Schnee whispered while looking at the White Tail, which had lost all reason because of the pain and anger.

Based on level and monster rank, the White Tail before her was supposed to be the peak of its kind. But in actuality it didn't match such a description at all.

The monster was simply flailing wildly and did not show any trace of intellect, which should increase as the monster's level did.

Not all monsters were like that, but as far as Schnee knew, the intelligence of Demon Fox monsters tended to increase along with their level.

“I suppose Yuzuha's “hunch” is right on the money, huh?”

Schnee stood on the monster, now with neck and tails cut off, and looked towards Fuji.

However, that lasted no longer than a few seconds, she immediately glanced at the battlefield once more and pointed her blade towards the monsters.



Filma and Tiera, riding on Kagerou's back, arrived in Shijou territory at the time Schnee's group had started fighting, when Shibaid and Kankurou had finished exterminating the Ichinose troops and monster army.

Akara, Akitaka, and Shiden, who were also headed towards the Shijou territory, had not arrived yet.

Even if they were guests in the Saegusa house, Filma and Tiera had not even met the Saegusa heiress, let alone knowing anyone from the Futaba or Yaejima.

Because of this, even if they knew that there were others coming that way, they did not go talk to them.

For Filma they would have only been in the way, and Tiera was not certain that they were heading to their same destination.

“We're almost there.”

“There’s smoke coming from behind the defensive walls...”

The soldiers seemed to be fighting back the invaders, but part of the frontlines appeared to have been breached. A 6-tailed Demon Fox monster was sweeping through the soldiers.

“I’m going to take down the one with 6 tails, so please take care of the small fry, Tiera.”

“Understood. I’ll draw them away as much as I can.”

After their conversation, Kagerou charged headfirst towards the monsters’ pack. Casting a wall of thunderbolts in its path while charging through with his huge body, Kagerou reduced the monsters to ashes in an instant.

“Okay then, my turn!”

Using the recoil from Kagerou’s braking motion, Filma jumped high in the air. Bathed in the sunlight, the unique armor covering only her chest and waist area – named [Magic Armor of Hollow Lacquer] - gave a dull gleam.

On the surface of [Magic Armor of Hollow Lacquer] a geometrical pattern emerged. The pattern was painted with two pigments of purple. Purple that was almost black, and purple that had a brilliant reddish tint.

These patterns, which made it seem as if wings had grown from Filma’s back, were proof of one of the armor’s abilities, magic power release.

This allowed the user to consume MP and use magic power as a booster or thruster, thus achieving higher speed.

After using it, it was no longer possible to perform quick changes in direction and its MP consumption was high, so it was a function no one used. According to Shin however, it was simply an ability that “chose its users”: the right person would surely be able to tame it.

As she ran freely through the air, almost like she was really flying, Filma readied her [Red Moon] .

The soldiers around the fox were just surrounding it while limiting its movements. As no one was especially close to the monster, the timing was just right.

“I’m sorry to say this all of a sudden, but you’re out.”

Occupied with the human soldiers, Filma attacked the demon fox from the sky, which became its blind spot. She came down with the momentum of a falling star.

No one managed to react in time. Both the soldiers and the demon fox stood still before the raging flame falling from the sky.

The soldiers increased their distance because of the heat levels, while the fox wailed loudly because of the strike that had pierced its body.

“W-what!? What the he-!?”

The soldiers who regained their bearings after the sudden fireball attack raised their voices. But they couldn’t finish their sentences.

Inside the flame that had slain the fox, a shadow was moving.

“Something’s coming out...”

The more the shadow came closer, the more it looked human. In the end, the flames split as of their own will, and from the fire whirlpool appeared Filma.

Despite being in the middle of searing hot flames, neither her skin nor her armor showed any burn marks.

Emerging from the flames in that manner, the soldiers both feared Filma and were charmed with her beautiful appearance.

The armor she was wearing could hardly be said to be battle-oriented. No one, however, felt like pointing it out.

It looked good on her, and from the patterns rising from it, anyone would understand that it was no ordinary armor.

“You’ll forgive me for snatching your little prey, yes? —hm? Can you hear me?”

“EH!?! No, well, we were struggling in fact, you saved us. May I ask who you are though?”

“Let’s just say I’m reinforcements. My buddies are rampaging over there, but don’t attack them by mistake, okay?”

Filma pointed towards the large monster army.

What the soldiers saw when they turned was a large wolf-like monster routing the other packs of monsters. In addition, the person riding it was releasing attacks like flashes of light.

“Are you, allies?”

“Of course, didn’t I say that I’m reinforcements? Okay then, I’m going that way so I leave this to you. It’s the place you live in, you better protect it well.”

After saying all that, Filma gracefully leapt towards the masses of monsters.

The monsters turned to black ashes as her waves of flames spread at unbelievable speed.

Looking at this, the soldiers even started thinking that the demon fox they had been fighting until then maybe wasn’t that strong.

“Filma is really amazing...in a totally different way than master.”

Tiera felt somewhat at a loss for words, looking at Filma’s performance of leaping over the monster hordes and attacking the demon fox.

Tiera’s head was filled with questions, like what were those wing-like things that sprouted on Filma’s back, what was up with her armor, which barely covered anything...but for now she put them away and shot her bow.

Her enemies were monsters: there was no need to hesitate.

“I’m stronger than before, after all.”

Maybe because of the fragments absorbed within her body when Filma was freed, Tiera felt that her bow had become very light. If she infused just a bit of magic power in it, her arrows pierced through monsters with much more speed and power than before.

In the Balmel battle, she only managed to shoot arrows with Kagerou and Yuzuha's help, but now she could fly with just her strength, and with more power than before.

Combined with her original abilities, Tiera's fighting power had increased exponentially.

“GRUAAAAAAAAAAA!!!”

As if encouraging her sniping, Kagerou roared. A mad dance of thunderbolts erupted in their surroundings, turning monsters into ashes.

Because of this overwhelmingly superior presence, even the monsters heading towards the Shijou city now proceeded more slowly.

In addition, the demon fox commanding them was now gone. The monster army was on the verge of collapse.

“I was worried that they would think we were enemies, but it doesn't look like they're going to attack us.”

Tiera looked in the direction of the fighting soldiers and felt a little relieved.

She was a bit apprehensive when Filma had charged into the demon fox like that.

“!?”

Just after this brief relief, Tiera prepared another arrow to shoot, but something other than monster corpses entered her line of sight.

That mostly torn and eaten thing she saw was a human corpse.

It was not the first time for Tiera to see a dead body. But the sight of that body, ravaged and destroyed to the point that it barely retained its original shape, was horrifying enough to make her swallow her breath.

“—I—I won't allow any more of this!!!”

Tiera inhaled briefly, then looked straight at the scenery before her eyes.

Maybe because the soldiers' numbers were too few, she understood that some

monsters had entered the town. But that would end now. Filma had crushed the monster's commander, and Kagerou was lowering their morale with its intimidating aura.

To lower casualties as much as possible, Tiera aimed at the units with higher levels.

PART 4

“What’s with these numbers?”

Shin had parted ways with Schnee and headed towards Fuji, but the formation of demon foxes he found around the mountain made him raise a brow. Almost all units were around level 700, with 6 or 7 tails. For Shin it was nothing special, but for this world it was close to a natural disaster.

Such monsters were now surrounding Mt. Fuji. They were also clearly expressing hostile intentions.

“Kuu!! Tamamo, not here!!”

“That’s true, I can’t pick up any presence that could be hers. What’s this about, anyway? There are the 8-headed Orochi and Munechika on top of Fuji. No matter how many boss-level monsters you gather, with their fighting power they’re just going to get annihilated.”

The gap between the level 900 Munechika and the level 700 demon foxes was just too large. That’s what their difference in fighting power meant.

Because of the demon foxes’ large numbers, Munechika could maybe suffer some injuries, but if they fought they would be surely exterminated.

Despite that, the demon foxes were unmistakably heading towards the mists covering the mountain.

“Hmm?”

Among the demon foxes climbing up Mt. Fuji, Shin detected a small presence moving up as well.

It was not being attacked despite being right next to the demon foxes, so it was likely to be an ally.

Shin thought it could be Tamamo, and asked Yuzuha for confirmation, but she denied that possibility.

“Yuzuha, I’m going to see this sneaky one before dealing with them. What are you going to do?”

“...I feel a bad presence from there. Yuzuha, go there. Shin, go to Fuji.”

After a short pause, Yuzuha turned to a direction different than the mountain.

“Will you be fine by yourself?”

“Leave it to Yuzuha!!”

Yuzuha hopped down from Shin’s shoulder, transformed into little girl mode, and puffed up her chest.

Shin would have been worried until a while ago, but her level was now higher and her control over her powers were much better.

Shin looked at Yuzuha, who was looking back at him with straight and honest eyes, and nodded.

“—got it. Take these with you, just in case.”

Shin took an accessory that would take damage instead of the user and items to heal status ailments from the item box.

Yuzuha took them, put them in her robes, then ran off in fox form.

“OK, time to do my part.”

After whispering to himself, Shin went on his way.

While concealing his presence with [Hiding] , Shin drew closer to the dot moving among the demon foxes.

When he came close enough to see, he spotted a man clad in black ninja wear head to toe.

The name displayed via [Analyze] was Rokuhara Kai, the man who was with Juugo.

Shin jumped in front of Kai and deactivated [Hiding] .

“!?! You are the man from that time...!?”

Kai reacted to Shin’s sudden appearance by drawing his ninja blade. He was clearly wary of Shin after recognizing him.

“Do you mean, the time at Aokigahara?”

“Who can say!”

Before even an attempt to conversation was made, Kai casted a magic spell towards Shin.

What flew towards Shin was the flame-type magic skill [Fireball] . It was a basic offensive magic, widely used by beginners and experts alike.

However, magic used by a ninja like Kai, whose job leaned more towards physical attacks, could not work on Shin.

The [Fireball] flying towards Shin vanished into nothingness just before hitting him.

“If possible, I’d like to know why you are doing this.”

“...to once again spread the flames of war in Hinomoto.”

“—I’m surprised to receive an answer. But why? I hear that there is much to lose in the flames of war. What would you gain in doing this?”

Shin did not expect any answers, but as he received one instead, he expressed another doubt.

“....Hinomoto has had continuous conflicts, all within this small island country. One needed to be strong, lest everything be taken away from them. Because of that, in those times everyone was strong. But now the people forgot those times of war, and became weak. The Brave Ten as well, none of them can even match sir Kankurou now, they are just brats with nothing more than their Returned Ancestor status going for them. If peace continues on like this, Hinomoto will eventually grow weak.”

“As someone who saw the continent’s adventurers and soldiers, I can tell you that Hinomoto soldiers are clearly stronger than them.”

Shin said what he honestly thought. Even in Balmel, a city exposed to the dangers of the Flood's monster hordes, the soldiers' quality was lower than Hinomoto.

"It is not enough for soldiers to be strong. The lords governing its domains, the soldiers serving under them, the people inhabiting its lands...all of them need to be strong, or a small country like Hinomoto has no future."

"Even so, is setting monsters on the people an acceptable way? It would just cause a burden on those precious soldiers and citizens."

"If they fall because of something like that, it means that they were worth that much in the first place. This was one of the truths in the era of wars."

"You speak as if you saw it with your own eyes."

Based on his experiences until now, Shin thought that Kai's race was Human.

Humans have short life spans. No one from this race could have witnessed the age of wars and still be alive.

"Because they showed it to me."

"They 'showed' it?"

"The one who controls these beasts did. They seem to have different goals, but no matter if we are being used or not, our wish will be fulfilled."

Kai spoke while pointing at a Blue Tail among the demon foxes surrounding them.

Shin never heard of abilities allowing the user to see the past, but before that, he could not know if the past Kai saw was the truth or not.

"I will not accept a unification scared of sacrifices. Hinomoto will become a strong country only if the truly strong rule over it."

"The man called Ichinose Juugo is already dead. Even so, do you continue?"

"Do you think I would stop now?"

"I suppose not."

Kai's killing intent grew more intense. In response, Shin's hand reaches to the katana [Moonless] at his waist.

"....I did not think it would be possible to talk like this. Are you sure it was fine to leak all that information?"

"It makes no difference. Dead men tell no tales."

"That man might be you though, you know?"

"That is fine too. The strong live, the weak perish. That is all."

Even his own death was an acceptable outcome. Kai's eyes as he said so were straight and true, despite the haziness within them.

"...were the days of peace so painful?"

"....."

Shin's last words were the only ones Kai did not reply to.

Wielding his ninja blade, Kai disappeared into the shadow of a Red Tail.

The monsters surrounding Shin were 3 Red Tails and 3 White Tails. The former were around level 600, the latter level 700: all boss-class monsters.

There were also other monsters of the demon fox species, but except those heading towards Shin, they were all proceeding towards the peak.

"That's a shame."

Shin spoke in response to Kai's silence. The echo of these words was so cold, it would have ran chills down the spines of whoever heard them.

Shin then unsheathed [Moonless] while shifting his line of sight to the right.

As he drew a silver arc in the air with the blade, a sound of clashing metal followed and 3 kunai fell on the ground, split clean in half.

Even if he had concealed himself, Kai's [Hiding] was inferior to Shin's perception

abilities.

“Did you think you were hiding?”

Shin’s line of sight uncovered Kai’s position.

Because Kai felt a chill down the back of his spine he turned towards the origin of this savage thirst for blood. Even though his facial expression became stiff, it also changed into a smile.

“What I sensed that time was no lie, I see.”

Even if he had accepted death as positive, some things could not be overcome.

The stench of blood Kai had sensed from Shin was not something that would emanate from someone who only battled against monsters.

It was proof that his hands were stained with the blood of countless people.

Kai looked downward towards the rattling sound that had reached his ears. He found his right arm, the one holding his blade, shaking.

The demon foxes around Shin too, intimidated by his killing intent, could not move.

Even the other demon foxes heading towards the peak turned towards Shin, their bodies trembling.

“Heh, this is how true war must be.”

Kai pulled out a round pill from his robe and swallowed it, then charged towards Shin.

Kai’s after-images split and attacked Shin.

It was a technique combining high-speed movement and illusions, by using the skills [Ground Shrink] and [Mirage Dance]. The round pill allowed Kai to move at a speed easily surpassing the average Chosen One.

This combination, which Schnee often uses too, served to enhance all of Kai’s techniques, also taking advantage of his boosted physical abilities.

However—.

“A ninja should never attack from the front, come on.”

Before Shin’s [Moonless] , it was all meaningless.

No matter how deftly Kai hid within the illusions, Shin’s eyes could see through them. Attacking him from the front was a poor strategy, no matter how boosted Kai was by the round pill.

In the blink of an eye, Shin closed in on one of Kai’s copies: it was the real one.

Even if wide-eyed in surprise, Kai tried to dodge with all his might. Maybe because of his long experience in battle, his body moved before he could think.

Thanks to this, the air-rending slash performed by [Moonless] stopped at slicing the ninja’s left arm off.

“I alone am no match, I see. —-Attack!!”

After Kai’s order, the demon foxes, frozen still because of Shin’s killing intent, started moving. They targeted Shin with fangs and claws, taking advantage of their large bodies.

They had already understood, from watching the exchange between Kai and Shin, that magic would not work.

“You’re in the way.”

The White tail and Red Tail’s claws were approaching Shin from both the left and right side. Shin responded indifferently by swinging [Moonless] .

Two silver flashes run through the air. As they disappeared, the HP of two demon foxes reached zero.

Their heads and front legs fell to the ground seconds later.

Katana-type martial skill [Beast Hunt] .

Thanks to the skill’s increased damage against animal-type monsters such as the

demon foxes, two units fell with ridiculous ease.

Shin lightly swung [Moonless] , still not stained with a single drop of blood, and spoke.

“I will cut down everything. Give up.”

In the space of one single breath, Shin slayed the White Tail approaching from behind. He then took the killing intent he had been focusing on his surroundings to intimidate the monsters and released it to the fullest, without limiting it.

His opponent being shifted from humans to monsters, his intent also shifted from defeating to killing.

Differently from a bandit or ruffian, in Shin’s eyes Kai was acting with a clear objective.

He seemed to have been influenced by something, but as also displayed by [Analyze] , he was not under complete manipulation.

He did not know what the reason was, but Shin felt that for both Kai and Juugo, deep down their own will was behind their actions. After his conversation with Kai, Shin’s supposition turned into certainty.

If their will desired war and killing though, for Shin there was no other choice.

Excluding the monster’s involvement, a commotion like this would have happened sooner or later.

For the present Hinomoto, their position was that of heretics. Their ways and thoughts would never be understood.

Even if in a contorted form, their love for their country was at the heart of it all.

That too was a way of thinking. But no matter what their reasons were, Shin would not accept Juugo and Kai’s way of doing things.

And thus, he cuts.

The killing intent emanating from his body, as chilling as a deathly cold breeze, spoke to those facing Shin, telling them to prepare to die.

“After a life spent in the darkness, for my last opponent to be someone of such might...I am thankful.”

A smile widening on his lips, Kai leapt and ran through Shin’s killing intent.

Normally he could have closed the distance in an instant. However Kai’s body, although boosted by the round pill, could not keep up with his mind.

Shin was looking in Kai’s direction, but did not move a step.

He held [Moonless] straight in front, its tip pointed forward, quietly staring at Kai. There were no openings in his stance.

“Gwah”

As he was running towards Shin, Kai’s legs creaked. His long battle experience told him that something was wrong with his bones. Then, as if provoked by that, his legs and arms produced strange noises.

“I see the recoil has come.”

Shin said while looking at Kai.

After looking at Kai’s status display, Shin had guessed what the pill Kai swallowed had to be.

Shin’s decision of cutting down Kai was out of compassion: having him destroy himself would have been too pitiful of an ending.

“It’s been awhile since I last saw someone use a forbidden drug.”

“But even if I did, look at me now.”

What Shin called forbidden drug was actually an item with the official name of “Miracle Drug of Blinking Life”.

Using it would instantly raise all stats by several stages, but in exchange HP would decrease at a fixed rate, the player dying after a few minutes.

In addition, recovering lost HP or reviving right after dying was not possible: as

penalty for dying, the player would also be forcefully transported to their hometown.

In the game, it was an item used only in battles between players.

Even if one defeated a boss using it, the system would prevent any EXP or loot gain, so the players that just enjoyed adventuring did not even know of its existence.

“This is the end.”

Kai’s HP was already close to zero. Even in such a state, the techniques he unleashed were not weakened in the least.

The ninja blade’s attacks continued. Kai’s katana, painted black to be used in stealth missions, was met by Shin’s [Moonless] .

The platinum and gleaming black weapons crossed paths. Shin and Kai stopped moving, their backs to each other.



“Im...pressive...”

After this one last word, Kai fell. The katana he still held in his right hand had its blade cut in half.

“...can’t say this feels right.”

When Shin turned around, Kai had already drawn his last breath.

Looking at his somehow pleased-looking expression, Shin scratched his head, perplexed.

Possibly finding an opening in his now relaxed guard, Shin was attacked by a mass of flame and ice. However, it was enough to attract his attention. The attack was canceled by his magic resistance.

“So it’s not like he was in command, huh. You should at least know that laying a hand on me or Fuji would be the end of you though.”

As he finished talking, at Shin’s feet lied the corpses of 1 Red Tail and 1 Blue Tail. His opponents were now only monsters, so he swung his sword without the slightest hesitation.

Shin directed his perception towards Fuji and noticed a dot of light moving rapidly around the demon foxes. It was Munechika.

As the small dot came closer, the big ones would disappear. The speed at which they were annihilated was overwhelming: the 8-headed Orochi did not even move from the peak.

“There are still plenty of them; guess I’ll lend a hand.”

Shin started hunting down the demon foxes from the direction opposite to the dot he thought to be Munechika.

After less than an hour, most of the demon foxes that had gathered on Fuji had been exterminated.

As Shin took down the last unit, the sparkle of platinum armor appeared before him.

“So it was you, Shin.”

What appeared was the katana and person carrying the name of One of the Five Supreme Blades – Mikazuki Munechika. As she was battling, she was wearing her helmet, but not her flowing black hair nor her armor were stained by enemy blood.

“I see you did not have trouble either.”

“Monsters of that level are nothing to me. Curious to see you appear at the same time as the monsters’ assault though. Do you know something?”

“I don’t know much in detail, but I’ll tell you all I can.”

Shin briefly explained about Juugo, Kai, Tamamo and the plan they had put into action.

After he finished talking, Munechika thought for a while, holding her fingers to her lips, then she looked towards the peak of Fuji.

“The demon foxes’ goal for attacking was probably what we are protecting on top of the mountain. Not only the demon foxes, but many of Hinomoto’s monsters with a certain degree of intellect came to attack Fuji.”

“Is there something of much importance there? I did think it was strange that the mountain’s master Kagutsuchi wasn’t there, but...no, I do not mean to pry. You don’t need to answer.”

“Heh, I know that. I suppose I could tell you. Because your partner, the Element Tail, probably noticed already.”

“Eh? You knew Yuzuha was an Element Tail?”

Shin was also surprised that Yuzuha apparently knew the reason behind Kagutsuchi’s absence, but Munechika’s knowledge of Yuzuha’s species was even more astonishing to him.

“The energy of the Ley lines has a peculiar aura. I heard from Kagutsuchi that Element Tails have the ability of influencing Ley lines, as well.”

Judging from Munechika’s words, it didn’t look like Kagutsuchi had been slain.

Just like Yuzuha, it was apparently possible to communicate with it. During the game the battle would always start without any actual conversation, so Shin found it a bit

surprising.

“Well, this is not the time to stand around chatting. Go to your partner. And one more thing, you haven’t forgotten the promise to return to me, have you? I cannot claim to be patient, I will wait for only 10 years at most.”

“I will go now then. Rest assured, I have no intention of making you wait that long.”

Shin replied thinking that for an impatient person, that was a pretty long time span.

Strictly speaking, Munechika was like a spirit hosted within a sword, so there was no concept of lifespan for her, or so Shin reflected.

“I am looking forward to it then.”

Shin thanked Munechika, who told him the direction Yuzuha was in, and headed off.

PART 5

While Shin was talking with Munechika after the battle, Yuzuha was running over the plains, at the largest size she could currently take.

She was already considerably far from Fuji. Even though she still wasn't in her perfect form, the Element Tails' proverbially high physical abilities were serving her well enough.

"....there."

Yuzuha was looking towards a forest located from the path leading to Fuji.

The nasty presence she had felt while traveling with Shin was getting closer and closer.

She had already perceived the being behind this presence. It too should have noticed Yuzuha's approach.

The owner of the presence was deep in the forest and not moving. It appeared to be waiting for Yuzuha.

"Kuu."

Thinking that it was even better if it didn't run away, Yuzuha proceeded into the forest, mindful of any traps.

After a few minutes, she arrived in an open area without any trees.

It was an area roughly 50 mels wide, where only 10 cemel tall grass grew.

In that deserted place, there was one shadow other than Yuzuha's. Long white hair reaching to the ground, gently flowing in the wind. A woman was standing there, alone.

Perfectly proportioned features that 10 people out of 10 would surely describe as beautiful, animal ears of the same color as her hair. As she was loosely wearing her kimono, her bountiful breasts and the captivating whiteness of her thighs sometimes peeked from her clothing.

On her back, from her waist sprouted 6 white tails, softly swaying left and right.

The woman's name was Tamamo.

“Kuu! Found you!”

Yuzuha was growling, her fur standing because of the aura coming from Tamamo, whose appearance made her look like a person from the Fox Tribe.

Yuzuha knew that Tamamo wasn't actually a person from the Fox Tribe. No member of that species would have 6 tails.

“Hehe, and I was here wondering who was coming...it was the Element Tail after all. My, you look quite weakened, though.”

In complete contrast with the hostility Yuzuha openly displayed, Tamamo's expression showed her confidence.

As the strength of a demon fox was displayed by the number of tails, Yuzuha was suspicious of the fact that the 6-tailed Tamamo was acting on her own.

Among the demon foxes on Fuji, there were ones with 7 tails as well.

Normally, those would be the commanding officers.

“Kuu, you give, bad aura.”

Yuzuha spoke while taking human form.

“Bad aura, hmm. Could it maybe be....this!?”

A black ball of fire shot out of Tamamo's hand. Yuzuha dodged it instinctively and looked at where the ball of fire landed. She saw the ground dyed in purple where the black flames burnt the grass.

Something different from miasma was tainting the land. Yuzuha understood it through her intuition.

“You!! Inside, different! This person, container!”

“So YoU CAAn UndERstaND ThAT mUCh. YeS, thIS BODy iS VErY vERy GoOD!”

Tamamo’s voice was gradually distorting. The sounds it emitted, which could barely be understood as words, were human speech no more.

Yuzuha’s eyes saw the pitch black silhouette of another demon fox rise behind Tamamo.

The contour of this figure was blurred here and there, but it was obviously a demon fox.

When Yuzuha had seen Tamamo, together with Juugo, in Kujou territory, she had not perceived this presence.

Furthermore, Yuzuha knew of only one thing who matched this presence.

“Disaster-bearing Demon Fox, Tamamo. The corrupted form of an Element Tail, who possesses other people.”

“Kah KAh! THaT Is ME iNDEEd. We mEEt LiKE tHIStime, yEs. O eSTeMEd “pROgENItOR” oF aLL uSs eLEMEnt tAiLs!”

Knowledge of each other came out of their mouths. But only a handful in this world could comprehend what was said.

In the game era, Tamamo was just an event boss and the Element Tails were hidden bosses that only a handful of advanced players knew of.

There was a clear gap in their strength, but the players did not know that there was a clear difference in the strengths of these individuals.

Even if the players did not know, the difference in strength was certainly there. Consequently, Yuzuha and Tamamo were personally aware it was so.

“Kuu! Why you do these things!”

“ThAt’S a cURiOUStHING To aSk. I cAME tO THis wORLD To bRinG fOrTH dISAsTER! To kILL aNd To dEsTRoY iS My rEAsOn fOr eXIStINg! aFTeR tHEsE lONg yEARs, YOu hAve FORGoTTen eVeN thAt?!”

The black shadow trembled, the demon fox possessing Tamamo roared.

To invade cities and bring terror to the people. To be defeated by players, to be reborn, to do so again.

That endless cycle is what let Tamamo be Tamamo. It was something completely natural, as natural as people breathing.

However, now that the world had become reality, it was nothing more than a curse implanted in the cycle of life.

“Kuu, that is not necessary now”

“I cARe nOTHinG aBOUt tHat. I SHAaL fULFiLl mY eXISTenCe. THIs bOdY haS aLREaDy lOst aLl seNSe oF seLf. IT wAs bETRraYEd, It hATed, It oFfeReD itSeLF To Me. ITS bEAUty liES oNly in itS aPPEArANCe nOw.”

“...kuu.”

Yuzuha cried with melancholy while looking at Tamamo.

The manipulated woman was smiling. Tamamo said that it did not have a sense of self anymore, but that expression seemed to convey that she had no regrets.

Yuzuha thought that a great many people would have been charmed by her, if it weren't for the red tears flowing down her cheeks.

“If you wish to stop me, use your strength to annihilate my body. O progenitor of the Element Tails, surely you can!!”

The black demon fox returned inside the woman's body. Then, the six tails stood up, swaying as always, and became covered in black flames.

Yuzuha understood that the woman's negative feelings fed Tamamo and increased its power.

“Hnn!!”

As if in response to Tamamo's grunt, the tails attacked Yuzuha.

The 6 tails, spreading in a fan-like motion, moved as if they had individual will and surrounded Yuzuha, as to cut off any possible escape route.

“Kuu!!”

Yuzuha responded by casting a magic spell with quick activation. She then enveloped her own tails in different magic spells, repelling Tamamo’s tails, half of which had turned into black flames.

The most effective tails were the ones wrapped in light-type magic and divine-type magic.

“...you can sleep, now. You don’t have to, fight.”

“Nonsense!!”

Tamamo’s tails repeatedly went on the offensive, while Yuzuha only defended herself.

Maybe because of the demon fox’s higher pressure, the attacks that Yuzuha couldn’t fully defend herself from ripped Yuzuha’s shrine maiden clothes.

“You understand too, do you not?”

Tamamo’s tails increased after this question.

Suddenly, 2 tails made completely of black flames had appeared. They were attached to her waist, just like the others.

“Juugo and Kai have died?”

Tamamo whispered with an expression mixed with envy and sadness.

Their relationship consisted in using each other, but it was not manipulation via Tamamo’s infusion of power.

The power Tamamo had given them returned to its owner, making it even stronger.

Yuzuha now faced even fiercer attacks: she countered 6 tails with her own and 1 with the flames she spewed from her mouth.

However, she could not counter the last one and tried to avoid it with a jump, but the black flames managed to singe Yuzuha's body.

"If you will do nothing, then die!!"

The 8 tails attacked again. If they hit directly, they would cause considerable damage even to Yuzuha. Before the attack, the item Shin gave her activated.

A transparent membrane appeared all around Yuzuha and stopped Tamamo's attack.

"A barrier...but I know well, that it won't last long!!"

Tamamo's tails repeatedly struck the barrier. Exclusively, as the tails made of black flames hit it, tiny cracks start appearing on its surface.

Yuzuha could not see the barrier's resistance decreasing. But the gradually increasing cracks showed that its limit was now close.

"Kuu..."

The sound of the cracking barrier canceled Yuzuha's cries.

Just like snakes eyeing their prey, the black flame tails pierced the ground where Yuzuha was.

"...you're finally getting serious."

As if in response to Tamamo's whispered words, the black flames were repelled away.

The black flames and dust of clouds were mixed together in the air, within that mixture several silhouettes could be seen.

Yuzuha had transformed into the Adult form of an Element Tail with 9 gently swaying tails.

"I cannot return for long, you see."

Silver waist-length hair, transparently violet eyes, animal ears of the same color of her hair standing briskly up.

Along with a breathtaking beauty that would charm anyone who saw her, Yuzuha - who had regained her original powers- quietly stared at Tamamo.

“Is hastening your death important too?”

“That is my only desire. Come on, o originator, wielder of powers the legends sing of!! Show them to me!!”

After Tamamo’s scream, the 8 tails once again targeted Yuzuha. Their power and momentum were at their highest.

“...you poor thing.”

Yuzuha whispered as the 2 black flame tails and 6 tails enveloped in black flames approach her with frightening speed. Following her whisper, her silver tails became flashes of light and pierced the space between the 2.

A clash of silver and black, with the latter as the loser.

The black flames scattered and vanished, the tails were torn to shreds.

Tamamo had 8 tails, Yuzuha 9. Along with the 8 tails who won the clash, the unattended 9th tail closed in to Tamamo.

“Gwaaahhh!!!”

Tamamo crossed its arms in defense, but it made little difference before an attack that tore to shreds tails filled with power. Tamamo was launched into the air.

Both arms were torn and severed from Tamamo’s body, its insides broken and ripped.

It seemed like a lie that until a few instants ago, Yuzuha was locked in defense. That’s how overwhelming her superiority was.

This was temporary for Yuzuha, but her original power was clearly above Tamamo.

“...kh.....kh....”

Tamamo came crashing down on the ground and was now lying face up. The only sound to be heard was her ragged breathing.

She was not dead yet, but her body was on its final throes. Even if left alone, it would have lasted a few minutes at most.

As she was looking at Tamamo, a golden flame appeared over Yuzuha's head.

Tamamo was roused as her line of sight got fixed onto Yuzuha's figure. The mere sight of that divine flame would be enough to bring anyone to its knees, due to its incommensurable heat.

"...you may pass on now."

A few seconds later, accompanied by Yuzuha's words, the golden flame swallowed Tamamo.

Tamamo's body turned into molten ashes in seconds.

The very last instant, her expression seemed to sketch a smile.

"Phew..."

The flames disappeared as Yuzuha breathed quietly. Nothing but a scorched ground remained, where Tamamo's body used to be.

After the flames completely disappeared, a silver light leaked from Yuzuha's body.

Her body progressively returned to the teenager-like form it had until a few moments before, just like a video played in reverse.

"Kuu....."

She then returned in fox mode and plopped down on the ground.

Even if she had regained some of her powers from the location where Filma had been trapped, it was still not complete. Focusing her strength to return to her adult form would only last for a few minutes.

Furthermore, even if she temporarily regained that form, she could not retrieve the memories and knowledge amassed throughout the years.

It was a sort of ace up the sleeve to use in emergency situations.

“.....”

As she closed her eyes to recover her strength, Yuzuha felt a familiar presence approaching.

She slowly tried to stand up, then remembered something and fell down again.

“!? Yuzuha!?”

The approaching presence was Shin.

As soon as he saw Yuzuha lying on the ground, he rushed to her with enough speed to leave behind after-images. He gently picked her up in his arms and checked her condition.

“Her HP and MP don’t seem to have decreased much. The item’s broken, she seems to be powerless...what crazy things did you do?”

Yuzuha had barely received any damage, but the recoil of returning to her adult form had robbed her immature body of its energy.

“Defeated, Tamamo.”

“Still you went too far!! What would happen if you died....?”

Yuzuha judged that what she did was something bad. As she could comprehend from Shin’s voice that he was really worried. To tell you the truth, she actually had enough energy left to stand and walk.

Oblivious of Yuzuha’s actual condition, Shin gently held her in his arms.

“Kuu”

Wrapped by the warm sense of security provided by Shin’s arms, Yuzuha emitted a small cry.



The invasion of several domains acted by the Ichinose soldiers and monsters had been on a large scale, but it had been suppressed before it caused large damage.

Special mention should be made to the reinforcements sent to the various regions.

Toudou Kankurou, 1st seat of the Hinomoto Brave Ten, and the black-scaled Dragnil who performed actions on par with him.

Saegusa Karin, Shijou Tsugumasa and Tsuguho, also from the Brave Ten, and the silver-haired Elf who appeared with them.

The red-haired Lord who fought the monsters attacking the Shijou domain even earlier than the Brave Ten, along with the huge wolf-like monster and the black-haired Elf.

After showing performances comparable with the Brave Ten, they all simply vanished without a word after the battle.

Many tried looking for them, obviously, but for some reason no one seemed to remember what they looked like.

Among Hinomoto's soldiers, some rumor that they were spirits of the age of wars, who appear when the country is in peril.

In reality it was all due to concealment skills. The only ones capable of remembering were the few who met them and spoke face to face. And these few too were ordered by their superiors not to speak about these reinforcements to anyone else.

These mysterious helpers were now in front of the gates of the Saegusa house. They did not have much luggage with them but were all equipped for traveling.

Shin's group had no more reason to stay with the Saegusa.

They had no pressing reason to go anywhere, but as the battle ended, they decided it was the right timing to depart.

“Thank you for your hospitality.”

Along with the Saegusa house members (Karin, Kuyou, Kayo, Chiyo), Kankurou too had come to see Shin's party off.

"Must you truly depart? We owe you the gratitude of saving Hinomoto from the flames of war. If only we could express our thanks somehow..."

Karin, reluctant to see them go, had the proud [Black Moon] at her waist.

As Juugo's foul play was discovered, the last remaining contestant, Karin, was chosen to be the divine katana's successor.

"You are already keeping the [Hakuramaru] matter a secret for me. I thank you too for your cooperation, sir Kankurou. If word spread that I had that katana, the country itself could come after me."

Shin replied to Karin and bowed his head to Kankurou.

Ancient-grade weapons were sought after by anyone, individuals and countries alike.

Shin had given [Hakuramaru] to Karin as he feared something would happen during the inheritance ceremony, but he did not regret that choice.

[Black Moon] was a katana tempered by Shin. Average weapons would not be able to match its blade.

To all who saw that Shin was in possession of [Hakuramaru], they explained that he was traveling to return it to its rightful owner, clearly stating that it was not possible to obtain it from Shin.

Kankurou had concluded by stating that Shin was to be treated with maximum courtesy, so there was no particular attempt at negotiation.

"We have not been able to thank you properly for Lady Haruna's matter either, though. Is there really nothing we could do?"

"I discussed this with everyone else too, but there is nothing we require at the moment. Thus, if in the future we will need help or assistance, please lend us your aid. I am sure there could be matters, besides war, that we cannot solve on our own."

Shin answered clearly to Kuyou's question and its serious tone. In case of necessity,

having human connections would surely help.

“In that case, we shall do our utmost when that time comes. I look forward to our next meeting.”

“We will be counting on you then.”

Schnee and the others too bid their farewells, and the party left the Kujou domain.

— their destination was Hinomoto’s sacred mountain, Fuji.

s t a t u s

ステータス紹介

THE NEW
GATE



Name: **Kujou Kanade**

Gender: **Female**

Race: **Human**

Main Job: **Archer**

Sub Job: **None**

Adventurer's Rank: **C**

● **Stats**

LV: 159

HP: 3482

MP: 2750

STR: 311

VIT: 189

DEX: 433

AGI: 351

INT: 220

LUC: 59

● **Battle Equipment**

Head: Forehead Protector of Magic Steel
 Body: Scarlet Flower Wear (VIT bonus [M])
 Arms: Scarlet Flower Armguard (DEX bonus [M])
 Legs: Magic Thread White Tabi (AGI bonus [M])
 Accessory: Blue Magic Thread Hair Ornament (HP auto recovery [S])
 Weapons: Fiery Diamond Bow (Shooting range extension [M], Hitting assist [M])

● **Title(s)**

● Instructor of Archery
 ● Vice-Instructor of Physical skills
 ● Sniper

● **Skill(s)**

● Red Arrow
 ● Blue Arrow
 ● Penetrating Arrow
 ● Long Shot
 ● Biting Arrow
 etc

Other

● 2nd daughter of the Kujou house



Name: Saegusa Karin

Gender: Female

Race: Human

Main Job: Samurai

Sub Job: Swordsman

Adventurer's Rank: C

● **Stats**

LV: 221

HP: 6233

MP: 3790

STR: 602

VIT: 248

DEX: 633

AGI: 511

INT: 171

LUC: 73

● **Battle Equipment**

- Head:** Forehead Protector of Magic Steel
- Body:** Young Warrior's Battle Wear - Torso(VIT bonus [M] - Arrow dodge bonus [S])
- Arms:** Young Warrior's Battle Wear - Arms(STR bonus [M] - Attack speed bonus [S])
- Legs:** Young Warrior's Battle Wear - Legs(AGI bonus [M] - Knockback reduction [S])
- Accessory:** Black Magic Thread Hairpin (Mental Resistance Bonus [S])
- Weapons:** Vermilion Orchid (Added damage : flame [M])

● **Title(s)**

- Expert of Katana skills
- Expert of Physical skills
- Master of Magic Blades
- Protector of Smiles
- Protection of the Divine Katana etc

● **Skill(s)**

- Instant Flash
- Moonlight Slashing
- Dance
- Repeated Slash
- Sheathing Blade
- Infiltrator Blade etc

Other

- 3rd seat of the Hinomoto Brave Ten



Name: **Gale Serpent**

Species: **Serpent**

Rank: **King**

● **Stats**

LV: 709

HP: 6749

MP: 6606

STR: 412

VIT: 658

DEX: 474

AGI: 387

INT: 333

LUC: 50

● **Battle Equipment**

None

● **Title(s)**

● Harbinger of Storms

● Superior Grade Serpent

● **Skill(s)**

● **Water Breath**

● **Aqua Lance**

● **Dragon Roar**

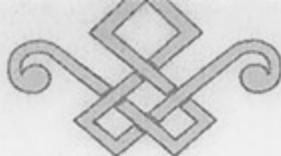
● **Royal Intimidation**

● **Weather Manipulation**

etc

Other

● **Enhancement of Inferior units of same Species**



Name: Ichinose Juugo

Gender: Male

Race: Beast

Main Job: Samurai

Sub Job: Berserker

Adventurer's Rank: None

● **Stats**

LV: 221

HP: 5301

MP: 3003

STR: 475

VIT: 200

DEX: 528

AGI: 386

INT: 152

LUC: 31

● **Battle Equipment**

Head: None
Body: Steel Magic Thread Hakama (VIT bonus [M])
Arms: None
Legs: Thunder Reed Canary Grass Sandals (Max HP reduction, AGI bonus [L])
Accessory: Mythril Bell (Status ailment resistance [M])
Weapons: Raving God's Blade (STR bonus [L] - Berserk status - Immunity to penetration)

● **Title(s)**

● Expert of Katana skills
● Vice-Instructor of Physical skills
● Platoon Captain
● Master of Magic Blade (False)
● Battle Fanatic
etc

● **Skill(s)**

● Infiltrator Blade
● Piercing Void
● Helmet Smasher
● Flying Swallow
● Ki Manipulation
etc

Other

● 6th seat of the Hinomoto Brave Ten
● Fox Possession (All Status +40%)



Name: Tamamo

Gender: -

Species: Calamity Tail

● **Stats**

LV: 255

HP: 8422

MP: 8830

STR: 871

VIT: 662

DEX: 713

AGI: 597

INT: 806

LUC: 0

● **Battle Equipment**

None

● **Title(s)**

● Demon Fox of Calamity

● Bringer of Disaster

● Recurring Blight

● **Skill(s)**

● Breath of Decay

● Black Flames of Cursed Poison

● Fangs and Claws of Curse

● Tails of Manipulation

Other

● The one dwelling within sacrifices



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