

風波しのぎ
Kazamami Shinogi

RENEW
ザ・ニュー・ゲート
GATE
10. 温もりに凍えて

The New Gate

**- Volume 10 -
Frozen in Warmth**

**-Author-
Kazanami Shinogi**

**-Artist-
Hell's Resident**

[Shin Translations]

THE NEW
ザ・ニュー・ゲート
GATE
風波しのぎ
Kazanami Shinogi
10. 温もりに凍えて

Illustration : Ke G



Hameln
High Pixie, serial monster-using PK.
A completely egotistical person.

Vlad
High Lord, belongs to a PK guild, admires Shin to abnormal levels.

Marino
Human, Shin's lover in the game.
A small monkey-like monster is her partner.

Catnip
Human, usually equips a beast transformation set.
Boasts idol-level popularity.

Shin
The story's main character.
High Human. The strongest player who engraved his name in the history of an online game.

Holly
High Elf, Shadow's wife.
Sweet-tempered.

Luca
Beast, a Type Cat (beast with cat-like characteristics) living in an orphanage.

Shadow
High Lord, proficient in close quarters combat.
Normally manages a cafe.

Main Characters

THE NEW GATE

Sigurd

Lens!

Sacred Place Kalkia

Beirun

Balmel

Black Priestess Shrine

Kujou Castle

Sacred Mountain Fuji

Hinomoto



「THE NEW GATE」WORLD'S TERMINOLOGY

● Stats

LV: Level

HP: Hit Point

MP: Magic Point

STR: Strength

VIT: Vitality

DEX: Dexterity

AGI: Agility

INT: Intelligence

LUC: Luck

● Distance/Weight

1 cemel = 1 cm

1 mel = 1 m

1 kemel = 1 km

1 gum = 1 g

1 kegum = 1 kg

● Currency

Jul (J): Currency that widely circulates in the game world for 500 years.

Geyl (G): Currency in the game era. Worth of 1 billion Jul or more.

Jul copper coin = 100

Jul silver coin = 100 Jul copper coin = 10,000

Jul gold coin = 100 Jul silver coin = 1,000,000

Jul white gold coin = 100 Jul gold coin = 100,000,000

● Major Guilds in the Game Era

Rokuten : Elite guild formed by 6 Humans with maxed stats.

Savage Lions : Combat-oriented guild formed mainly by Beasts. Excels in group tactics.

Yatagarasu : Combat-oriented guild formed mainly by species with long life spans.
Specializes in supportive magic and archery.

Type Cat Language Research Association : Pursuers of the highest grade, researching
word endings suitable for Type Cats.

Avidya : Guild formed with the goal of exacting revenge against PKs. Its members throw
away their lives with no hesitation for the sake of revenge.

Ouroboros : A group of abnormal individuals that delights in killing other Players. Many
factions exist within it.

Liberacion : A PK guild that targets low-leveled Players. Structurally very weak.

Ouroboros' Hollow : A PK guild that takes any request as long as a proper reward is offered.

C h a p t e r 1

囚 わ れ た 人 々

THE NEW
GATE

Chapter 1

After their journey to recover for the Five Supreme Blades in the island country of Hinomoto, Shin's party returned to Black Priestess Shrine's guildhouse.

Shin and Tiera shared part of their memories when they purified one of the Five Supreme Blades, 『Dojigiri Yasutsuna』 ; this spurred Shin to decide to talk about his past to her.

Tiera spoke while looking straight into Shin's eyes.

“.....tell me. I want to know more about you.”

“Got it. It's going to take a while, but please hear me out----at the time, I still didn't know how evil people could be. I didn't know that you could lose something important all of a sudden.”

Shin continued talking while also looking straight into Tiera's eyes.

“What I'm going to tell you happened before the “Dusk of the Majesty”. When we used to call this world a “game”.”

†

One year passed since the MMORPG “THE NEW GATE” had been transferred to virtual reality.

What was supposed to be a game had become reality. There were two big changes that had affected the game.

Logging out was not possible and death in the game meant death in real life.

Very few could handle this absurd situation with a cool head.

It was said that the chaos and confusion caused more than 500 casualties, but no one could understand if that figure was high or low.

It all happened suddenly, but fortunately -if one could say so- the players' stats had not been reset.

The stats and levels the players had spent long hours raising, powerful equipment and rare items, guildhouses, methods of contact with friends, all of those remained.

Hoping to put an end to the death game, one man was, today too, challenging a dungeon.

“Rrrraahhh!!!”

A crimson flash lit up the darkness of the dungeon, following the man's war cry. It had been created by the swing of his blade.

The blade pierced the void, severing the right leg of the giant-type monster Gigantes Moss.

Having lost everything below the right thigh, the gargantuan monster fell to the ground. Its body extended for more than 5 mels and was studded with rocks and boulders, which caused a small tremor as the monster tumbled down.

The shaking ground limited the player's action and prevented him from continuing the attack.

“30% HP left. About time it changes attack patterns.”

The man mumbled to himself while keeping the collapsed monster within his field of view.

His name was Shin.

His opponent was the boss monster that awaited players in the deepest reaches of the dungeon.

As Shin had predicted, the monster's HP gauge had fallen into the red zone of less than 30%, causing certain changes in Gigantes Moss' body.

From the base of its 2 battleaxe-wielding arms, a new set of arms grew out. At the same time, the ceiling of the boss chamber crumbled, bringing a longsword and a spear to the room below.

“So that’s your game.”

After calmly concluding that the change was a physical one, Shin activated a magic skill.

“Just in case, I better check if your weak points changed.”

Magic skills of all seven elements struck the monster after Shin spoke.

Bullets of fire and water, spears of light and thunder, and claws and fangs of wind and earth.

Seven spells that were usually cast on their own struck all at once. Too much for even the now four-armed Gigantes Moss to handle.

Shin had activated the skill 【Magic Boost】 , to increase the offensive power of his magic, and the 7-type combination magic skill 【Elemental Blast】 .

It was a combo attack used to determine the monster’s weakness while inflicting a certain degree of damage at the same time.

Depending on the elemental properties of the monster the spell is used on, it might end up healing them, but Gigantes Moss suffered damage. Based on the differences of inflicted damage, it was clear that the monster was strong against fire and wind but weak against thunder and darkness.

The problem was that the damage itself was infinitesimal.

“No changes in weak points, I see. Magic defense shot up though.”

Gigantes Moss was originally a monster strong against magic attacks.

For Shin, continuing this one-sided attack from a distance was not impossible, but because of the monster’s increased defensive power, triggered by the HP loss, even Shin’s spells could not inflict decisive damage.

The only method left was close combat.

“Well, so be it. I wasn’t thinking of whittling you down from a distance anyway!”

While keeping the monster busy with multi-hit magic spells, Shin grasped his trusted weapon, the katana 『True Moon』. The skill activation caused the blade to emit increasingly bright red ripples, before being covered in darkness. The next moment, deep red lightning shot forward.

Triple combination skill 【Black Flower Flash】.

Using the magic barrage as cover, Shin drew closer to the monster in a flash and circled behind its back.

Thanks to the high speed movement made possible by the combination of Movement-type skills 【Ground Shrink】 and 【Mirage Dance】, the Gigantes Moss lost sight of Shin.

Another probable cause was its limited movements, caused by the loss of its right leg. The monster, ignoring the spells striking its body, looked for Shin with its eyes.

“!!!”

Shin focused without letting out a word, then swung 『True Moon』 down on Gigantes Moss' back.

The blade, clad in scorching hot darkness, rent the monster's rock hard skin. Immediately after the slash, thunder struck the same point.

Gigantes Moss lost its balance and fell forward from the blow.

The monster tried to counterattack, screaming in pain, but its movements were even more stiff because of the short-term paralysis caused by the thunder element from the attack. The desperate attempt to attack made the monster fall to the ground again.

Shin would not let such an opportunity go. He had instead predicted the situation, and struck the monster from behind again.

It would not take much time for Gigantes Moss to be back on its feet. But Shin moved behind the monster and activated another skill much faster.

“This is the end!”

An orange-colored aura now enveloped 『True Moon』 ; it was the Sword-type Martial skill 【Tyrant Beat】 .

Many Katana-type and Sword-type skills could be used as long as one wielded a bladed weapon. Using Sword-type skills with a katana would cause their offensive power to drop slightly, but Shin focused more on skill effects, so he had stopped using only Katana-type skills even when wielding a katana.

The strike, aimed at the monster's weakpoint -the back of its neck- saw its damage increase thanks to a critical hit. The skill's effects also allowed Shin to continue a one-sided offensive.

It was just a matter of time until Gigantos Moss' HP reached zero.

“Ngh! I shouldn't be tired, but my shoulders feel stiff!”

With a yawn, the tension left Shin's body.

After defeating the boss and clearing the dungeon, Shin returned to the entrance. He had been fighting in the dungeon since the morning, and when he went outside, he realized that the sun was setting already.

Physical exhaustion existed as part of the system, but it was already completely recovered.

Rather than that, he felt more mentally tired.

Even if the avatar was fully recovered, the mind of the player controlling it was not.

Death in this world meant death in real life. “THE NEW GATE” was now a death game, there was no turning back after dying.

No matter if the opponent was a boss monster or some small fry from beginner-oriented areas, the player's life was on the line in every fight. It was obvious that long engagements would cause mental distress.

“Phew. With this, about half of the dungeons are left.”

The condition for clearing the death game “THE NEW GATE” was to defeat the boss monster in the last dungeon, “Gate of the Otherworld”. It wasn’t a certainty that they would be freed from the game or not, but all players made that their objective for now.

In order to enter the final dungeon, one was first required to clear a series of other dungeons. Clearing them would unlock sealed areas, allowing the player to get gradually closer to the final dungeon.

At the start of the death game, all players had been gathered in “Kalkia”, one of the hometowns, and could only move in its surroundings.

Shin’s map had already registered most fields’ geographical data. Looking at the map revealed that around half were displayed as transparent, which meant impossible to travel to.

The unlocked fields were proof of the courage and sacrifice of those who, like Shin, had cleared dungeons. It had already taken 4 months to reach this point.

“I can still do it alone. But the second half won’t be that easy...”

Shin sighed, then checked the items dropped by the monster. In some cases, items useful to clear the next dungeon could be found.

The items dropped were rare, but Shin’s equipment had higher specs, so they were of little use to him.

“.....nothing special this time.”

His hands stopped scrolling the display and closed the menu screen. The items, other than equipment, did not seem like they could be particularly useful in the next dungeon.

Proceeding from the dungeon to the teleport point, Shin handled any attacking monster with just one hand, then looked up to the sky. The clear, cloudless sky brightened his spirits, if just a little.

“Oh! He’s back! How did it go?”

Once he returned to Kelgunsk, one of the hometowns, Shin was greeted by voices impatient to see him back. He had not hidden the fact that he had gone out to clear a dungeon, so they had likely obtained the information from somewhere.

“Finished without problems. We can go to the next field now too. I’m sure you know already, but be extra careful if you proceed. The dungeon boss changed in a way I never saw before after all.”

Shin answered while looking at the emblem engraved on the gauntlet worn by the young High Beast man he had become acquainted with a long time ago now, Lao.

The emblem, depicting a lion crushing a long sword with its teeth, symbolized the guild with the most clout at the time, “Savage Lions”. Shin remembered that the guildmaster was a lion High Beast.

“Sure thing. I’m not part of the Savage Lions’ Explosive Legs corps for nothing. If worst comes to worst, I’ll just hightail it out.”

Lao chuckled heartily, his cat-like ears pointing up, as he spoke, then disappeared into the bustling crowd.

The Savage Lions guild was composed of the Explosive Legs corps, who handled scouting and information gathering, and the combat-oriented Explosive Fists corps.

As far as Shin knew, Lao was a warrior not inferior in any way to the captain of the Explosive Legs corps.

Shin had no idea why such a person was awaiting his return though. He thought it was a job one of his subordinates could easily do, but would not stick his nose in the affairs of other guilds.

“Guess I’ll take a walk in the city.”

Thinking that he couldn’t just stand around the teleport point like that, Shin headed towards the city. Maybe because he just returned from putting his life on the line to clear the dungeon, looking at the town scenery made him feel relieved.

“Oh, ain’t that Shin. How did things go in the dungeon?”

Shin was stopped by the voice of the man behind the counter of a skewer stall. It was

a player who had purposefully created an elderly avatar and role played as a street vendor.

His tone was overly familiar partly because of his character, but also because Shin often frequented the stall.

“Hey there. A new area has been unlocked. You could get more types of ingredients soon.”

After the start of the death game, when new areas were unlocked, items and equipment thought to be still not implemented in the game were discovered. Among them there were materials of excellent quality, and Shin too had gathered some.

“Well now, ain’t that some real good news. Here, this is on the house for the hero that braved a dungeon all on his lonesome.”

“Please stop it with the hero talk, sir.”

Shin grabbed the skewer the man offered to him, with an embarrassed laugh. He knew the man would not have accepted no as an answer.

Hero was the word some players used when referring to Shin. At the start of the death game, the players noticed that their levels, stats and equipments had not changed, so they immediately went to look for advanced players. They thought that the cooperation of advanced players was vital in order to clear the dungeons.

It did not take long for them to find out that a certain advanced player surpassing all the others was still logged in.

A member of Rokuten, the guild said to be the strongest, and a blacksmith that created equipment of the highest quality.

Shin’s existence grew larger among many players, who found hope in him.

His power, incommensurable strength that no one could even get close to, did pose the problem that other players would just be in his way, but it was a small one: everyone had great expectations for Shin.

Cooperating with other advanced players, Shin had cleared beginner-level dungeons in a flash, moving on to mid-level ones. The speed at which he moved was more than

enough to increase others' expectations.

Shin managed to clear even advanced dungeons on his own, which other high-level players had trouble with.

The dungeon Shin cleared that day too had been too much for other advanced players. It would not have been so if all advanced players were logged in, at present Shin was the pillar of dungeon clearing.

Because of this, people used to honor him and call him "Hero".

"First they get expectant, then disappointed, all on their own... now there's jealousy and envy mixed up in it all, I don't know what's what anymore..."

Yes, people "used to" honor Shin and call him "Hero".

After starting to challenge advanced dungeons, Shin's clearing speed visibly fell. As the dungeons rose in difficulty the monsters within them grew stronger, the traps and gimmicks became more complicated, making them more dangerous.

Even for Shin, clearing advanced dungeons -transformed in unknown ways by the death game- at the same speed as low-difficulty beginner level dungeons was not possible.

There were players, however, that did not understand this. Or rather, did not "want" to understand this.

Shin's clearing speed was falling because he was taking it easy. He didn't actually want to clear the dungeons.

Groundless rumors such as these started circulating around 2 weeks after Shin started facing the advanced dungeons.

The "expectations" many players had towards Shin.

The players who purely thought that Shin could do it, that felt a "trust" equal to "expectation", players who truly knew Shin, were very few.

The "expectations" of the many players other than these were just them running away from their responsibilities and pushing them onto Shin, thinking that they didn't need

to do anything, he would take care of it all somehow.

“Tch, must be easy for him since he’s the only one with good equipment”

These words reached Shin as he was walking and eating the skewers.

He could find the source at the edge of his line of sight. Without moving his eyes, Shin noticed a player clad in low level armor, leaning against a wall in a back alley. Level 40 was really low.

Shin immediately understood that he was a beginner.

“You think I can give gear to just anybody, huh? Materials don’t come free, dammit.”

Shin walked on, ignoring the man, then spat out his honest thoughts when he saw his favourite sweets shop in the distance. The words he mumbled were not heard by anyone, soon lost in the noise of the crowd.

As Shin was a blacksmith, many came to him to ask for equipment. However, he was always rather strict in whom to give weapons to.

One reason was what he had muttered, that materials were not free. But the first reason was something else.

That was the existence of PKs, players who had not stopped killing other players even after the start of the death game.

If he just gave out weapons easily and they reached PK hands, unfortunate casualties would increase.

For this reason, Shin supplied weapons only to a very limited range of players: guildmasters and party leaders. That was only temporary, however; he would lend gear, not give it away. If a PK had mingled among them, Shin would take the gear back.

From the standpoint of ordinary players, however, it only looked like he was stingy with his gear.

It would have been impossible for Shin to craft gear for everyone after all. Despite this, there were rumors that he and other powerful players wanted to monopolize equipment: Shin was rather sick of the situation.

“What’s wrong, meow? Shimeow, you look down, meow”

Exhaustion requires sweet things. Shin was looking at cakes, trying to forget the rumors, when the owner of the “Lucky Cat” sweets shop, Catnip, called to him.

Cat like-speak was an unspoken rule of the “Type Cat Language Research Association” guild, apparently. Shin remembered refusing other acquaintances to call him “Shimeow”.

Catnip was Human, but thanks to an equipment set called “Beast Transformation” cat ears the same color as her orange hair sprouted on her head, as well as a cat tail, poking out of her miniskirt. She was a catgirl maid with high skin exposure, like you would find in a maid cafe.

All other clerks in the shop wore the same attire. Catnip was 160 centimeters tall. Her clothes fairly exposed her bust, so from the height of Shin’s eyes it was hard not to look.

“Ah, nothing, I just came back from defeating a dungeon boss. That’s the reason, probably.”

“You pushed yourself too hard again, meow? You’re too reckless, Shimeow.”

While Catnip’s speech style did not make her sound serious at all, her expression was very much so.

“I know that. But if I don’t do this, we can’t hope to clear any time soon.”

“There’s no point in caring so much about what others say... but you’re so serious in a weird way, Shimeow. I suppose I meown’t have a choice... Shimeow, present for you.”

Catnip took out a card from her bosom. Item boxes could be used from anywhere, as soon as one focused, but Shin had never seen any player using it from that position. To him it looked simply like the card had come out of the cleavage of Catnip’s ample bust.

“Me-meow!! Catnip’s specially made cookies, meow! Eat’em up and cheer up, meow.”

“Thank you very much. I’d be happier if you gave them out more quietly, though... also thinking a little more about where you take them out of.”

“Did I do something bad, meow?”

Catnip was puzzled to see Shin sigh. It was clear that he wasn't joking.

“People are looking at us weird. But maybe you did it on purpose?”

Her silhouette might be just an avatar, a temporary figure, but she was still a very pretty girl and would thus attract attention.

Most avatars were made by combining given elements together. It was something typical in many games, and of course did not mean that the players' real appearance was anywhere close the avatar's.

In contrast with such mass-produced avatars (albeit the large quantity of sample elements made it quite rare for two avatars to be 100% the same), some players used avatars reflecting their real appearance and figure.

Catnip was one of them.

The so-called “Full-scan Avatar”, real and fake at the same time, also presented the risk of the player being identified in reality. Most of such players, however, used the game as a tool to spread their popularity.

As far as Shin knew, such famous players had been scouted by corporations and debuted as idols. Catnip openly said that she aimed to do the same.

In “THE NEW GATE” the male:female player ratio was 7:3 or even 8:2; a truly pretty girl like Catnip was highly popular among all female players.

She was as famous as a real idol among male players. She had a fan club, though unofficial, and a slew of devoted fans.

Actually, even now Shin was being targeted by several hostile players. Several dots on the map had turned to the red color of hostility.

He felt bad for Catnip, who was worrying about him, but he prayed that no unnecessary trouble came up.

“Shimeow was my first, after all. You're special, meow.”

Catnip held her cheeks with her hands, blushing.

Moments later, Shin felt fierce killing intent coming from the people looking at him. That was still supposed to be a game, but for some reason he felt something akin to an aura.

“You’re going to create even more misunderstandings... if I get ambushed it’s your fault, Catnip.”

“But I can’t think of anyone that could beat you, Shimeow.”

“It’s a game after all, if you find a hole in the system you could probably even beat more advanced opponents, and----”

Shin stopped halfway through his sentence. Catnip had closed his mouth with one of her slender fingers.

“Don’t say that. I wouldn’t forgive even you if you made Marino sad, Shin.”

“Beat” was a word that, depending on the situation, could also mean “kill”. It wasn’t a problem before, but now things were different.

Catnip gave a stern warning to Shin for alluding to his own death, even speaking without the usual cat-like style. She didn’t like to hear anyone talk like that, even if they were joking.

“Ah..... I’m sorry.”

“If you understood, then go home, meow. Today... hehe, something good might happen, meow.”

“I can’t say your expression doesn’t make me worry...”

Quickly shifting out of her serious expression, Catnip was now grinning. It was clear enough that she was plotting something, but she surely wouldn’t talk even if cornered.

Shin had a bad feeling about her last words, but left the store after buying some sweets to complement the Catnip cookies he had received.

Going back to the teleportation point, Shin headed to a different location: his home,

Tsuki no Hokora.

“Welcome back. You have guests.”

Schnee’s usual greeting was a bit different this time. The “guests” Schnee mentioned were people allowed to enter the residential area of Tsuki no Hokora even if Shin was not present.

At present, there was only 1 person with such privileges.

“Ah, Shin... er, welcome back...”

The guest noticed Shin’s return and greeted him from the kitchen. It was Shin’s lover, the female player Marino.

As she turned towards Shin, her two waist-length ponytails drew a brown arc in the air. Her sky blue eyes looked at Shin, with some hesitation.

Shin was slightly curious about her unusual behavior, but his attention was soon captured by her attire.

“.....nice.”

“Shin? What happened?”

Marino shouldn’t have heard what Shin whispered, but she was slightly blushing as she asked that question.

A white blouse and a blue skirt with a yellow checkered pattern. A short mantle covering her from the shoulders to her back was Marino’s usual look. As she was cooking, however, she had taken her usual mantle off and was wearing a red apron.

“Ah, er, I’m sorry. I’m home. You were cooking?”

Shin, entranced by the apron-clad Marino, hurriedly replied. She tilted her head at his reaction, a bit confused.

(I wonder how can a single apron make her look so cute?)

Maybe because he wasn’t used to seeing girls wearing aprons, or maybe because it

was Marino. Shin concluded that it was probably the latter, and was about to talk to her again, but Marino spoke first.

“Ah, ehm... welcome back home.”

“Hm? Ah, er, I’m home?”

Shin thought that they had just had that exchanged seconds before, when Marino said something unexpected.

“A-a-a-are you going to have a bath first? Or dinner first? O-o-or!! M-m-me!?!”

“.....”

Shin needed a few seconds to grasp the situations. Despite having said the line herself, Marino was blazing red and frozen in place out of embarrassment.

She looked quite different from her usual cheerful self and extremely lovely. Then Shin remembered Catnip mentioning that “something good would happen”.

“.....hey, is it OK if I choose you, Marino?”

Shin found himself giving this answer.

“.....yes.”

What came back from her was a whispered consent.

The moment he heard that, Shin put his right hand on her cheek, turned her face towards him and pressed his lips on hers.

Engaging in R-18 actions was a taboo within “THE NEW GATE”. But after the start of the death game, there was no management or GMs to stop any transgressors.

Because of the system, it was not possible to engage in “advanced” acts, intercourse included, but for players in a relationship or married, kissing was an important act to confirm their reciprocal affection.

“.....hah.”

Maybe because she had been holding her breath, Marino inhaled deeply when Shin released his hold on her. Her face was bright red, beyond the possibility of making any excuse.

“Anyway, why did you say something like that? I enjoyed it very much, but were you always this forward?”

“I was really embarrassed too, you know!! Don’t look at my face!! Don’t loooooook!”

Still blushing fiercely, Marino pushed Shin to make him look the other way. She pushed her face against his back, making sure that he couldn’t see it even if he turned his head.

If another person was looking, they would simply think that their flirting was continuing.

“.....did you calm down?”

“Yeah... but you’re too unfazed, that’s kind of annoying.”

After around 5 minutes, Marino’s voice was back to its usual tone, even if it sounded muffled because her face was still buried in Shin’s back.

“So let me ask again, why did you do something like that? Was today a special day or something?”

“That’s not it. A little before you came back, Catnip contacted me, saying that you were tired. I also thought that I wanted to do something for you, since you looked kind of down lately. Then Catnip said that... a-any man would love that... so...”

Marino started blushing again. Because of one of the game’s effects, steam started rising from her head.

Shin thought he heard a cat-like voice chuckling in his head.

“I see... that explains Catnip’s evil smile.”

Shin did not neglect sending his gratitude to Catnip, in his heart.

“So... do you really feel better because of that?”

“Honestly speaking? I feel a whole lot better. Now if Marino hugged me, that’d be just perfect.”

“Wha!? Ah, ah... alright already! I c-came all this way, I’m not going to pull back!”

Shin had said that half as a joke, but Marino reacted more positively than he expected. She hadn’t really calmed down completely, it seems.

Marino spread her arms wide, as if saying “I’m ready when you are!!”.

(.....I could go like this, but maybe I should wait and...)

Shin, feeling mischievous, slipped behind Marino without a sound. She had closed her eyes and had not noticed his movements.

“.....?”

Feeling that she had already waited long, Marino opened her eyes: that moment, Shin hugged her tight from behind.

“Hyah!?”

Marino ended up flinching from the surprise.

“Surprised?”

“Uuh, you meanie...”

Keeping that stance, Shin sat on the chair behind him. Marino was on his lap.

“This is so embarrassing...”

“Marino is going to spoil me today, after all. I’m going to enjoy myself today, to my heart’s content.”

“Why do you talk like that!? Aaah, don’t blow in my ears!!”

“It was on purpose, of course.”

“That’s even mean----aah, no, I’m weak there... you’ll pay for this...”

For the following 30 minutes, the distance between the two was zero.

“OK then, what’s on today’s menu?”

“Ox hamburg steak, soup, and salad. There’s bread and rice too, but which do you want, huh?”

“Ah, I’ll have rice, I guess.”

Maybe because Shin had “bothered” her while she was cooking, Marino was now slightly cold towards him. He had offered to help, but was turned down sharply.

Still, she was continuing to cook for him, so she was probably not really angry.

Now they only had to wait for the steak to finish cooking, so Shin waited quietly.

Marino’s cooking skills were still low, but Tsuki no Hokora’s kitchen had cooking skill bonuses and also shortened cooking times. Because of that, even Marino could make sufficiently delicious food.

“Here you go.”

Marino came out of the kitchen, carrying a tray with the hamburg steak still sizzling on its iron plate. The rice and soup were steaming too.

After Marino had removed her apron and sat down, Shin took fork and knife in hand and set to eating.

Shin cut the steak, revealing its juicy insides and spreading its delicious aroma further in the room. It was a rather high degree of realism for a game. It could be said that the level of realism had increased even more after the start of the death game.

“It’s really great that they implemented the sense of taste too. It would be pretty sad if this just refilled the stomach bar.”

Good food gives energy needed for tomorrow. Eating tasteless food items day after day would get one’s spirits down soon.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Marino? Is there sauce on my face or something?”

Marino was contemplating Shin’s face as he happily ate his meal. Shin felt his nerves calm down thanks to the peacefulness of that atmosphere.

“No, I was just thinking that you really look happy when you eat... that’s all.”

Marino’s expression also showed how Shin eating her handmade food made her happy.

“Eating good stuff would make anyone look like that, no?”

“I wouldn’t feel this happy if it was anyone else.”

Marino directly conveyed her feelings to Shin.

For Shin, eating while she was looking so intently was a little awkward, but saying that would turn Marino’s mood sour again, so he refrained.

It wasn’t too much of an annoyance since Marino was the one looking, actually.

After a while, Marino started eating her part too. Shin asked for seconds of rice and soup, then after the meal they sat together on the sofa.

“You’re finally back to the usual Shin.”

Marino talked while leaning on Shin’s shoulder.

“.....did I look that horrible?”

Shin felt the same as always, so his reply contained some surprise.

“When you think too much or hit a dead end... your face gets gradually tenser and tenser. Your eyes get so sharp too. That’s how you were until just now.”

Marino herself was concerned that mentioning this too much would have ended up burdening him.

“Don’t worry so much on your own... I end up getting down too just by looking at you.”

“You can say it anytime, you know? I can’t notice it myself, well in fact I didn’t, so...”

“Choosing the right timing is not easy... a long time ago, I messed up while trying to do that.”

Marino replied while wrapping her right arm around Shin’s left. Normally Shin’s attention would focus on the softness of her feminine parts, but this time he was more concerned about her looking down.

“In real life, you mean?”

“Yeah. I was yelled at, like “what the hell do you know about that!?”...”

“...I see.”

Marino rarely talked about real life, but evidently she felt like she could now.

“OK, I’ll take a slower pace with the dungeon crawling. That will help in the long run, and I won’t worry you either.”

Frustrated at his inability of saying something better to ease her mind, Shin tried to sound as cheerful as he could.

Even without physical fatigue, mental strain could cause failures at important times. Shin would hate to make Marino worry because of things that normally would never happen.

“This could delay our return to the real world though, sorry.”

“Your safety is a lot more important than that, Shin.”

Marino smiled faintly.

“Hey, Marino, the dungeon clearing has reached a good point now, so can I go with you tomorrow?”

Because of her relatively low stats, Marino worked in a church in the first hometown, Kalkia. The city also housed an orphanage, used to give shelter to very young players. Since Marino worked in the orphanage, Shin had helped modifying it, so now it was a structure different from the average.

“That’s fine by me, but it’ll probably be boring, you know?”

“That’s OK. After all, I just want to look at you working.”

Shin grinned and looked at Marino. His tone was a teasing one, but his expression was very serene.

“Aah, if you make a face like that I can’t even stay angry, can I?”

Marino seemed unsure whether to get angry or to calm down because of Shin’s conflicting words and expression, especially because lately Shin always seemed down.

“Hm? Did I make a weird face?”

“Aah, if you don’t know then never mind. Rather than that, if you’re coming too you’re going to help me with the kids, ok? They love games too, so it’ll be easy for you, I bet.”

“It’ll probably be OK with the boys, but the girls are all yours. Our philosophy towards playing games is totally different after all.”

Shin knew out of experience that most female players, like Marino, preferred to focus on cooking skills, communicating with tamed monsters, and knitting, all skills he had barely touched.

Because of that, he wasn’t able to keep a conversation with them at times. Not even Shin was knowledgeable about all sorts of skills and items.

“Well, you’ll have to talk to them first. OK, let’s get to bed soon to be ready for tomorrow. I’ll clean up here, so why don’t you get a bath first, Shin?”

“I will, thanks. Oh, I got some cookies and madeleines from Catnip’s shop, should we bring them to the orphanage?”

“Oh, that’s a good idea. The kids will be really happy.”

Shin left the rest to Marino and went to the bath.

Dipping in the hot water-filled bathtub filled him with an inexplicable feeling of liberation.

“The high level of realism can give a lot of trouble, but I really am thankful that they replicated this feeling too...”

It might be strange to say, but even if one’s body was dirty or smelled the game gave no penalties, nor did bathing increase the avatar’s specs. Even so players, especially female ones, wanted to bathe regularly.

In real life, only particular hot springs gave considerable effects, but in this world bathing after a battle seemed to give an even greater feeling of relief.

“Life itself feels cleaner after a bath” was a very apt way of putting it.

Shin got out of the bath, gulped down a bottle of milk from the fridge, said goodnight to Marino, and proceeded to his bedroom.

He had to be more exhausted than he thought, as his consciousness slipped away as soon as he lied on the mattress.

“Mwaht?”

Some time later, Shin woke up and felt something strange on his right arm.

He looked at it and found Marino, wearing pajamas, snugly gripping his arm, sleeping peacefully.

“Ah..... well... whatever.”

The option of carrying her back to her room did not emerge in Shin’s half-asleep brain.

They were lovers since before the death game and now, at least according to the system, they were husband and wife. Was there anything wrong with sleeping in the same bed? It was easy to accept the situation.

Shin thought that he might as well go all the way, removed the right arm that Marino was grabbing and hugged her with both of his arms.

Relishing in the happiness blooming in his chest, Shin fell again into slumber.

The following morning, Shin woke up after feeling something tremble. Something was moving in his arms.

“.....hn?”

Like the day before, he looked in the direction of the noise and found Marino, blushing fiercely. Shin had apparently woken up because of her attempts to slip out of his embrace.

“Ah, ah, er...”

“.....morning.”

Words wouldn't come out of the embarrassed Marino's mouth, so Shin thought he should say good morning, for the moment.

“G-Good morning... sho... so, why are you hugging me?”

Shin smiled gently because of Marino's cute stuttering and replied.

“You slipped under the covers yesterday, so I used you as pillow.”

“I-I-I guess I was half asleep and g-got the wrong room...”

“We're husband and wife, at least according to the system, so isn't it fine?”

“It's embarrassing!! Aaah, I bet you looked at my dumb sleeping face too...”

Marino must have been really embarrassed, as she covered her face with her hands and squirmed after Shin freed her from his hug. Her bellybutton was in plain sight because of her wriggling.

“Sleeping face? Haven't we both seen each other's a lot already?”

“Today was not OK! Not after the dream I had... I bet I looked so dumb...”

Shin only remembered seeing her smiling peacefully. Marino would probably not believe him, though.

“I see, I see, a dream... what kind of dream was it?”

Shin decided to press further.

“I...”

“I?”

“I CAN’T SAY IT!!!”

“Gwah!”

After firmly planting an uppercut on the grinning Shin’s chin, Marino rushed out of the room.

Left alone, Shin reflected that he might have gone too far, while massaging his unhurt chin.

“My deepest apologies. I teased too much.”

“You think that if you apologize like that I’ll forgive you, right.”

Shin lowered his head at the breakfast table, but Marino’s reply was just jaded. Shin knew from experience that honestly apologizing was the quickest way to obtain Marino’s forgiveness.

Marino, of course, had already seen through Shin’s attempt.

“OK, OK. In exchange, you’ll have to work plenty today.”

“Yes, I shall work my hardest, ma’am!”

“Enough already! Eat your breakfast, come on!”

Spurred by Marino, Shin rushed through his morning meal.

He would ask what to do at the orphanage on the way there. There was nothing in particular they had to bring with them.

“Have a nice day.”

“I’ll leave the rest to you.”

After greeting Schnee, Shin and Marino teleported to Kalkia.

Walking through the crowd, Shin felt several pairs of eyes on him. His equipment was different, but evidently his face was recognized by many. He did not mind anymore, but when going into town this happened often.

“Ah! It’s big sis Marino!”

They heard a boy’s voice when they arrived at the orphanage. Two boys came running towards them from the square next to the orphanage. Both wielded sponge blades, equipment that did not cause damage.

Both kids were around 150 centimeters tall and looked like elementary or junior high school students.

Their faces still looked childish, probably because they hadn’t edited their avatars. Setting avatars to automatic mode would make their appearances change according to one’s age.

“Who’s this person?”

“Your boyfriend??”

“His name is Shin, he will help me today.”

Marino introduced Shin to the boys, ignoring the boyfriend suspicion.

Shin had already visited the orphanage several times, but had not met the two boys before.

“I know you can see it with **【Analyze】** , but I’ll introduce you just in case. The boy with black hair is Ryohei, the one with brown hair is Teppei.”

“Nice to meet you”

“Nice to meetcha!”

Ryohei greeted Shin a bit timidly, while Teppei sounded more energetic.

According to Marino, sometimes they hunt low level monsters in the forest, accompanied by an advanced player. Because of their natural “vigor”, they are a bit infamous as the orphanage’s troublesome duo.

“Where’s Emil?”

“Inside! Luca is crying again, you know.”

Marino asked about the player that managed the orphanage and said she would go greet them as she went inside the orphanage.

“Hey, hey, mister! Have you ever been to the frontlines of conquered areas? Big sis Emil says it’s dangerous and won’t let us go!”

“If you want to go, you have to raise your levels some more. Or you’re going to die even if you get grazed by a punch, kids.”

“Teppei, you can’t go. You’d run off and get killed right away.”

After Shin’s answer, Ryohei added a snarky comment, while shrugging his shoulders.

“Whaaat!?”

“If you can’t beat me even once, you have no chance!”

Apparently Ryohei was higher than Teppei in the orphanage’s hierarchy.

As the kids forgot about him and started play fighting, Shin looked around, thinking about what he could do.

“Hm?”

He then found a small shadow at the edge of his line of sight. Looking towards it. Shin noticed the face of a very young girl subtly peeking from behind a tree.

The moment her eyes met Shin’s, the little girl quickly retreated behind the tree. But, poor thing, she couldn’t hide her animal ears and the Type Cat-like tail. Both seemed to be monitoring Shin’s presence.

Shin held his chin with one hand, acting deep in thought. And slowly moved closer to the tree. He would stop when the girl peeked, then move again when she hid.

(She's not afraid of me, is she.)

The girl should have noticed Shin's approach, but did not try to run away. He thought that she was wary of him because they had never met before, but that did not seem to be the case.

Her slightly spacing out expression kept poking out and hiding again. Soon enough, Shin reached the tree behind which the girl was hiding.

"Good morning."

".....good morning."

Shin tried a greeting, which was returned by a whisper. It wasn't clear if the girl really wanted to hide or not, as only her face came out of the shade when she looked at Shin.

She was leaning forward, so her shoulder-length hair hung in the air.

"Er, I think this is the first time we meet. My name is Shin, I came to help Marino. What about you?"

".....Luca."

"Luca, I see. Well, nice to meet you."

"Um."

Luca nodded slightly and stepped out of the shade. Her height was about 110 cemel. Her animal ears, the same color as her hair, sometimes flicked and moved.

Because of the game's systems, the avatar's height was based on real life height. Shin thought that she was a bit too small, as in a bit too young, to play a game like that.

"Ah! Luca! Teach was looking for you!"

Shin looked back and found Teppei and Ryohei, along with Marino and another person, a woman wearing sister-like clothing.

After hearing Teppei's voice, Luca flinched and hid behind Shin. Her hands, gripping her sleeves, were trembling.

"Teppei, you're too loud. You'll scare Luca away."

"Ah, I'm s-sorry."

Teppei apologized right away: he had no intention of scaring Luca.

"So you were here, Luca. I was looking for you."

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

Luca replied while looking at Marino, who had caught up to them.

"Come on, let's go back to the orphanage first. Ryohei, Teppei, you two especially!! You haven't prepared to leave with Garozzo, right!? Quit standing around and go get ready!! Move it, brats!"

"Yes ma'am!!"

After getting yelled at, the boys sprinted back to the orphanage, as ordered by Emil, the orphanage's supervisor. A very beautiful woman, she had waist-length light blue hair and emerald-like eyes.

Her nun-like attire made her look like a devout believer at first glance. Her personality and speech, however, were quite far apart from the common idea of a nun.

Emil's speech was coarse and she was rather quick with her hands. On the other hand she was very reliable and caring towards the people around her.

Looking at her taking care of the orphanage kids, Shin thought she looked more like a tough mother than a nun.

He never said it to Emil herself, of course; it would only make Emil's basic equipment, a nail bat, cry for blood. It was not a weapon feared not for the damage it caused, but for its horrifying look.

"Marino, you and Luca take care of the usual work."

“OK, leave it to me.”

“Luca, you better do what Marino says, got it?”

“Ok, got it.”

The “work” was handling requests given by NPCs. It was a precious source of income for the orphanage, since many of its players could not go out in the field and hunt monsters.

Marino had already done them many times, so it was unlikely that she needed help.

Luca also firmly nodded to Emil’s words.

“Guess I should go over there?”

Shin looked towards the square where Teppei and Ryohei were play fighting before. A group of boys with sponge blades were waiting.

“Yeah, you’ve got our spunky brats to take care of. They have energy to spare after all. Let’em go wild enough to make them stop thinking of sneaking outside. I’ll be the coach.”

Shin visited the orphanage irregularly, so Emil decided what task to give him each time. Naturally, most of the time it was taking care of the kids.

The only rule was for Shin to not go hunting or to use skills to gather items or Geyl.

----If you have to go hunting for the sake of the orphanage, take a rest instead.

----Rather than that, make sure the kids can go back to the real world as soon as possible.

That was the opinion of Emil and all other orphanage collaborators.

They had accepted that Shin would sometimes give them a hand, for a change of pace.

“OK, today your opponent is me. Don’t hold anything back!”

It was not the first mock battle for Shin and the boys: they charged at him without

hesitation.

Ryohei and Teppei, who were supposed to prepare to leave, mingled among the other boys at first, but Shin quickly flicked them back towards Emil, who grabbed them by the neck and took them away.

“Well, that’s about it.”

About 2 hours after the battle between Shin and the spunky army started, the little valiant warriors clearly showed signs of exhaustion, some lying down on the ground.

This exhaustion had no visible gauge, like HP or MP. Players with high HP or VIT would not get tired as easily, so it was said to be a hidden stat.

Exhaustion caused several demerits; attack power and movement speed decreased, while received damage increased. It could be healed via recovery magic, so it wasn’t a big problem, but the only user present at the moment -Emil- did not do anything, so the square looked like a battlefield of fallen soldiers.

“Crap, you’re too strong...!”

“Adults can’t fight seriously against... kids...!”

The unperturbed Shin was met with praise and complaints from the kids, but they were all too tired to complete their sentences.

“Got it, brats? Out there it’s packed with dangerous monsters that would send even battle maniacs like him flying. Don’t you ever dare go out on your own!!”

“Got it---!”

“We’d die for sure...”

The kids’ answers were really exhausted too, to the point that one would wonder how much they had really understood of what Emil said.

“OK then, Shin, your next job is... hm?”

“Is something wrong?”

Emil stopped halfway through her sentence and looked towards the door leading to the garden; Luca was peeking from behind it. Next to her, Marino was laughing, a bit awkwardly.

“She did that this morning too... is Luca always like that?”

“Nope, not really? She’s always scared shitless of people she sees for the first time, especially guys like you. She came here only a while ago though, so there’s still plenty we don’t know about her.”

Emil then added “Never seen her like that” and motioned at Marino and Luca to come closer.

“See, Luca, let’s go?”

Thanks to Emil’s gesture and Marino’s encouragement, Luca finally came out of her hiding spot behind the door. While walking, though, she skillfully hid behind Marino and stared at Shin at the same time.

“Er, we meet again.”

“Um.”

Shin spoke to Luca, a bit awkwardly, and for some reason she stopped hiding behind Marino and grabbed Shin’s trousers.

“Ah... er, what is this...?”

“Hmm, seems she took a liking to you. Pretty rare.”

Shin was even more confused because of Luca’s behavior, while Emil commented with a grin.

“What’s the matter with Shin, Luca?”

“.....looks like my brother.”

“Is that so.”

Marino’s answer to Luca’s words was somewhat dry.

Shin wondered why, when he received a voice chat message from Emil.

“(Luca’s brother is already dead.)”

Luca, originally, was only logged in because her brother needed a certain number of players to create a guild.

Learning that she was only 5 years old, Shin understood the circumstances. Even elementary school students played VR games now, but he couldn’t imagine that a girl of pre-school age would want to play a game where PKs existed.

In the small time until she logged out, however, the world had changed.

Her brother and his comrades had departed, leaving Luca in a field for beginners, to never come back, as Emil explained.

“(How old was her brother, by the way?)”

“(He had just entered junior high, it seems)”

“(...I don’t know if I should be happy or not.)”

You look like my junior high school brother ----having similar height or facial features would be one thing, but if their mentalities were similar it would be pretty shocking for Shin.

“We might as well have Shin take care of Luca today.”

“That’s a nice idea. Here!”

Emil apparently came up with the idea on the spot, but Marino caught on immediately and put Shin and Luca’s hands together.

Luca’s hands were soft and very small, even more so when compared to Shin’s.

Rather than holding hands, it looked like Shin’s hands were wrapped around Luca’s. Shin realized again how young she was.

“OK! Today you can count on me!”

“.....ok.”

Luca's hands gripped Shin's tightly.

Shin, Marino, and Emil smiled at her reaction.

†

The scene was a lavishly decorated room. In this exaggeratedly luxurious chamber, two young men could be seen.

One sat on an ornate chair, a glass of wine in hand. His intricately decorated clothing suggested that he was a member of monarchy or nobility, and on his hand was a ring with a large ruby sparkling.

A longsword with a gemstone-studded scabbard was propped against the man's chair. An expert would have noticed that it was the unupgraded version of the Ancient-grade weapon 『Excalibur』 .

The man's name within the game was Aldo.

“So, where's that guy fighting now?”

“It appears that as of yesterday, part of the Houzand continent has been liberated. At present, roughly 40% of the continent has been liberated.”

The other man answered, while kneeling before the first. Based on his dark green hooded mantle and easy-to-move-in boots, his job appeared to be a hunter rather than a magician.

His name within the game was Robin Hood.

“Tch, his clearing speed really dropped this past month. What's he wasting time for? He's supposed to be a maniac whose only talent is playing games!!”

Aldo shouted while pounding his fists on the chair. His brownish blonde hair became slightly disheveled.

“Considering the increase in difficulty, I would not consider it to be strange that his

clearing speed decreased, sir.”

“Player skill means being able to do something about that, right!? Hmph, even with all the money and time they waste, this is all they can do, I suppose.”

Aldo clearly looked down on players. The reason was that he was not a “pure” player himself.

The avatar Aldo used had been created and provided by the management. It used data from an event monster, Arthur Pendragon.

Its stats were 800 on average, and its equipment -while of basic rank- was all Ancient-grade.

It was something completely excessive for a THE NEW GATE beginner.

(The last dungeon too was usually conquered only in parties... he really has no idea how incredible it is to clear it solo.)

Robin mumbled to himself. Having played normally, he fully understood how incredible Shin’s feat of clearing the dungeon on his own was.

Unlike Aldo’s avatar, Robin’s avatar was an ordinary one. He had focused his stat points on AGI and DEX and specialized in reconnaissance. His fighting style was mainly attacking from a distance with his bow and poison.

Even so, while he could sneak into dungeons, he did not think of challenging bosses. He had no chance of winning.

“Hey, Hagiwara!! Are you listening??”

“Ah, yes, my apologies. I am. However, even if we wanted him to hurry up, it would be all for naught if he ends up dying.”

Robin gave a serious answer, keeping his annoyance at being called with his real name to himself. Aldo insisted that they should just push him harder, but anyone would understand that such a method would not increase the dungeon clearing speed.

Aldo and Robin’s relationship, simply put, was that of superior and subordinate in a company.

Aldo was the son of a patron of THE NEW GATE, who provided the game's management with capital. Thus, Robin was once again forced to listen to Aldo boast about the avatar that the management had prepared for him.

Aldo had overheard Robin talk to other players about the game in the company and coerced him into becoming his attendant.

Robin never regretted his carelessness more than that time. How liberating would it be if it was only the death game trapping him. His stress level was high enough to make him think such ridiculous thoughts.

"Hmph. Bring him here then. If he's a gamer, I'm sure dangling some kind of clearing reward in front of his eyes will make him work harder."

"Would it not be easier for us to just let him proceed as he wants?"

"I'm getting sick of waiting. I want to return to the real world. Do you know how many months have passed since this situation started!? I can't even enjoy a woman with this body. The alcohol just gets you halfway drunk, and the cigarettes are terrible too. Who could put up with this crap!!"

Aldo became irritated while talking, and pounded on his chair again.

Robin gritted his teeth, barely managing to avoid shouting, "*You go and clear dungeons too then!!*" to the man on the throne, and let out a small sigh without Aldo noticing.

"I will try to talk to him, but please remember that I can't do anything if he refuses."

"Do SOMETHING! Or you're getting demoted! No, fired!!"

"U-understood, I will go convince him!!"

Robin left the room, cursing and lamenting his relationship with Aldo under his breath.

He wanted nothing more than to tell Aldo to go do it himself, but he could not afford to go against him now. In the real world, Aldo was a high-ranked executive whose word had great importance within HR, while Robin was nothing but a rank-and-file employee.

Surviving in this world was important, but so was keeping his career in the real one.

He had a family to sustain; for their sake, Robin had no choice but to swallow his pride.

“But there’s nothing I can do about this...”

Robin had heard much about Shin, who stood on the frontlines of dungeon clearing.

In the first month after the Death Game began, it was even possible to visit Tsuki no Hokora, but now, it had changed locations and no one knew where it was. The only options were to find him in a city and talk to him, or to ask an information broker.

“I want to see Rie and Emi...”

Whispering the names of his wife and daughter, Robin’s silhouette was lost within the town’s crowds.

On the other hand, Aldo was now alone in the room, still indignant.

He gripped his wine glass with a bit more strength, and shattered it. Thanks to the room’s self-cleaning function, the spilled wine and glass fragments sparkled and disappeared.

“Shit!! And after I managed to use my connections to play easily!! What the hell’s this death game!!”

Aldo still didn’t regard the game world as reality. Despite his high level stats and equipment, he had left dungeon clearing and boss fighting to others, so he had no idea that fighting on the frontlines meant to stake one’s life.

He had only ever fought low-level monsters, such as slimes and goblins. Because of the stats difference, even if he received an attack, the damage would be zero, while the damage he inflicted was completely overkill.

Such one-sided beatings would have never made him think that the risk of death was very real.

“Okay then, what to do until he comes back... hm?”

Out of the blue, a bell signaled the arrival of guests. The maid he had created as a support character had already gone to greet them.

Aldo's menu displayed two individuals.

One was a savage-looking man in dark brown armor. The armor and its decorations were riddled with cuts and damage that increased his wild appearance even more. His hair and beard were unkempt. He looked just like the boss of a band of thieves or mercenaries.

The other was a handsome-looking man in silver armor. With blonde hair tied behind his head, and with features normally only seen on TV or in magazines, he has the appearance of a knight, completely contrasting with his companion.

Looking at their strangely realistic faces, Aldo thought that they might have used the full scan avatar feature, which replicated the players' real appearances.

No matter how one looked in real life, however, they wouldn't stand out much in the game world. Handsome or beautiful characters were a dime a dozen, to the point that some players even deliberately twisted their looks.

The menu screen displayed names, levels, and jobs of the two men.

"Gargalla and Vlad? Never heard of them before. Both level 255. Jobs are Magic Swordsman and Dragon Knight, huh? They seem to have pretty good gear, I guess they're game maniacs too."

Players could pay real money to obtain equipment, but such gear came with the penalty of never matching the players' level and stats.

Aldo's **【Analyze】**, also provided by the management, showed that neither Gargalla nor Vlad's equipment had such penalties.

("Shall I let the guests inside?")

"I guess they'll suffice in killing some time. Yeah, let them in."

Aldo chose "YES" from the "Authorize entrance? YES/NO" window that appeared on his menu. A short while later, the two guests entered the room led by the maid.

“I thank you for allowing us to visit you. My name is Vlad, pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Gargalla.”

“No need for useless greetings. What do you want?”

Aldo replied in rude manner to Vlad’s smiling greeting and Gargalla’s cold self-introduction. It was hardly proper behavior to welcome guests, but Vlad did not seem offended in the least.

“I saw Mr. Robin leave here with a rather serious expression, you see. I was wondering if we could assist you, good sir.”

“You should have just asked Robin then.”

“I thought talking with the person giving orders would be quicker. Besides, I might be more useful in case of secret orders, you see.”

A friendly grin appeared on Vlad’s lips.

Secret orders. Aldo’s eyes narrowed at these words.

“Please, don’t be alarmed. I apologize for gathering information without permission. But my comrade and I share the same goal as you.”

“My goal?”

“Indeed. You wish to go back to the real world quickly, yes? And for that, you want that man, who’s taking his sweet time, to hurry up. Am I wrong?”

Aldo did not think it strange that another man thought the same thing as himself. On the contrary, he thought that it was absurd that other players didn’t say anything to Shin.

Hearing the words “go back to the real world”, Aldo was now convinced that he understood the reason why Vlad had shown up.

“And you people are able to do that?”

“We can. We have reached a rather high level, if I may say so, and therefore if we contact him as “dungeon clearing partners”, I doubt he will ignore us. And if he does, we have other ways to force him to listen to us. Gargalla here is an expert in such methods.”

What Vlad alluded to were unsavory methods. As Aldo glanced at Gargalla, the latter cracked a slight grin.

“I’m a specialist in that field. Plenty of experience, yeah?”

Gargalla’s expression brimmed with confidence.

Normally Aldo would not have had the guts to dirty his hands with illegal activities, however having been trapped and unable to log out for such a long time, what little patience he had quickly ran out.

Aldo thus nodded without hesitation, sparing no thought to the fact that this would pass the burden to someone else.

“Leaving this to just Robin will accomplish nothing so I’ll be counting on you two as well. And so, what do you want from me?”

Even if their goals were the same, Aldo didn’t believe the two guests wouldn’t ask for a reward.

The two guests’ smiles widened at his words.

“Please let us take care of the dungeon clearing affair. As for the reward, I would like you to procure some weapons. Of course, that is after we succeed in spurring that man to action.”

“Hm? You have yours already, don’t you?”

“It is embarrassing to admit, but there are few blacksmiths capable of forging rare weapons. And that man is the most skilled of them all. I also do not have a death wish. I apologize for such a rude request, but could you please accept it?”

Vlad gave a courteous, deep bow, which pleased Aldo very much.

“So be it. But it will only be done if you succeed, remember that.”

“I am very grateful. We will act right away, so if you will excuse us.”

Vlad bowed again, then headed towards the exit of Aldo’s home.

“Wait! I have not heard that man’s request yet. I don’t want to listen to any illegal requests later. So, what is it?”

“Hm? Ah, me.”

Gargalla turned only his head back and smiled defiantly.

“I just want to fight against Shin. Not his current half-assed and slacked self, but when he's really serious...”

Gargalla said nothing else and followed Vlad outside.

“.....tch, creepy fellow.”

Gargalla’s smile had given Aldo chills.

Outside Aldo’s home, Vlad quickly hid his face with a helmet. Gargalla then caught up to him.

“Hah, to think that he’ll let us handle the case with an explanation like that. Having a superior like that would surely be tough on the subordinates.”

“Damn right.”

Vlad knew about the relationship between Aldo and Robin. They had visited while Robin was absent precisely because he had collected this information.

His words of understanding towards Aldo’s plight concealed Vlad’s disdain for the man. Gargalla also shared similar sentiments.

“That Aldo too, if he acted himself, the dungeon clearing would surely become at least a bit faster. That avatar is such a waste on him. If only there was an avatar exchange function available, I’d make very good use of it.”

“Right, the guy inside is total shit. Nothing remotely interesting ‘bout him.”

Someone with a powerful avatar, equipped with Ancient grade equipment, that had not participated in clearing any dungeons.

For players who were earnestly striving to clear the dungeons, Aldo was an infuriating existence.

He could have at least been more helpful with clearing the dungeons that were currently being conquered.

Instead, Aldo spent his days doing nothing, entrusting even the smallest tasks to Robin.

Vlad had concealed his feelings in Aldo’s presence, but he despised him. Gargalla, on the other hand, found him utterly boring.

“Well, since we’re going to use him, the dumber he is, the better.”

“Yeah, for your actual job.”

Vlad was a scammer in real life. Because of this experience, he knew that Aldo planned to use him and Gargalla.

I would never be cheated, I could never be used by others. Vlad had seen through the fact that Aldo was rife with such groundless confidence.

“Well then, time to start then. My *just* duty is to set him free, after all.”

“As creepy as always, man.”

“I’m not seeking your approval.”

With those words trailing behind, Vlad disappeared into the bustle of the city.

“Haha, a High Human...! I hope this will be a lot of fun...”

Gargalla then walked away, in a different direction than Vlad.

Unbeknownst to Shin, ominous shadows were drawing closer.

†

Shin had been tasked with caring for Luca; they knitted and took naps together, surprising everyone around them with how well they got along.

Marino and Emil would sometimes drop in to check on them, but Luca was never unmanageable.

Although she was a bit shy at first, by the afternoon she had completely opened up to Shin.

“What can I say? It’s pretty surprising.”

Holly, a female player, expressed her surprise upon seeing Shin interact with Luca. As one of the advanced players who collaborated with the orphanage, she was also on friendly terms with Shin. Soft-spoken and serene, she was especially popular with the younger children.

“Eh? What is?”

“Well, kids like Luca are pretty hard to care for if you’re not used to it, you know? Especially for a man, like you. Or so I thought anyway.”

It was now an hour past noon, signalling nap time for the children.

Lying down together with them, Shin watched over the sleeping Luca.

“Yeah, that could be because I have a little sister too.”

“Oh really? Ah, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry into your real life circumstances.”

“That’s all right. I have two brothers, one older and one younger, and a little sister. Looking after our little sister is our duty, right? My brothers and I took turns taking care of her. Compared to Luca, however, my little sister was quite the handful as she was always wandering off.”

Perhaps due to similar ages, Shin’s little sister was most attached to their little brother. Despite that, Shin was relatively experienced in taking care of children because of her.

“You said it before, right? That your brothers never played THE NEW GATE?”

Marino, who was caring for the other children, noted that she had heard about the topic before.

“My little sister did. But luckily she wasn’t involved in this mess.”

“If she had, I bet you would have rushed to look for her.”

“Oh, I’m sure she could survive easily, so I wouldn’t really be worried.”

“Is she really strong too?”

“Frankly speaking, yes, very much so. Not only are her level and stats high, but she also has high movement speed.”

Shin's little sister also played THE NEW GATE, and because of her ability, had become rather famous. The two siblings had kept their distance within the game, so few knew of her connection to Shin.

“She can make even you say something like that? Is she as powerful as my husband?”

“Yes, well you could say that I’m biased since she’s family, but my sister is probably superior, as far as player skill is concerned. Though, Shadow’s player skill is amazing too.”

Shadow was Holly’s husband and also famous for his skill.

Shin’s words surprised Marino.

“Better than Shadow? Your little sister is amazing too, then, in a different way from you. Are your other brothers this special too?”

“No, they don’t even play THE NEW GATE, after all.”

All of Shin’s siblings loved videogames, comics, and animation, but his oldest brother was busy with work and did not partake much in such pastimes anymore. Shin’s little brother liked comics more than videogames, so the only one to play the same games as Shin was his little sister.

She wasn’t that interested in comics or animation either. Even within the same family, likes and hobbies were all different.

“Hn...”

Shin looked back towards Luca, who shifted slightly in her sleep, and realized that her right hand had somehow started gripping his left. She was still asleep though.

“Looks like she wants to keep you close even while sleeping.”

“My, I’m afraid you won’t escape easily, big brother.”

Marino smiled and Holly lightly teased Shin.

With an embarrassed laugh, Shin’s gaze turned towards the hand Luca was holding. He could have escaped her grip all too easily, but he did not feel like moving away anytime soon.

“Holly and I will take care of the other kids, so Shin will stay with Luca. Is that ok?”

“Of course. And Shin, when Luca wakes up, be at her side, ok? This morning she threw a fit because you weren’t there.”

This was what Teppei and Ryohei had mentioned when Shin and Marino arrived at the orphanage.

Luca had lived alone for about 2 months after her brother and his party disappeared. There was no one she was familiar with among the people around her, so she was deeply afraid of losing someone she knew, as Emil had told Shin in secret.

Emil had slept with her the previous night, but had woken up early to prepare the children’s food, leaving Luca alone in the process. There was no one with her when she woke up, so Luca started loudly crying.

“OK, got it. If I have to go somewhere, I’ll let someone know first.”

There were other players in the orphanage other than Emil, Marino and Holly. Shin was acquainted with them all, so he wouldn’t have trouble calling someone if necessary.

The game world did not require using the toilet so unless there was an emergency, Shin would have no trouble staying with Luca until she woke up.

“OK, I’ll leave her to you then.”

“Take good care of her, all right?”

Shin watched them head off, then looked again at Luca’s face and her hand, still holding his. He then added a little more more strength in his grip.

As if in response to that, Luca’s expression became more serene.

Luca opened her eyes around thirty minutes later. Naptime was always half an hour, so apparently her body had memorized it.

She was still in a daze at first, but when she saw Shin next to her, she felt slightly embarrassed to have her sleeping face exposed, despite her very young age.

“Afternoon is free time, right? What do you want to do?”

Making children work too much felt wrong, so either mornings or afternoons in the orphanage were always free activity times. Today, they all did as they pleased after waking up from their afternoon nap, given that they had already worked in morning.

Incidentally, the energetic group Shin had “fought” in the morning would help with simple jobs in the afternoon.

“I want to take a walk.”

“Outside then? Well, staying cooped up inside all day would be boring after all.”

The orphanage was pretty vast, but even going slowly it would only take a minute to walk a lap around it.

In town, it was generally not possible to reduce players’ HP and kill them. But as was the case with everything else, there were exceptions due to which the orphanage made sure that when the children ventured outside, they were always accompanied by someone who could hold their own in battle.

“No good?”

“No, a change of pace would be nice, after all. Wait a moment, let’s try asking Emil.”

Shin contacted Emil via chat, and was asked to do some shopping as well. He agreed and raised a thumb in Luca's direction.

"Yay!"

Luca raised her little thumbs, excited.

Thanks to the item box, there was no need to physically carry things. If anything happened, Shin could react immediately, so there would be no problem.

Shin heard from Emil that the other children would stay within the orphanage grounds, so he and Luca left right away.

"Oh, you're going out?"

The two bumped into Marino as they were opening the orphanage doors. Shin explained that he was going out for a walk with Luca and to do some shopping.

"She's always been inside lately, now that you mention it. Yes, I also think it's a good idea."

Marino agreed with a smile, when Luca suddenly grabbed her hand.

"Luca?"

"Marino come too?"

Marino looked at Shin, silently asking him if something had happened.

Shin shook his head.

"Hmm, okay, I'll ask Emil. If she allows it, I'll come with you guys."

"Ok."

Unlike Shin, Marino was one of the orphanage's central members because she often helped out there. She couldn't just leave without a word.

Marino went quiet for several seconds to use the chat, then raised her thumb just like Shin had previously done.

“Yay!”

Luca repeated the same gesture again.

“OK, let’s go. Luca, don’t let go of Marino’s hand, okay?”

Shin had Luca take Marino’s left hand, so she would not get lost in a crowd.

“The other hand is yours then, Shin.”

In response, Marino put Luca’s right hand on Shin’s.

“Let’s go.”

“Okay!!”

With both her hands being held, Luca beamed with joy. Shin and Marino smiled at each other.

After leaving the orphanage, the trio first headed to the grocery street to procure meat and vegetables. The street was crowded with players who had agricultural jobs, offering the products they grew to other players coming to buy ingredients for dinner.

“-----yes, please give me the usual. Ah, but I need one more of that meat.”

Shin had been entrusted with the shopping, but Marino carefully selected what to buy. She always shopped like this for the orphanage, so the store owners treated her with familiarity and also responded well to her bargaining.



“Big sis Mari, wow...”

“Isn't your bargaining skill already active when you start shopping? You're also using a real negotiation skill.”

Shin and Luca were impressed by Marino's skill.

“----agh, I can't just say no to you, can I! Consider this a thank you for always buying my goods! I'll give them to you for 70. Now get lost!”

“Thank you very much!”

“By the way, are those two with you, missy?”

“Yes, they are, why do you ask?”

The owner looked at Shin and Luca, then grinned and whispered to Marino.

“Well ya see, shopping while holding hands with a kid... doesn't that resemble a couple of newlyweds? You're gonna make single dudes like me green with envy, darnit!”

“N-Newlywhat!? What are you saying!?”

Marino stuttered in response, unable to say the full word.

“Anyone would think so, little lady. But yeah okay, enough jokes for today.”

“You can't just joke about things like this!!”

“You didn't really hate it though, didja. You were grinning, missy!”

“!?”

Marino abruptly hid her mouth with her hands. Incidentally, Shin heard everything.

He came closer, thinking it was time to lend Marino a helping hand, when the owner's expression turned deadly serious.

“I'm not an information broker or anything, but you're a precious customer, so I gotta tell ya. Make sure the little girl don't hear.”

“Hm?”

Shin gently pressed his hands on Luca's ears, who had tilted her head after hearing the man's words.

“Please.”

“Yeah, I'll be quick. They say that a bunch of PKs started being active again lately. Ever heard of 'Ouroboros' Hollow?' Even some advanced players have fallen victim to them. We've been told to keep alert.”

“I've heard the name, yes. Their members all have pretty high stats, or so I heard.”

“Ouroboros' Hollow” was composed solely of PK players.

The players who were only acting out that role in the game and had no intention of truly killing had long left the guild. The ones who remained were actual murderers.

The guild that killed players for fun had now turned into a true assassins' guild.

“I have no idea what they're thinking, but some of em' even target small kids. Which yer' orphanage has a whole bunch of. Better stay on your toes, ya hear me?”

“Thank you for giving us such important information.”

Marino thanked the concerned owner.

As the man had said, the orphanage was a prime target, because of the weakness of the players inside and the grave consequences such an act would cause. It was also a fact that there were those who preyed on the weak with no particular reason.

“Don't mention it, missy. It'd be really sad for a face I know to disappear... ah, you can let her go now.”

After the owner's words, Shin took his hands off Luca's ears.

“You finished talking?”

“Yeah, sorry for covering your ears all of a sudden.”

“.....no, I have been defaild* ... you must take responsibility!”

(T/N: defaild* Defiled was misspelled on purpose, Luca is supposed to not know what she's saying)

To Shin's apology, Luca put her hands on her hips and puffed up her chest in protest. The gesture itself was quite comical, in complete contrast with the very serious tone of her objection.

“Hey hey man, what are you teaching to a little girl like that...?”

“Like I would!! Really though, where did you learn that...?”

“Teppei said it's a good thing to say to boys. It isn't?”

“Of course it isn't. It's better not to use those words much.”

“?... okay.”

Luca didn't actually know the meaning of what she had said, so she honestly nodded.

“Well then, guess I'll have a little “talk” with Teppei once we get back.”

“That's true. Better inform Emil too.”

“You're smiling, but not happy...?”

Marino and Shin's lips were smiling, but their eyes weren't, which confused Luca quite a bit.

“Hahaha, nothing to worry about, Luca.”

“Yes, we're going to take care of everything. OK then, shopping's done, so let's go for a little walk. Have a nice day, sir.”

“Sure, you lot take care!”

They bade farewell to the shop owner, then Marino held Luca's hand as the trio walked on.

As Kalkia was one of the hometowns, players had set up all sorts of shops.

Commodity stores with healing medicines and everyday goods, open-air stands with handmade equipment, eateries with waiters running around taking orders. The great variety of shops and people made it entertaining just to look at them.

Luca, happily walking between Shin and Marino, enjoyed the sights too.

“We’ve been out a while already, better go back.”

Fun times go by quickly. When Shin checked the time, it was already past 4 in the afternoon.

THE NEW GATE included a season system too; seasons would change roughly each month. The current season was autumn, so the sun would set early. It was already noticeably darker compared to noon hours.

“We go back, already?”

“Yes. If it gets dark everyone will worry.”

Luca seemed disappointed, so Shin promised that he would take her on a walk again.

When they returned to the orphanage, the children who had left to help with work had come back too. Some girls who noticed Luca’s return invited her to play with them.

Marino would often sleep over at the orphanage, but because she would stay at Shin’s place for a while, Marino went to report to Emil.

Waiting for Marino to come back, Shin was at the orphanage’s gates, lost in thought while looking at the sky.

There, one man approached him.

“Excuse me sir... could you tell me if you really are Mr. Shin?”

“.....yes, I am, and you are?”

Shin turned towards the man. He quickly activated **【Analyze】**, which displayed the man’s name as Vlad, his level 255.

“My apologies. My name is Vlad. I hoped to visit Tsuki no Hokora and happened to see you here, so I took the liberty to approach you directly.”

Vlad’s polite speech and demeanor did not seem particularly suspicious.

“Is that so. What exactly brings you to me then?”

“I am actually in the middle of clearing another dungeon, and the area before the boss contains some very powerful poison. I thus wanted to ask if you possibly could share some recovery items. The parties involved in this clearing effort are composed of members from the guilds “Savage Lions” and “Yatagarasu”, led by Lao of the Explosive Legs corps. I have heard that you are acquainted with Lao, so if necessary you could contact him.”

The strength of the poison probably made it impossible for the players to cure it fully using their skills.

Shin asked about details of the area and quickly figured out what the man was referring to.

“That must be Bloodred Poison. It’s true that very few players in the whole game can recover from that, I think it can’t be helped.”

Bloodred Poison was a particular negative status with far worse effects than normal Poison. Players with INT less than 900 could only mitigate its effects through skills. This status also lasted for a considerably long time, so defeating a boss while under its effects was hardly doable.

“Understood, I will prepare some recovery items for you, but wouldn’t it have been faster if Lao just sent me a message via chat?”

“Lao is now heading to the dungeon. He did not want to burden you, but the other leaders decided that prolonging the mission would be difficult because of scarce resources and the members’ morale diminishing. As such, I have been entrusted with delivering the message.”

Lao said that he would have contacted Shin if the current dungeon clearing mission failed, at least according to Vlad.

He had approached Shin now probably because there was a high chance of failure at

present.

“I shall take my leave then. I thank you for your assistance.”

Just as Vlad had turned to leave, Marino came out of the orphanage.

“Sorry for the wait, Shin.”

“No, you came just at the right time.”

Shin welcomed Marino with a smile.

“Er, did I interrupt you?”

“Please do not worry, as I was about to leave. Farewell, then.”

Vlad gave a small bow and left.

“Tch, I had heard of her, but... what’s with that woman!?”

After leaving Shin, Vlad slipped in the crowd, then quickly turned into a back alley.

He couldn’t help blurting out his annoyance and was relieved to see that no one was around to hear.

“Filthy player trash parasitizing Shin... should just go die already...”

Vlad continued cursing with a menacing tone that he had completely concealed when talking to Shin.

A member of Rokuten, the strongest guild, and the only player who had achieved max stats.

Vlad could barely imagine how much time, money, and dedication it took to achieve such a level.

“Aah, but to cleanse the trash heaping around him is my noble duty. Gahaha, it’s supposed to be a chore, so why do I feel so excited?”

Shin was a player that Vlad admired. The glorious sight of Shin sweeping through the opposing team by himself in a guild vs guild battle had moved Vlad's heart, despite the fact that it was just a game.

When he first started playing he focused on raising his level and stats, but now that his avatar was stronger, he only spent his efforts on things related to Shin.

"The strongest shine the most when they are alone at the peak. The cursed star that shines the brightest within Rokuten... I shall bring back your true brilliance."

An insane laugh echoed in the alley, without reaching any ears.

†

"Hey, who was that person?"

"Hmm? He's from a party that's currently clearing another location. It's a bit of a nasty place, you see. He came to request some recovery items. I know the leader, so I'll ask him for details."

"I see..."

"What's wrong? You're making a weird face."

Marino's expression had drastically changed; she now looked concerned as she stared in the direction Vlad had gone.

"Something wrong with that man?"

Assessing Marino's gaze, Shin guessed that Vlad was the reason of her worry.

"I'm not too sure, but, he was glaring at me with a really cold look."

"He glared at you?"

Shin frowned. He could not think of a reason why anyone would resent Marino.

Despite it being widely known that she worked in the orphanage everyday, there were whispers that she received preferential treatment as Shin's lover. Such groundless resentment was already a thing of the past.

“I guess we should be careful.”

“I don’t think they’d do anything in these parts though.”

In the city, a Player’s HP could not reach zero under normal circumstances. No matter how high another player’s stats or what skills they used, it would be impossible for them to kill a player within a city.

In the game, some burglar players targeted stores, but it was only stores set up outside of the protected city limits by players such as Shin. The town was a safe location for all players.

“Normally, yeah. There haven’t been any monster invasion events lately, so I’m a bit worried. During such events, even in the city...”

It’s possible to kill.

He didn’t say it outright, but that was what Shin feared the most. Monster invasion events were the reason why towns were not absolute safe havens for players.

During an invasion event, if the town defenses were breached and the monsters penetrated inside, the rule preventing players’ HP from being reduced below a certain threshold value was removed. In other words, during such events, it was possible to PK even in town.

It was a fact that became largely known after the invasion event that happened two weeks after the start of the death game. This event had generated several casualties.

“It’s going to be okay, don’t worry. Even if an invasion event starts, we just need to make sure the town’s defenses hold up.”

“Well, yes, that’s true...”

After the first invasion event, many players and guilds invested heavily in protecting the towns. Clearing dungeons was, of course, important, but without a place to return to, it was ultimately meaningless.

Thanks to the upgraded town defenses, monsters had successfully invaded towns only during that first event. It was not strange for Marino to say that there was nothing to worry about.

“I’m more worried about you, Shin. You’re clearing dungeons by yourself, so no one would be there to help in case it was necessary.”

“Hey, I’m always making sure it’s safe enough to go on. I didn’t max my stats for nothing, ya know?”

Not even Shin would go face bosses without scouting first. Based on the strength of the Gigantes Moss, the last boss he fought, he answered rather optimistically that there were no problems yet.

“Even if you say so, I’m still worried! Listen well now, in the next dungeon, and the one after that, and the one after that too, you absolutely must come back safe and sound, okay!? If you die I’m joining you as soon as I can, got it!?”

On the other hand, Marino was dead serious. She grabbed his lapel and looked straight into his eyes, while hers brimmed with tears.

“O-okay, I’m sorry. I don’t want to die either. I’ll always come back!”

Struck by Marino’s seriousness, Shin made his promise. Hearing her say that she would join him in death, he couldn’t ignore her plea.

After Shin confirmed the promise, Marino slowly backed away from him, albeit still pouting and angrily glaring at him.

“You mustn’t die, okay? We’re all going back together, all right?”

“Yes, I know. I keep my promises.”

“...no matter what, okay?”

“Yes, we made some good friends after all. It’ll be nice to meet in real life too.”

“...yes.”

Apparently satisfied with Shin’s answer, Marino affectionately squeezed his hands tightly.

“...let’s go home.”

“Yes.”

Relieved to see Marino smile, Shin started walking again. With fairly bad timing, though, the silhouette of a person appeared before them.

“Found you at last. I am truly sorry, but could you spare some time for me?”

“...you are?”

Protecting Marino behind his back, Shin confronted the man.

“My name is Robin. I came with a request for you, Sir Shin.”

The player who introduced himself as Robin bowed his head to Shin.

“A request? What is it?”

“I know this will be really rude of me to say, and I apologize in advance. But could it be possible for you to increase the speed of your dungeon clearing?”

“My dungeon clearing?”

Robin raised his head, showing his distressed expression. Seeing this, Shin sensed something different from this man compared to other players who had irresponsibly urged him to hurry up in clearing the dungeons.

“Wait a minute!! Shin is doing his best, you know!”

“Wait, Marino. He seems different from the others so far.”

Marino had witnessed such scenes many times in the past and was ready to fly off the handle at the man, but Shin talked her down, continuing to talk with Robin.

“Believe me, I am going as fast as I can... did something happens?”

“My... superior in real life told me to make you hurry up. I’m truly sorry, I know very well that the dungeon clearing parties are staking their lives, but if I oppose him my real life will be in jeopardy... to be honest, I can’t stop worrying when I think about how my family might be doing right now. My superior told me to urge you, and won’t listen to reason...”

“.....”

There were other players with situations like Robin. Shin was still a student and did not have a family to nurture.

Even so, thinking about his life after returning to reality worried him. While trapped in this world, there was no way of knowing how the real one was changing.

Because of this, Shin could understand Robin's feelings, at least to an extent.

“I'm sorry. As I already said to others, there are new traps and unknown monsters in the dungeons that weren't there before. Boss fight patterns are changing too. I'm trying to clear them as fast as I can, but it's just not possible to proceed as quickly as I could with beginner or intermediate level dungeons.”

“.....yes, of course. I'm sorry for approaching you out of the blue like this.”

Uttering these final words, Robin left. His distressed expression persisted until the end.

“Will that person be okay?”

“I don't know. It's been four months since we were trapped in this world... There are a plenty of people like him who are worried sick about the real world.”

There were no counselors or similar professions in this world. Some people stood back up on their feet, supported by others, while others fell into despair.

“There are many like him who want nothing more than to return to the real world and then there are people like PKs, who want to stay here forever.”

Marino commented with a difficult expression as they went back.

“That's true... well, everyone's different. What else can we say.”

“Yes... you're right. Everyone has different circumstances...”

Marino's expression was still clouded, but a bit clearer than before.

After returning to Tsuki no Hokora, Shin took a bath, as per Marino's suggestion.

Dipping in the hot bath gave him some relief. He felt that it wasn't an illusion and closed his eyes.

While Shin was in the bath, Marino prepared dinner. The menu was white stew and salad.

She deftly cut the ingredients and brought them to a boil, displaying the skill of someone used to cooking.

"Going back to reality... huh..."

Focused on cooking, Marino spoke her thoughts out loud. In reaction to hearing her own words, her movements came to a halt.

"Huh...? What was I... thinking about?"

What she had heard were her own words, but she felt like they had come from somewhere else.

When she realized the truth, she also fully noticed her real feelings. When she heard about the PKs, she was supposed to be angry. But at the same time, she thought "Yes, I can see that".

"This is weird. Why do I..."

Marino knew that, like the PKs, she also harbored a certain dislike towards the idea of returning to reality. In fact, Robin's desire of returning had not moved her heart in the slightest.

"This is just strange. I wanted to go back too, didn't I?"

Too weird. This couldn't be.

The emotions swelling in her own chest confused Marino.

That very moment, something disrupted her field of sight.

"Eh...?"

She thought she heard a thud-like sound, from far away.

“Ah...”

Her body wouldn't move.

Just like a sudden scene change, she saw the floor, the racks, then her own arms dropping down.

“Aah...”

Then, she finally understood what was happening to her.

She had forgotten a long time ago and tried not to think about it since.

She thought that things would continue like this forever.

“So... Time's almost up.”

The end was drawing near. The time limit drew closer.

“A little more. Just a little more...”

She tried to move her arms.

They moved, as if it was a dream that they didn't just moments ago. She could now stand by herself. It was another attack, probably.

“...I have to tell him. I can't cause any more problems for Shin.”

Words which didn't come from her heart. The words of a good girl who always did what she was told.

Disappointing the person who loved her was terrifying.

But all she could leave him with were items and equipment; she felt that she had no right to be with him, that Shin would probably leave her. A girl with just a little time left to live... was nothing more than dead weight.

“But I don't want to leave him...”

Even if her mind understood, she couldn't accept it.

Marino's reason and emotions completely opposed each other.

"I finished bathing!"

Shin's voice reached her.

Hearing the voice of her beloved, Marino made her decision.

After bathing and eating dinner, there was not much to do.

For entertainment and ways to kill time, THE NEW GATE only offered some minigames, the chance of listening to the in-game local news, which consisted of an indistinguishable mess of lies and truth, or just checking the information exchange bulletin board.

Just as Shin finished browsing the bulletin board he always checked, Marino entered his room.

There were many other rooms and plenty of beds available. Despite that, the two would sometimes sleep together, so it was not strange for Marino to come in.

"...Marino?"

However, Shin noticed that there was something unusual about her.

Marino, now in pajamas, hesitatingly sat down on the bed. She took Shin's big pillow and hugged it tightly.

"What's wrong? Are you feeling sick?"

"No, I'm okay now."

I'm okay now. Shin felt something off with those words. He imagined that what had happened on their way back from the orphanage still occupied her thoughts.

"I'm going to bed soon, what will you do?"

“I will too. We have to work hard... tomorrow too, right?”

With a slightly forced smile, Marino slipped under the covers. When Shin lay next to her, she timidly gripped his arm.

“Marino?”

It was not strange for her to cuddle like this. But this time she seemed tense, unnatural.

“Can we... talk a little?”

Marino spoke while pressing her face against Shin’s arm.

She was going to talk about something very important. Shin quietly consented.

“...Shin, do you think you want to go back to reality soon?”

“Well, yeah... I think that I want to go back. But, though I know it feels wrong to say, I also think that my current lifestyle is pretty fun. We don’t know who we are in the real world, and... I mean, I’m not asking for you to tell me. But in the real world I couldn’t sleep with you. So while deep down, I feel that I want to go back, a part of me also enjoys this life.”

Shin could feel like this because his level and stats weren’t reset, and because of the items and equipment he had retained.

“.....yeah.”

Marino trembled a little to Shin’s answer.

“Life for me feels really fulfilling now. I wake up in the morning, work, prepare dinner. You return and I welcome you back home... I sleep feeling your warmth close to me. Such a life makes my heart beat faster... gives me happiness... everyday.”

Marino’s grip tightened. It felt like she would not let go anymore.

“Hey, Mari----”

“Listen to me, Shin.”

Marino stopped Shin mid-sentence and raised her head.

She had probably been crying as there were traces of tears. It silenced Shin.

“My real name... is Masaki Rino. I’ll turn 19 this year.”

During their whole time together, Marino had rarely talked about her real life circumstances.

She didn’t have to say that she didn’t want to talk about it for Shin to understand. He knew her well enough to.

That is why he felt he had to ask, after Marino suddenly revealed such information.

“...is it okay for me to know?”

“Yes. I want Shin to remember.”

“I see. Then I’d also like you to remember my real name. I’m Kiritani Shinya, a 21-year-old university student...”

Shin also revealed his real name. He hadn’t said it in a long time.

“I said it at the orphanage too, but when the death game ends, why don’t we all meet up and go out drinking or something? We could book Holly and Shadow’s place or something.”

“...yes, I’d love to.”

Marino was now smiling next to him, but there was something strange with her today.

Shin had made her laugh many times before, that’s why he knew.

Her words suggested that they would never meet in real life, that their relationship was limited to this world.

“Marino... no, Rino. Can you tell me what’s wrong?”

“The real me... is sick. The doctor said that it’s a disease with no known cause or treatment.”

Marino explained that the reason why her time within the game was limited and she never spoke about real life was because of this. She did not know when her condition would worsen, so she thought it would not be good to get too close to other people.

“Why did you get closer to me, then? I know this is just a virtual world, but you did tell me a lot about yourself.”

“Yeah... I wonder why?”

Her voice felt calm now. Even if her words were in question form, she seemed to know the answer already.

“I can say this now, but... at first, I had no intention of getting too involved. There was no way I could get a boyfriend in real life, so I wanted to try what it felt like being in a relationship, even if virtually. You’re the first one that approached me in this world, so I chose you. That was the only reason, really.”

There was no real reason. So said Marino, but her sighs made it also feel like she was just trying to convince herself.

“Yes, that was the only reason, and yet...”

The words expressed her feelings of surrender towards what had happened against her will.

“Talking, adventuring, winning and losing with you... before I realized it, I was always thinking about you. I didn’t realize that I was falling in love, until a nurse pointed it out. I have never even met you in the real world, and yet...”

Marino said that she really didn’t understand.

“The me in the real world could die at any moment. I sometimes wondered what would happen to the me here if the real me died. Then once, I wondered... how good would it be if time just continued on like this?”

“That’s...”

“It won’t. If I die in the real world, the me here will just disappear. I know it. Despite that... I can’t help hoping. My attachment to the real world, my desire to go back, is very weak.”

“.....”

Shin did not say anything. He had plenty of reasons to want to return to the real world.

But he could understand Marino's feelings. Shin also found the current world pleasant to be in after all.

“I'm sorry. I just wanted to tell you that I'm sick, but I ended up blabbing about stuff I didn't even... I guess I'll go sleep in the next room tonight.”

Maybe she felt bad towards the now silent Shin. Marino got out of the bed and headed towards the door.

But he would not let her go.

“Aah!”

Shin firmly grabbed her thin arms and pulled her towards him. He pulled her rather abruptly, so Marino's body fell towards him, putting her in his arms.

“Er, ehm...”

Marino was confused by the sudden development. She didn't understand what Shin's actions meant.

“I'll come to you.”

“Eh?”

“Even in the real world, I'll stay with you, Rino.”

In the original world, Shin was just a university student. He couldn't cure Marino's disease.

There was but one thing he could do: to be by her side.

Not out of compassion. Not out of pity.

He wanted to be with her. Even if there was little time left for her, he wanted to spend it together.

Nothing more, nothing less.

“I’ll be with you, until the end.”

“.....”

Shin didn’t know how Marino would react to his words.

Logical or not, those were Shin’s real feelings.

“But I’m... a real burden of a woman, you know? I’m spoiled, Shin... Shinya, if you talk with other girls I get jealous right away. I also don’t have much time left to live. Don’t you understand that I’m going to die, leaving nothing but my selfish feelings? You’ll just waste time with me, Shinya...”

Responding to Shin’s declaration, Marino nervously listed off all of her faults.

Despite her words, however, her arms were now around Shin, her forehead pressing against his chest. Movements that expressed her intention of never letting him go. Shin responded by gently patting her head.

“Hey, should I believe your words or your actions?”

“...You know it already. Dummy.”

Marino raised her head a little and replied while glaring at Shin. The room was barely lit, but Shin did not fail to notice Marino’s flushed cheeks.

“If you don’t say it, I can’t be sure though, hmm...”

“You... tease. And I was so decided and all.”

Still glaring, Marino went silent for a few seconds, then whispered.

“I don’t want to be separated from you. Not in this virtual world, nor in the real one.”

“Yes, I promise. Even if this world ends, I will come meet you, Rino.”

The two then slept together in the same bed.

Wrapped in a peaceful sense of happiness.

C h a p t e r 2

タ イ ム リ ミ ッ ト

THE NEW
GATE

Chapter 2

The monsters were restless.

On the other side of the mountain facing the hometown was an area players rarely set foot in.

In this area characterized by nothing but its vastness, all sorts of monsters had gathered without fighting one another.

Snake-type monsters. Tiger-type monsters. Bird-type monsters and humanoid-type monsters as well. There were even Chimera-types, fusions of several monsters.

Normally, such a high density of monsters would cause a reduction in numbers as they attack one other. However, a certain player's presence prevented this.

Atop this area's highest hill stood a lone player.

This player, Hameln, sighed while looking down on the monsters.

"So this is the maximum that low-grade items allowed me to gather. Causing an artificial invasion event is difficult indeed."

Even while uttering such a line, his charming features showed the mischievous smile of a boy who had just performed a successful prank.

Hameln was 170 centimeters tall and had typical Pixie tattoo-like marks on his face. He wore a gentleman-like attire, adorned with accessories here and there, complete with white gloves and a long stick held in one hand. The top hat on his head completed his gentleman-like appearance, but his demeanor was contradictory to that of any true gentleman.

A pack of monsters of all types. Controlling it in order to unleash it on a hometown was not something a sane person would come up with.

"Hmm?"

Just as Hameln pondered over his next course of action, he noticed that a monster icon disappeared from the map.

Two icons were breaking through the monster horde. Considering that the level of the gathered monsters was 300 at most, it was something any somewhat experienced player could have done.

“They’re probably thinking that they’ve found a nice hunting ground? Or perhaps they have come to exterminate the monsters because they consider them dangerous.”

Hameln activated 【Clairvoyance】 and 【Through Sight】.

His now expanded field of sight revealed a man wielding a glaive with a 1-mel long blade and another brandishing a broadsword with a very jagged blade, severely lacking in practicality.

The former, who was wearing silver armor, was named Vlad. Hameln’s 【Analyze】 displayed his job as Dragon Knight.

The latter, wearing brown armor, apparently possessed higher stats; only his name, Gargalla, could be displayed.

“Oh my, he noticed me from such a distance?”

Hameln was genuinely surprised at feeling Gargalla’s eyes on himself.

It was well-known that some players sometimes felt mysterious sensations unexplainable by reason, such as “I felt someone watching me” or “I can feel someone’s killing intent”.

To be able to pinpoint the direction after only being in the line of sight for about 10 seconds, however, was something pretty exceptional.

Still in Hameln’s field of vision, Gargalla grinned. They adjusted their course towards the hill Hameln was on, blowing away the monsters in their way like pebbles.

“Heavens, their course changed. Maybe they’re the same type as I am?”

Hameln grimaced, lamenting the development of the situation.

The instant Hameln saw Gargalla's smile, he felt that deep inside they were very similar.

He felt more displeasure rather than familiarity toward Gargalla, a perfect example of the inability to tolerate someone just because of how similar that person was to oneself. In short, it could be said that those who were very similar in this regard abhorred one another.

With this ambiguous sensation in his heart, Hameln observed as Gargalla drew closer to his position.

"Hey there. Gotta thank you for not hightailing it."

"No need for thanks. I simply wished to confirm something."

After roughly five minutes, Gargalla had reached Hameln's hill.

Some time later, Vlad reached as well. They had arrived at different times, although neither showed signs of exhaustion.

"You're slow, man!! Raise the pace, will ya??"

"Dragon knights are meant to be with dragons... please don't ask for the impossible."

Vlad darted an annoyed glance at Gargalla's mocking tone. As he had implied, Dragon Knights could show their full capabilities only when accompanied by their dragons. In fact, when they were by themselves their stats decreased.

Naturally, it would have been very difficult to catch up to Gargalla, who had superior stats and equipment.

"Haha, ah, apologies for all the ruckus man. Let me tell you straight out, we didn't come to fight or anything. Though it looks like doing so could be fun."

"I will take that as a compliment. Now then, what brings you here?"

Hameln, who was just observing the two in silence, finally prompted Gargalla to speak.

"You're the tamer who uses monsters to attack people outside of towns, right? There's something ya gotta help us with. This guy here will tell you all the juicy details."

“First you leave me behind and now I have to do all the explaining?”

Vlad voiced his dissatisfaction, but Gargalla, looked in the opposite direction while ignoring him.

Hameln, thinking that the newly-arrived duo was a pretty hilarious combination, was holding back his laughter.

“Gentlemen, please continue your bickering later. So, what exactly did you want from me? Though, I can feel that you probably share the same sentiments.”

“My apologies for showing you such an embarrassing scene. We wish to request for you to use monsters to attack a certain town. I am sure you have also grown bored of crushing small settlements, yes?”

I see, they sure did their homework. Hameln was honestly impressed to hear what Vlad already knew about him.

With the items Hameln could find, there was a limit to the amount and levels of monsters he could gather. He enjoyed observing how people fought against adversities and lately often thought about wanting to cause something more spectacular.

“I must admit, that is quite the enthralling proposal.”

“I am truly happy to hear such words.”

“With my current gear, however, all I can procure are monsters such as the ones you broke through just now. To attack a hometown fortified by player defenses, their fighting power is severely lacking.”

Just based on the level, as soon as advanced players joined in the fray, the assault would be quelled in no time. It was also clear by how easily Gargalla stomped through the monster horde earlier.

“The only reason for that, though, is item quality. Am I right?”

“Hmm. I’m not sure how you know that, but yes, you are correct. Just as average iron cannot create Ancient-grade weapons, high-grade items are necessary in order to produce good results. Well, quite obvious, isn’t it?”

Some low-grade items were sometimes necessary, in a “secret trick” sort of way, but generally if one wished to have rare gear and skills, equally precious materials or items were needed. Those, however, were extremely rare and difficult to obtain.

“Don’t worry. We have come to meet you precisely because there is something we would like you to take a look at.”

Vlad flashed a very confident smile to Hameln. It was meant to show friendliness and affability, but Hameln simply found it very suspicious.

“What will you do after making me cause a monster attack? It depends on the town too, but I’m sure you are aware that most of them are heavily fortified and defended.”

“We know, to an extent, what the conditions for the start of a monster invasion event are. Mr. Hameln, we wish for you take part in it and take control of the monsters.”

Hameln’s eyes narrowed. Using monsters to attack cities was something he was very interested in too.

Many players theorized about the conditions for the creation of such events, hoping to defend their bases better, but they had not been fully revealed.

“To be honest, I am more interested in these conditions than the items... but I suppose I will not ask. I would like to know your goals though. Some are interested in the invasion itself, but you two do not look like you would care for that.”

“Yes indeed, our goals are different. Well, we both have different ones, actually.”

PKs using invasion events to hunt for players rarely shared common goals. What they had were only their respective desires.

For Vlad, it was the desire of getting rid of the “player trash” around Shin.

For Gargalla, it was the desire of dueling strong players to the death.

Some just wanted to go on a rampage, while others still treated the current situation as a game, engaging in very dangerous endeavors.

“I see. I used to think of myself as someone pretty strange, but I see that I have good company.”

Hameln spoke without breaking his smile.

“It is quite normal to use whatever means possible in order to achieve one’s goal. Is it not?”

“It’s what they call being loyal to your desires for me.”

Neither one of the three cared in the slightest about the possible victims. Even while thinking that the other two were abnormal people, they could keep cooperating. Likely because they did not have any interest in each other.

“That’s good enough. Unleashing a monster attack on a town where a High Human resides sounds quite appealing. So, about the items and the day of execution?”

“It will depend on your monsters. How much time do you need to gather them?”

Vlad inquired as he handed the item he had brought to Hameln.

“With this item, I certainly should be able to gather monsters of a relatively high level. I would need about one week.”

Hameln made his decision after observing the item given to him, the 『Putrefaction Nectar』. The 『Putrefaction Nectar』 was dropped by Queen Rafflesia, a Trent-type advanced monster. Queen Rafflesias were monsters of considerably high levels in the 800-850 range and attacked in circular patterns using their roots and vines.

Huge flowers, roots and vines attacking in waves, branches lashing from the stem. It was difficult to decide whether it was a flower or a tree, but on the other hand it was undoubtedly a level 3 monster that players needed extensive skill to defeat.

The 『Putrefaction Nectar』 could be used to create the 『Tempting Beeswax』 and 『Hungry Beast Ambrosia』 items using a Tamer skill. The former allowed one to temporarily control monsters, while the latter, once materialized, allowed one to attract monsters up to level 700.

“One week, is it. Can we set it for 10 days from now then? Even if we know the conditions, we cannot just do it anytime we want.”

“Understood.”

Hameln nodded while pondering what could be involved in these conditions. There was too little known information, though, preventing him from reaching any conclusion.

“You are interested in the conditions, yes?”

“Yes, well, but I suppose it is better not to ask.”

“Not at all, we came to you to seek your cooperation, after all. Telling you won’t be a problem.”

“Oh? You would reveal it so easily?”

Hameln thought it to be very important information and was puzzled to see Vlad agreeing to talk about it so easily.

“That’s not a problem. It’s just a matter of time until they are found... no, I should say that while they are not made public, some players already found out.”

After this premise, Vlad started talking.

The monster invasion event creation condition, as far as Vlad knew, was either that the number of players in a town, or the number of players going outside from a Hometown, had to exceed a certain value.

The more players that were in a town, the greater the event manifestation probability, as well as monster numbers and levels would increase.

The progress of the dungeon clearing had spread the players wide, so the first condition had become difficult to fulfill, thus decreasing monster invasion events. When they manifested, it was always because of the latter condition.

“Hmm, I see. I can understand the first, but the second seems rather difficult to find to me. Did you find the answer on a stone inscription maybe?”

When game events ended, stone inscriptions with their creation conditions appeared as unique items. Some recurring events, like monster invasions, were exceptions to this rule, but from Vlad’s explanation Hameln supposed that it was the reason.

“Yes, it is exactly as you guessed. It seems that it is dropped rarely, in areas seldom

frequented by players. ”

“Not even major guilds are aware?”

“Those, other than us, in charge of large numbers of people... like prominent members in major guilds probably know already. The stone inscriptions do not come in singles after all. With many people the probability of finding them rises as well. We too are employing spies to prevent information leaks, but there is no way of absolutely preventing information from spreading, thus I suppose it is better to consider it to be already known. Even if it was, there might be several reasons why such information is not revealed at large.”

Knowing the conditions could have made it possible to prevent the event from manifesting. But no guilds had ever shown such intentions, nor was such information ever revealed publicly. At most, there were some unreliable rumors, nothing else.

Major guilds had their own philosophy. This is what Hameln gleaned from Vlad’s words.

“Hehe, humans are truly never boring. Yes, I shall lend you my help. A large-scale monster invasion in a hometown, used by PKs to infiltrate the town. I do feel like I am going to see something unprecedented.”



Just imagining it all was beyond exciting. Noticing that Vlad and Gargalla were grinning just like he was, Hameln's smile widened.

†

A few days after their meeting with Hameln, Vlad and Gargalla went to visit Aldo.

Aldo's home was located in Kalkia; it had not been just a coincidence for Robin to meet Shin on the latter's way back from the orphanage.

"We're going to see that guy again?"

"Yes, because thanks to the items Shin gave us, another dungeon has been cleared. After all, that too is one of our accomplishments."

"Even if Shin didn't do it himself? Will the man really accept this?"

"He will. These kind of people just love to interpret things in the way most benefiting to them."

It's just hilarious how ridiculously dumb they are. After adding this comment, Vlad knocked on Aldo's door.

Aldo's home, located in what could be called a quiet, luxurious neighborhood, was a mansion that towered above even the other high-end homes of the area.

The same maid NPC that had welcomed them last time appeared. Aldo seemed to be at home; soon after the maid went to report their arrival, they were allowed inside.

"Any developments?"

"Yes. Just a few days ago, we have obtained his cooperation and another dungeon has already been cleared. As proof, there is the public statement from the Savage Lions, one of the guilds which was already involved in the clearing."

"Oh oh, you surely produce results quickly. Unlike that Robin."

Aldo was alone in his home. Vlad had planned to just take his reward and leave the rest for a time when Robin was not present, but now decided to take the chance to do it all, grinning deeper.

“Thank you very much. Thus, I must ask... knowing full well that this might sound impudent, I would like to receive the promised reward. I promise, of course, to continue pouring every last effort into dungeon clearing.”

“So be it. You showed results, I suppose you deserve compensation.”

With an arrogant attitude, Aldo took a bunch of cards from his item box and flung them at Vlad.

Vlad barely managed to catch the flying cards. The cards' holder name had been erased, so they did not bounce away when he caught them.

Looking at their names, Vlad was very surprised.

“『Excalibur』, First Rate Potions and Ethers? These would be worth a fair amount of money. Are you sure you can give them to us?”

Vlad had gathered information about Aldo, but would have never thought that he would give Ancient-grade weapons away.

“Even in heaps, this world's currency is worthless. I have too many of those items too. Use them well.”

Aldo could not see what there was to be surprised about and Vlad thanked him with a wry chuckle. This man really did not understand anything.

“We shall strive to do our utmost. By the way, I do not see Mr. Robin anywhere. Is he at work?”

“What is your business with that useless fool?”

“Well, as he apparently hasn't produced results yet, I was thinking of having him help us.”

“What could a man who can't even call someone even do?”

Aldo's lack of any expectations from Robin was evident.

“I heard that he has contacted Shin, but has been refused. As an apology, I was thinking of having him approach the man again. Not for a cooperation request from the clearing

team, but because the life of someone dear is in danger. That would surely spur him to clear dungeons even faster. Things would become much easier for us too if he was mentally cornered enough to get rid of his hesitations.”

Vlad explained his plan of using Robin to further press Shin, without his smile ever leaving his lips.

“Hah, you’re some villain.”

“My deepest gratitude for such praise.”

“That works for me. His uselessness has started to become unbearable after all. Do as you please.”

Aldo mercilessly cut off Robin, as if ordering a broken tool to be disposed of.

Witnessing such a display of humans being objectified, Vlad thought that this man must be seriously mentally cornered, and put away the other lines he had prepared to convince him.

“Thank you very much. Then I shall start preparations immediately.”

After expressing their thanks to Aldo, the two returned to the hometown.

“Are we going to wait for that Hood guy now?”

Gargalla, who had not spoken a word during the meeting, finally talked to Vlad with a tone full of despise.

“Yes. He should be at his limits, so we have to make sure he acts on the designed day. I am sure he is desperate himself, so I don’t think it will be difficult.”

“Amazing how you get all these ideas though. I have it easy since all I have to do is watch, but it’s a pain for sure.”

“Despite that, you are quite helpful.”

“If your plan works out, I can fight him going all out, that’s why. If you fail, I’ll crush you, end of story.”

Gargalla clearly stated that his reason for cooperation was only their common goal.

Vlad responded by looking at Gargalla with a somewhat bored annoyance.

“You cooperate because we share the same goal, I know that already. But there is one thing I must say.”

“What’s that now?”

Gargalla snapped back and Vlad looked at him again, this time with a stone-like expressionless face.

“If he goes all out on you, you’re going to die, you know?”

Vlad expressed his, albeit twisted, absolute trust in Shin and his abilities.

If the plan succeeds Shin will likely come to kill the perpetrators, Vlad and Gargalla, without hesitation. That eliminated any chance of Gargalla winning.

“I’ll be trying to kill him. Nothing strange about getting killed.”

Gargalla smiled broadly, expressing how he would enjoy that too.

†

The day before Vlad’s meeting with Hameln, Robin wandered aimlessly through Kalkia at dusk as Aldo’s words continuously echoed in his mind.

If you can’t produce any results, you’re fired.

It was something Aldo could do. After all, Robin had witnessed it in the past.

Despite that, Robin didn’t do anything for the man about to be fired. He could not do anything, afraid he too would meet the same fate.

When the times comes for me to be fired, no one will mourn for me, just like that time, Robin thought.

“Hello, Mr. Robin.”

“.....Who are you?”

Robin had been walking with his gaze down, in desperation. A man’s sudden approach made him suspicious.

“My name is Vlad. I was actually requested by Mr. Aldo to urge a player named Shin to quicken his dungeon clearing. I learned that you were given instructions to do the same thing, so I was thinking that we could work together.”

Vlad explained the situation in a polite, courteous tone.

Maybe Vlad too was an employee of the same company? Robin briefly pondered over this, but he didn’t want to think about it any deeper.

“You too... terrible, isn’t it...?”

It was really terrible. How many times he had wondered, *if only my boss wasn’t someone like that...*

“You seem quite distressed, is something the matter? You do not appear to be affected by status ailments, though.”

Despite Vlad’s worried question, Robin turned and walked away.

“...Please, leave me alone.”

“That won’t do. You’ll be discarded like this, you know? Here and in reality as well.”

Robin abruptly turned around.

“Have you come to laugh at my misery!?”

His honest feelings erupted out. His voice was louder than expected.

“Absolutely not. In fact, I truly respect you for what you must have been through until now. I have a proposal, Mr. Robin, so would you hear me out? If you accept, I can erase the source of your troubles and dispel your worries, you know?”

“Huh?”

It took a moment for Robin to understand what Vlad meant.

Erase the source of his troubles.

That meant---

“You’ll kill him for me?”

Robin’s words clearly included a hint of hope.

“No, but... he’s strong. His avatar contains a cheat, coded in by management... most of his stats are over 800. His equipment is full of Ancient-grade gear too, stuff that you rarely get even if you pay. There is also barely any chance to kill him since he is always cooped up at home...”

“There is... a chance.”

“Eh?”

Vlad put a hand on Robin’s shoulder and whispered something into his ear. Robin stood still for several seconds.

“If you help me, I will erase him without fail. One of my comrades is in the same class as he is, you know. Excluding differences in stats, a greenhorn with a strong avatar is no match for someone who has actually fought in this world. You understand, don’t you? I heard that he doesn’t even remember all of his skills, right?”

“...yes, that’s right. He hasn’t even fought properly here.”

He can kill? That man?

Without Aldo around, Robin would not be forced to pester Shin. There was no need to kowtow to anyone. No need to run errands for others. No need to be mocked for playing a game. To run around everywhere looking for items. To venture into dangerous areas. To be avoided by the players working at the frontlines to clear dungeons.

If they returned to reality, Robin would surely be fired if Aldo was around. He would be fired without a just cause, so he would not receive any retirement bonus either.

“If so...”

“What do you think? Isn’t it an attractive proposal?”

Vlad’s voice easily slipped into his ears.

Attractive. Yes, it was very attractive. Even if it was a demon’s whisper.

“...what do you need from me?”

“Hehe. Just something, yes, something very simple.”

Vlad’s lips emitted a clear, bright laugh.

His smile was evil in a way Robin had never seen in his life.

“I want you to do just one thing. If you can do just that, my comrades and I will handle the rest.”

Smiling throughout, Vlad told Robin what he wanted him to do.

“That’s----”

Robin was shaken by what Vlad told him.

“One person will be erased. What, you thought you could keep your hands clean?”

“But... that’s...”

“Don’t worry. You just have to bring them. There is no need to hurt the child. I’ll say it again, you just have to bring them. That will be enough.”

Vlad’s gentle voice continued.

“My comrades and I will do everything. You simply have to call one person. Is that a sin? The person you call will just walk into something unfortunate. We will be the ones to act. You will share none of the blame.”

“I’m... not to... blame...?”

A false pardon.

Robin did not want to look at reality. He did not express his doubts.

“Yes. You wish to return to the real world, free of concerns, right? You wish to meet your family, don’t you? Won’t you help us then, just a little?”

I want to see my family.

That thought made him decide.

For the current Robin, nothing except his family really mattered.

†

The morning following the night Shin slept while embracing Marino. Shin woke up feeling someone wiggling in his arms.

“.....ah.”

As he opened his eyes, Shin found Marino’s face right before his, at breathing distance.

Noticing that Shin was awake, she tried to retreat.

Before she could, though, Shin’s arms moved. He hugged Marino tightly before she could jump out of the covers. Holding the back of her head, he pulled her towards him.

“Eeh!? Hey, wait, mmhn!?”

Without letting her resist, Shin went in for a kiss. After a moment, Marino stopped resisting.

“Hah...”

After the kiss, Marino seemed to lose all of her energy and just stared into space. Seeing her so defenseless, Shin thought to play a prank on the girl, but she returned to her senses before he had a chance to do so.

“W-Whuat are you doing, all of a sudden?”

Marino was not only stuttering but also out of breath, her cheeks flushing red.

“What? You wanted to kiss, right? So badly that you tried it while I was sleeping.”

“W-Well, that’s true, but... it couldn’t be helped! I was looking at you sleep and couldn’t hold back.”

Marino spoke while poking Shin’s chest. Shin, on the other hand, couldn’t stop grinning.

“No problem then. At least none for me. Rather, you can continue. Snuggle all you want.”

“That’s enough!!”

Shin opened his arms to encourage her, but Marino scampered out of the room. Shin lay down again, thinking that he probably teased her too much.

What Marino had said the night before about her illness was on his mind.

In reality, they were probably sleeping in a hospital bed. If anything happened, the doctors and nurses would likely come running. Marino was already sick, so she would be assisted even more.

Shin didn’t know what continuously sleeping could do to the body. It was possible that Marino’s life expectancy was constantly shortening. Thinking about it, he felt an urge to immediately look for a new area and clear it.

“.....calm down. Rushing ahead without thinking is the worst choice in a dungeon.”

Shin jumped up from the bed and took a deep breath. Even during the game, he had sometimes picked the wrong skill and died just before clearing a dungeon. In this world, that would be utterly reckless to do.

Shin reprimanded himself not to lose his cool, but he couldn’t help feeling restless. The life of the first person he had ever loved was at stake. He could not manage to stay completely calm.

Then, he heard someone knock. As Shin responded, the door opened a little.

“Breakfast is ready.”

“Sorry, I’m coming.”

Shin apologized to the still blushing Marino and stood up. When he passed by her, he stroked her hair without thinking.

“Ehm, what?”

“Nothing, just felt like stroking your hair.”

“.....that’s fine, then.”

Marino looked embarrassed but also a little happy.

Looking at her, Shin felt his restlessness dissipate.

(I have to make it in time.)

On the other hand, his drive was even stronger.

I will return alive with Marino. Such emotions burned brightly within Shin’s heart.

The heart could influence the body. Even though Shin’s body was supposed to be mere data, he now felt pumped and full of energy as if it had been strengthened.

“H-Haven’t you had enough? You’re patting me too much!”

“Hey, it feels really good to touch, so...”

He felt uneasy, but also stronger, thanks to her.

He could only do everything in his power now.

“Ok then, time for breakfast!”

“Hey! Don’t go off by yourself!”

Shin laughed wryly as Marino hurried after him.

“OK, shall we go?... is what I want to say, but...”

“Meow? What’s wrong, meow?”

Shin’s words elicited a response from an all-too-sweet female voice.

After breakfast, Shin was all ready to go to a dungeon, but he wasn’t alone; Catnip was standing next to him. She was wearing her cat ears maid costume, just like she did at the shop.

The only difference from her normal shop attire was the Baghnakhs equipped on her hands. Because of Catnip’s appearance, these platinum gray-colored claws looked just like a cat’s. Their grade was middle Mythology, their completely not cute name being 『Stray Cat Fever』 .

“So, what’s with the getup?”

“Shimeow, you’re going to a new dungeon, meow? I want to come with you, meow!”

As players unlocked new areas, they would be the first to add those locations to their maps. As some time had already elapsed since Shin had liberated this area, a good degree of additional exploration had already occurred.

Since Shin hadn't completely explored the area he had unlocked, he had to fill in his map with information purchased from information brokers. Using information provided by those players who had fully explored the region, Shin had a completely updated map of the area.

“Er, yes I am going, but... were you waiting for me all this time?”

The daily activities of players varied depending on their mood. Shin was proactive in clearing areas, but even he would not visit them every day. Even if one waited beside the teleport point, there was no guarantee of meeting.

“Marimeow told me. She said that you’d definitely go to a dungeon, so I’ve been waiting since this morning, meow.”

Marino had completely seen through Shin’s intentions.

“You keep saying things like that, and your fanclub will start sending assassins after me...”

“Hehe, meow! No blushing, meow!”

“I’m honestly not joking, you know?”

Shin subtly tried to make Catnip aware of the presence of the fanclub members behind her, but to no avail. Was it on purpose or was this just how she was? Catnip was smiling broadly, but Shin couldn’t help feeling tense.

“.....ok, setting aside whether or not we are going together for a moment, why are you the only one here? What happened to your usual party members? They wouldn’t like to know that you are coming with me by yourself, which is frankly quite scary too.”

“Ah... actually, when they went looking for ingredients the other day, they were attacked by PKs, meow.”

As far as Shin knew, Catnip’s area for collecting ingredients was close to the hometown. It would have been a big risk for the PKs too.

Shin remembered what he had heard from the grocery stand owner; PKs had started becoming more active lately.

The other people in the store did not seem to notice, but Shin switched to chat and relayed this information to Catnip.

“(Sorry, meow... I got a little scared. But like I said now, I’m going to avoid going outside as much as possible now. But if I do that, we’ll run out of ingredients, meow... so please let me come with you. Think of it as helping me out, meow.)”

“(If that’s the reason, no problem at all.)”

Exploring areas was not necessarily any less dangerous than venturing into dungeons, but considering the known monsters’ levels and the field’s conditions, there would be no problems in bringing Catnip along.

Shin, too, had not always explored alone, even after the death game started.

The only problem could be that Shin and Catnip had different goals.

“(I mainly explore unmapped areas, though. You’re going to collect ingredients, right? Wouldn’t it be prudent to go with some other players?)”

“(Not really, meow. In the unmapped area now, there is a place I used to frequent before the death game, meow. I’m not sure how it’s changed now, but I might be able to find the items I’m looking for there, meow.)”

If the area was as she remembered, Catnip’s knowledge would surely help Shin. If the area had changed, they would simply proceed as in exploring a normal unmapped area.

“(Anyway, staying by your side is the safest route, meow. With your support characters, you could flip any boss on their backs, meow.)”

“(Why would I even flip them on their backs!? Well yes, I suppose I could protect you without a problem, but...)”

Catnip was an advanced player herself; she wouldn’t just be riding Shin’s coattails.

“(Your store is an oasis for all players after all. I’d be happy to contribute too. OK, I was thinking of leaving right now, what will you do?)”

“(I can go anytime too, meow. The party members know already, so no worries, meow)”

Shin nodded, albeit wondering if they were really convinced of Catnip's need to accompany Shin alone.

Being seen teleporting together would surely spark a never-ending series of trouble, so Shin said that he would wait at a specific place and teleported to Tsuki no Hokora first. They also decided on a time, to avoid missing each other.

In Tsuki no Hokora, Shin added four of his five support characters to the party.

High Lord Filma and High Dragnil Shibaid in the front, High Elf Schnee as mobile unit. Lastly, the High Pixie Sety in the rear. Girard possessed a fighting style similar to Catnip, so Shin decided to let him hold the fort this time.

After checking the members’ equipment and items, Shin set the AI strategy to focus on defense. The AI could not make complicated decisions like players would, so this

setting was for insurance.

“As long as I make sure our HP doesn’t go below a certain level and they support us, we should be OK. All frontline members can use taunt skills too.”

If necessary, Shin would have his support characters use their aggro-gathering skills and act as decoys while he and Catnip would flee. That was one reason to bring them along. Shin had never used this strategy before, but many players were saved because they used it

He had no intention of stepping in overly dangerous areas, but anything could happen in an unmapped zone or dungeon. One could never be too safe.

“OK, It’s about time.”

Shin went again to the hometown, then teleported to the area for the exploration.

The teleport point reminded him of a stone cathedral, it was an orthodox type. In order to avoid inconveniencing the other players, Shin waited for Catnip a short distance away.

About 5 minutes later, exactly at the specified time, Catnip teleported in.

“Sorry for the wait, meow.”

“I didn’t wait long, really. Let’s go.”

Shin and Catnip headed towards an unmapped zone. The thick woodland area outside the teleport point made it difficult to observe one’s surroundings. Shin decided to have Schnee go on ahead to scout the road as they proceeded.

“How is it? We just arrived, but is it as you remember?”

Shin asked while checking his detection skills.

“I can’t tell yet, meow. But the atmosphere of this woodland is the same, meow.”

The cathedral-like teleport point was exactly the same as she remembered, Catnip added.

“.....Schnee has already found monsters. A level 388 Sneak Boar. That’s exactly the type you mentioned, Catnip. This info hasn’t been released to the public yet.”

Shin checked the information received from Schnee through the menu. Information about monsters appearing in unmapped areas was publicly available, but the Sneak Boar was not listed in it.

“Really, meow? But I knew about that, meow. It’s a rare monster that’s not found easily, meow.”

“I see we can expect great things from you, miss Catnip.”

Overconfidence was a taboo, but knowing what monsters could appear would let them prepare with suitable countermeasures.

“I hope the monster I’m looking for comes up too, meow.”

Shin ambushed the Sneak Boar, quickly felled it, and checked the item dropped.

Catnip was looking for Sugar Unicorns, monster that dropped sweet-type items.

If she could find some she could make new creations for her store, so Catnip eagerly searched for the monster.

“Now that I think about it, you did say that you would have become a pastry chef if you hadn’t become an idol, right?”

“Yup, meow. I think it’s nice to have a lot of dreams. I’m also doing my best, meow.”

Catnip flexed her muscles, a proud look on her face. She was probably trying to show her biceps, but her thin arms just made her pose look cute.

“What about you, Shimeow? Is there something you want to do, meow?”

“Hmm, well... I’m in university now, but I’m not exactly striving for this one thing I want to do... I like games, but if I was asked if I wanted to make one, I’d probably say no...”

“I see, meow. What about Marimeow? Has she ever talked of such things?”

“Ah..... well, Marino...”

“I know about her disease, meow.”

“Eh?”

Shin was not sure how to reply. Catnip surprised him and said something unexpected. Shin was so stunned that he froze for an instant.

“Only people very close to her know, meow. As far as I know, only I, Holmeow and Milmeow know about it.”

More people knew about Marino’s condition than Shin expected. Incidentally, Holmeow was Holly, but Shin didn’t know who Milmeow was.

“I just heard about it recently, though.”

“That can’t be helped, meow. Some things are difficult to say to those truly dear to you, meow. Marimeow was really worried, thinking about if and how to tell you.”

Some things were easier to say to other girls or adults. Catnip added this conclusion.

“Really.”

“Hehe, meow. Shimeow, not being the first shocked you, meow?”

“Gh, right where it hurts...”

“But not telling was the right choice, meow. If you knew right away, you would have rushed in the dungeons without thinking about your safety, meow.”

Catnip looked straight at Shin, not smiling anymore.

“.....I can’t deny that.”

Players were now used to the situation and could retain a certain calm in their hearts. But that was not the case in the early stages of the death game. Obsessed about returning to reality, some players relentlessly urged Shin to clear the dungeons.

Thinking back on that period, Shin realized that Catnip’s guess would very likely have

turned true.

“Things were really hectic then.”

“Yup, meow. When I opened my shop, some told me that I was being disrespectful, meow.”

Doing things unrelated to going back was “evil”. Such a mood reigned over the players at the time.

“Few say that now, though. A few days ago I had someone come up to me and say it... but he had his company’s boss here, who keeps nagging him about that. Looked like he had it pretty tough.”

“The people that rely on others without doing anything themselves either shut themselves in their homes or just wait, meow. But having company relations reflected in-game is just the worst, meow...”

Shin had no intention of answering to the summon, but felt compassion towards Robin’s situation. After hearing about the man’s circumstances, Catnip’s expression turned sour.

“Hmm? Catnip, there’s a monster pack ahead.”

Trying to return the conversation to the right track, Shin opened the menu and saw a message about the appearance of a monster pack, composed of 4 units. Maybe thanks to Catnip’s earnest wishing, it was a pack of Sugar Unicorns.

“I’m looking forward to your new creations, Catnip.”

“Meow!? Did you find them, meow?”

“They’re 4 in all. Let’s catch them all.”

Shin ordered Schnee to standby and changed equipment in order to boost item drops.

The card he pulled out changed to a black bow with thunder-like decorations. It was the Ancient-grade longbow 『Surging Thunder Bow』. Its shots consumed MP, and one could adjust the attack power by regulating how many MP were consumed.

The finely crafted arrows were imbued with lightning, the target hit had a high of probability of being subjected with the Hi-Paralyze status.

“I’ll stop their movements. You give the final blow, Catnip.”

“Leave’em to me, meow.”

Shin ordered the support characters not to interfere and prepared to fire 『Surging Thunder Bow』 .

A half-transparent blue line appeared in his line of sight; it was a support function for aiming.

Then, Shin activated the Bow-type Martial skill 【Multi Arrow】 . Blue lines stretched towards each of the 4 Sugar Unicorns.

As Shin released the bowstring, lightning-like arrows zig-zagged through the trees, towards their targets. Splitting in midair, they all cleanly struck the monsters.

Without wasting time, Catnip jumped towards the collapsing monsters.

The 『Stray Cat Fever』 Catnip equipped emitted an orange glow.

“ 【Greedy Claw】 , meow!”

Orange-colored arc-like effects extended from 『Stray Cat Fever』 ’s four claws.

Unable to dodge, the Sugar Unicorns were crushed by Catnip’s 4-hit consecutive attack and vanished.

“Item drop increase, meow!”

Catnip’s words confirmed that 【Greedy Claw】 ’s effect had activated.

Most weapons had skills with Greedy in their names, which had the chance of increasing item drops from defeated enemies.

“Looking good, meow!”

“That’s right. Hopefully we can find the dungeon too.”

The duo continued to explore the area’s unmapped parts. They met monster packs several more times after the Sugar Unicorns.

“Shimeow, isn’t there something strange here?”

“You’re right. The monster encounter rate is too high.”

After the game had become VR-compatible, a too large number of monsters would be impossible for players to deal with, so the number of monsters appearing in a designated area had been reduced. Because of this, it was rare to encounter several monster units in less than 5 minutes.

“Could it be an event, meow?”

“There was no announcement, though. I would understand if they were bug-types, but...”

Bug-based monsters like ants and bees would appear in great numbers close to their nests. But the monsters Shin’s party had been fighting were mostly animal or human-like.

“I have a bad feeling about this. It’s dangerous to go on when we don’t know what could happen. Let’s go back for now.”

“Agreed, meow.”

As they turned back, carefully checking monster presence in the surroundings, Shin’s map showed a player icon.

“Catnip, stay alert. There’s a player coming this way.”

“I see it on my map too, meow. They’re alone, meow?”

A single icon was heading towards them. It proceeded straight on, ignoring the monsters around it.

It was probably using a concealment-type skill or item. Shin prepared for a confrontation and switched weapons to his 『True Moon』.

“My my, I am sorry, did I make you wait?”

After about 1 minute, a player appeared before Shin.

It was a young man with gray-silver hair and dark purple eyes. His waist-length hair was tied behind his neck. He talked to Shin with a pleasant expression and an innocent smile.

-----Hameln - Level 255 - Tamer

Shin's 【Analyze】 saw through the concealment skill and revealed the man's name.

“Do you have business with us?”

Shin asked the question while keeping a hand on 『True Moon』's hilt. He also commanded Schnee and the others to be ready to battle.

Hameln was infamous for being a MPK - a PK that used monsters. He was said to possess very high stats.

During a guild's PK extermination in the past, it was said that he had killed the whole group of players that had come to hunt him down. It would be foolish not to be cautious when such a person appeared.

“Oh, I would have never thought of seeing you in these parts, so I came to give you some advice, being the worrywart I am.”

“Advice?”

“Yes. Right now, groups of monsters are advancing towards all hometowns, to invade them. Trouble could arise if you don't go back right now, you know?”

Shin and Catnip's faces grew very tense due to the unexpected information. But if something like that was to happen, it would have been announced.

“.....despite that, I haven't heard anything from my acquaintances.”

Even saying so, Shin felt that it was more likely to be not a bluff, but the truth.

Hameln was a MPK, a specialist in gathering monsters. Shin knew about Tamer skills

to an extent, but not completely. It was plausible enough that Hameln could orchestrate a mock invasion event with items or skills that Shin didn't know about.

"The chaos and panic prevented them from contacting you, I suppose. A short while before the invasion started, some PKs have been rampaging within major guilds, you see. Haha, I too wish to go see if the defense lines will hold this time."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I'm interested in seeing how you will act. Whether you will defend the town, go hunt the PKs, or prioritize your loved ones' safety. Which will you choose, sir hero?"

With the same innocent smile, Hameln asked his question to Shin.

"Shin, I'll handle Hameln, you go back to the hometown!"

"Catnip?"

Catnip dropped her cat-like speech and urged Shin to return quickly, while glaring at Hameln.

"This guy always comes out after things have already started happening. He wouldn't lie about the invasion, Kalkia's already under attack!!"

"But even so---"

"This is not a normal event!! There's Marino in Kalkia. The orphanage's kids too. Set your priorities straight!!"

Shin couldn't say anything back.

He can't protect everything. If he doesn't focus on what he really wants to protect, he risks losing everything.

That was something Shin learned during the death game.

"(---I'll leave Schnee and the others here. Use them as decoy if necessary.)"

Shin related this to Catnip via chat, to not let Hameln hear, and poured MP into a crystal. Thanks to its effect of transporting the player to the nearest teleport point,

Shin vanished.

“Hmm, he prioritized his loved ones, as expected. Well, this is entertaining too.”

“You didn’t try to stop him? Must be feeling very confident.”

Catnip, in her fighting stance, asked the question to the pondering Hameln, his chin resting on his hand.

“Dear, I do not have the slightest intention of doing anything to you either. I like Lucky Cat’s sweets too, after all.”

“Don’t get in the way of business then!”

Catnip kicked the ground and closed in on Hameln, swinging her claws. Hameln stopped her wind-slicing strike with his stick.

“My apologies. Watching people fight against absurd situations is what entertains me the most, you see.”

“Sicko!”

Continuous blows from both hands. Surprise strikes, kicks. Catnip’s relentless attacks were stopped by Hameln spinning his stick, sometimes parrying, sometimes deflecting, composure never leaving his face.

Pixies did not have exceptional STR or AGI, but Hameln possessed high stats thanks to the resurrection bonus, enough to bridge the stat gap between Pixies and Humans, Catnip’s race.

Catnip was not weak by any means, but the game system all too evidently expressed their difference in ability.

“Oops, I see that his support characters are on a whole other level. It would be a bit too tiring to face you all, thus I suppose I will take my leave. I came to replenish on items, after all. Let us meet again, then.”

Hameln used a summoned monster as a shield against Schnee’s attack from the rear and promptly left.

Catnip tried to chase him down, but was deterred by smokescreens and other summoned monsters. Schnee and the party, following Shin's orders of protecting Catnip, did not follow Hameln but fought against the monsters.

"Please, make it in time..."

After defeating the monsters, Catnip headed to the teleport point with Schnee and the other support characters, praying.

†

It happened just after Marino saw Shin off and started helping at the orphanage.

"I'm sorry for making you accompany me."

"No, escorting is one of our duties. Nothing to worry about."

As the person in charge had forgotten to stock up on ingredients, Marino brought Luca, who had begged to tag along, with her to town.

Being escorted by Shadow, Marino shopped around while holding hands with Luca. Though, the shopping itself did not take much time.

"Go for a walk! Walk!"

Walking outside the orphanage was thrilling for Luca. It also helped that Shadow had the good idea of taking a slightly longer route.

"(It would be nice to let the other kids go out too, other than when they help out with our jobs)"

"(That's true. Most of the kids secretly play together outside anyway)"

Marino noted while chatting with Shadow that only the smaller children like Luca needed protection. Since there were so few of them now, it wouldn't be too troublesome to organize supervised outings for them.

Just as Marino thought of inviting other children next time, the alarm signaling a monster invasion blared throughout Kalkia.

“Looks like monsters are coming. Let’s hurry back to the orphanage.”

“Yes! Luca, that’s all for today’s walk. Let’s go back to the orphanage before the scary monsters arrive, okay?”

“Okay...”

“Don’t worry. The guilds are protecting the town.”

Marino tried talking as brightly as she could to comfort Luca, who was frightened by the alarm. All defenses, since the first failed monster repulsion, had succeeded. Thanks to such results, the nearby players were not too shaken.

“See, the people around us are also calm, right? Let’s go back to everyone now.”

Marino tried to walk as calmly as possible, so Luca would not panic. Even then, she had to periodically slow down at times after noticing her pace had started to quicken.

“I’m sorry, I would like a word with you...”

Then, as if aiming for that timing, Robin appeared.

Afraid of the slowly approaching Robin, Luca hid behind Marino.

“We’re in an emergency situation. Save that for later. ”

Shadow stood between Marino and Robin. He glared at Robin sternly, ready to react in case of any suspicious movements.

“I have no business with you. I came to talk with the young lady. Please stay out of this.”

“I refuse. There are monsters approaching the town right now. Everyone’s returning to their homes. Come again after the threat passes.”

Shadow spoke with a firmer tone. He would not allow any exceptions.

“I have to take the girl with me. You’re in the way!!”

Robin suddenly shouted, spread his mantle and threw a ball the size of a golf ball.

“Hah!”

Without losing his cool, Shadow pierced the flying ball with a knife.

The ball was easily severed in two, emitting a large quantity of white smoke at the same time, making it impossible to see.

“Shadow!!”

“I’m alright, I can see. Please look after Luca.”

“Yes!”

Marino gripped Luca’s hand again. Being a seasoned fighter, Shadow would not be confused by a mere smokescreen. Or so Marino had assumed, when suddenly, a shadow appeared behind her.

“Eh...?”

Marino quickly turned around, only to find a pair of glowing eyes just beyond the smoke. Judging by the height and size, they couldn’t belong to a player.

“Gwah!?”

Marino was standing there in a daze when Shadow’s scream of pain reached her ears. Looking in his direction, Marino saw something cut through the fog and blow Shadow away.

“Monsters!? The defenses have been breached!? Tch, I’ll hold them back here, take Luca and run!!”

“Y-Yes!!”

Since Marino could not use 【Through Sight】 , she was unable to see what was going on due to the smoke. However, hearing the sounds of clashing blades and seeing the light of the sparks through the smoke, she could guess.

Not much time had passed since the alarm was sounded, but one could hear screams and monster roars in the distance.

As the chat system was restricted during invasion events, Marino could not contact Shin for help.

“Marino...”

“Don’t worry, Shadow is strong, he won’t lose to some monsters. It’s dangerous here, so let’s go back quickly.”

Marino beamed the best smile she could muster at Luca and started walking away. Luckily she found a building’s wall, so they could proceed along it to an area unclouded by the smoke.

“OK, we’re finally in the main stre----!?”

After desperately running through the back alleys, they arrived in the large street Marino often passed.

What she saw there however, was a scenery completely different from the one she was used to.

“What is... this...”

Most of the stores and stalls that lined the street were engulfed in flames. The screams of fleeing people could be heard everywhere.

Some buildings were partially destroyed due to the fighting, while the undamaged ones were struck by players being flung around.

“We have to get away...”

Borderline paralyzed, Marino’s body could move only because of the warmth coming from Luca’s hand.

I can’t let go of her hand. I have to protect her.

Such feelings supported her trembling knees.

“Just a little more, be patient dear.”

“Okay...”

Holding Luca's hand, Marino continued walking along the walls, careful not to let the monsters spot her.

However, on a battlefield where monsters and players were engaged in furious battle, it was impossible to pass by unnoticed without stealth abilities.

A sudden explosion shook the building next to her; it had been caused by a 5-mels large dinosaur-like monster, which had smashed through the building to reach the main avenue.



Marino instinctively protected Luca with her body.

Fragments of the destroyed building rained all around them. These fragments were of unknown materials and could have much more offensive power than one would expect. One of them, unfortunately, ended up striking Marino's back.

"Gwah!?"

Thanks to an item she received from Shin, Marino's HP did not decrease. But due to the difference in mass between Marino and the fragment that hit her, they both were flung into the air spinning across the ground several times before stopping.

"Lu... ca..."

Marino stood up right away and searched for Luca.

In this world, as long as an avatar still had HP left and was not affected by status conditions, even if struck by an attack that would normally cause a large wound, it could still move.

Marino looked at her surroundings and found Luca who, like her, was trying to stand back up.

It was too soon to feel relieved though.

Luca had already been caught by Robin, who had appeared out of nowhere.

Marino thought she managed to lose him but Robin, who had a scouting-type job specialization, had easily tracked them. His expression was eerily cold and distant, ill suited considering the current situation, with monsters rampaging around town.

"You've made me waste enough time."

"Why...?"

"You're protected by Shin's items. Because you won't just follow me quietly, I had to resort to this, you know?"

His former polite speech was no more.

He had apparently discovered the fact that Marino had received a protective item from Shin.

“If you don’t want the girl to be hurt... you know what to do, right?”

“...yes. So let her go right now!!”

Marino removed the protective item and put it on the ground. Robin took the item and tied Marino up.

“Ma, Marino...”

The freed Luca, while afraid, stretched a hand towards Marino. But Robin had loaded Marino on his shoulders, far from Luca’s hands.

“I’m alright. Go back to the orphanage Luca!!”

“Shut up.”

“Ah...”

Robin’s paralyzing poison robbed Marino of her ability to move.

Carrying Marino on his shoulders, Robin looked at Luca.

“Give Marino back.”

“If you want her back, tell the player called Shin to come to this place.”

Robin threw a small piece of paper to Luca.

Luca desperately lunged at the piece of paper, to prevent it from flying away. When she finally managed to grab it, Robin and Marino had already disappeared.

†

“What the hell is going on here?!”

In front of the chaos of roaring monsters and screaming players, Aldo stood dazed and confused. As he rarely left his home, he had no idea why there were monsters

rampaging in the town, nor why the players were taking damage. Actually, few players knew the town defense corps had been attacked by PKs and that non-event monsters had infiltrated the town.

“S-Shit!! What equipment should I use!?”

Thanks to his avatar’s abilities, Aldo could tell the monsters’ names and levels. With his high stats and powerful gear, it would not be too difficult for him to protect himself.

Due to his lack of knowledge of the game, however, he didn’t know what weapons or effects would be useful. It took him around 10 minutes to realize that the basic equipment of Arthur Pendragon, the basis for his avatar, was the strongest available.

When he finally finished equipping it and started thinking about what to do next, something unexpected happened.

“Hyah!?”

His home’s ceiling suddenly collapsed. Something must have fallen on it. The booming sound and the falling debris made Aldo scream in surprise.

“Hey there. Still alive?”

“A person!? W-what? What are you doing, you bastard!?”

Realizing that the person speaking to him was one of the two visitors who had come to his home just a couple days before, Aldo forgot the terror he had just felt and furiously yelled at the man.

He had no idea what the man was thinking, but to think that he would do something so insane.

“What am I doing? What any other PK does, man.”

Paying little attention to the destruction, Gargalla walked closer to Aldo, a savage smile on his face.

“What are you saying?! What’s going on here?!”

“Hey now, are you for real? You didn’t see the monsters busting through town? You

were holed up in your house in this situation? Just because you have 【Wall】 and 【Barrier】 up... man, you're so done."

While looking at the man with contempt, Gargalla lifted his main weapon, different from the one he had carried during his visits to Aldo's home.

It was the lower Ancient-grade 『Giant Slayer』, a battleaxe with a black handle and flame-like patterns.

It was a weapon that increased in power the larger the difference in stats between the user and the target: a weapon designed to literally slay those greater than the user. The stronger the opponent was, the more powerful it became. However, because it did not work on those weaker than the user, it could easily lead to a disadvantage if it wasn't used with attention.

For the current situation, however, there could be no better weapon.

Aldo, who was a total beginner with nothing but high stats going for himself, could never hope to match someone who, despite his stats being lower, had grown stronger through PvP battles.

"In order to get here, I had to deal with many persistent and hard-to-kill monsters, so I'm feeling damn stressed right now. Your avatar is better though, so I really hope you'll let me have some fun!"

As he finished uttering these words, Gargalla attacked the armored Aldo with his battleaxe. The latter did not expect in the least to be attacked and received the blow squarely, without defending in any way.

With a metallic sound, like iron pipes striking against each other, Aldo flew across his home, bursting through the wall and landing on the adjacent block's moat.

"Gh... what are... you..."

Thanks to his stats and equipment the blow wasn't fatal, but the suddenness of the situation had left Aldo unable to think straight. He tried to push the rubble away and get up, only to notice a blade swinging down towards him.

"Gwah!?"

A critical hit, and Aldo's helmet was removed from his head. Overwhelmed by confusion, Aldo didn't even realize that his head was completely uncovered now.

"Hey, hand over all your items, now. It'd be a shame to have them all disappear, right?"

"Uh...?"

Aldo's mouth could only utter a lame reply. Gargalla hit the man's dazed face with a strong punch, to help him regain awareness of the situation.

"Hyeeh?!"

Grasping the situation, Aldo quickly scattered the items in his possession.

"T-This is all I have! It's all here!! So please don't----"

"No more use for you then."

Gargalla stepped on Aldo to keep him pinned to the ground, then swung down his axe.

"NO---"

Leaving no time for last words, the booming strike wiped out Aldo's upper body. After a few moments, his lower body disappeared too.

"So pathetic it was almost depressing."

Receiving a blow from 『Giant Slayer』 on his helmet-less head was enough to ensure that Aldo would die. In THE NEW GATE, critical parts like the neck and the heart were set as the players' weak points. The head and heart were especially weak; hitting them could cause instant death.

Gargalla confirmed that Aldo had disappeared from under his feet and relaxed his stance, sighing.

Before the instant death strike brought Aldo's HP to zero, the damage caused by previous strikes was not too high. The avatar's stats should have been high enough for any mid-level player to not be killed so quickly and easily.

While he was not expecting much, Gargalla still felt his frustration mounting.

“...hmm, might as well add some more reasons here to fuel him up.”

Gargalla's lips formed a grin, with an evil streak that would have made anyone present shiver.

After collecting the dropped items, Gargalla checked the direction and started moving towards the orphanage.

Shin reached the orphanage around the same time Luca did.

Seeing Luca teeter back on her own, Shin felt even more worried. The monster invasion event limited chat use temporarily, so he still didn't have a grasp on the situation.

“Luca!”

“Shin... Shin!!!”

Luca's eyes were filled with large tears. Shin grabbed her as she was about to fall, and the little girl broke out in tears.

Hearing her cry, Emil rushed out of the orphanage.

“Luca!!”

Seeing that she wouldn't stop crying, Emil's expression became clouded.

Shin had a bad feeling about the situation.

“First of all, let's go inside. Thanks to your barriers the monsters haven't come inside, Shin.”

“That's right. Let's go, Luca.”

Shin took Luca in his arms and was about to walk towards the orphanage, when Luca -who had regained some composure in her sadness- thrust a piece of paper in front of Shin's eyes.

The piece of paper she had gripped desperately, so as not to lose it, showed the coordinates of a location within Kalkia.

“This is...?”

“They took Marino away... all because I said I wanted to go on a walk...!!”

Luca kept crying, her face warped by the tears. Despite her young age, she was tormented by the guilt of having caused Marino’s kidnapping.

“It’s all right, I’ll go save her. Luca, you wait here with Emil and the others.”

Shin wiped Luca’s tears and entrusted her to Emil.

“Marino... will be okay?”

“Yeah, leave it to me.”

Shin flashed the biggest smile he could, so that Luca would not worry. After patting her head, he turned his back to her and walked away.

As soon as he exited Luca’s field of view, the mild expression peeled off Shin’s face. More than someone who was going to save somebody, he looked like a man who was going to start a massacre.

Shin started running towards the location signaled by the coordinates, the anger he felt clearly visible on his face.

About 10 minutes after Shin’s departure, Gargalla arrived at the orphanage.

Holding 『Giant Slayer』 high, he maintained his running speed as he raced along the roof-tops and jumped up.

『Giant Slayer』’s blade, boosted by the acceleration, was then swung down on the orphanage’s barrier.

The skill-boosted blow made the barrier shudder. Shin’s 【Barrier】 and 【Wall】 could withstand most blows without problems, but a strike from an advanced player

wielding an Ancient-grade weapon would not leave it unscathed.

Each blow triggered a counter of magic attacks, but Gargalla swept them away with his battleaxe. As the barrier was located within the city, the magic attacks' power was limited too.

"Damn, this is one tough barrier!! But... There we go!!"

【Barrier】 and 【Wall】 finally started showing cracks; seeing concrete effects of his attacks, Gargalla shouted in joy.

"Maybe High Humans aren't that good at defense?"

THE NEW GATE included few defensive skills, and normally offensive skills tended to have higher proficiency levels.

The skill Gargalla used had the effect of causing additional damage to barrier skills or armor. If one kept attacking and no one reinforced the barrier, it would eventually break down.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing!?"

"Whaat?"

Gargalla turned towards the voice and saw a woman.

"Whoa, now you look pretty strong, don't you."

【Analyze】 could not display her stats. Gargalla, though, possessed a rare ability. By looking at the player's stance, he could determine their fighting prowess. This unusual talent was what allowed him to survive for so long.

"You're on the High Human's side too?"

"You mean Shin, yes? What are you trying to do anyway?"

Saying so, the female player -Holly- took out her short wand. In an instant, she activated a defensive skill and created offensive magic on standby in mid-air.

"Damn, you're fast. A normal player needs more time to activate so many skills..."

you're VR-compatible, yeah?"

Gargalla mentioned the term used to refer to those who adapted to the relatively new VR environment faster than its creators expected. It was not a discriminatory term, but since such players could activate skills faster than others and control their avatars more efficiently than average players could, some whispered behind their backs that they were cheaters.

Gargalla did not mean to discriminate. In fact, his tone betrayed his heightened expectations. Holly responded by unleashing her magic; fire bullets, wind blades, and more flew towards Gargalla.

Gargalla dodged the ones which would explode, thus creating a larger area of effect, and knocked away the single-target ones with his battleaxe.

"A magician attacking from the front!? Now this is fun!!"

Holly unleashed several magic spells in a wave-like formation, and Gargalla gave up on dodging, instead charging straight towards Holly.

He activated a skill that enveloped his body in a red aura and gave him an explosive acceleration.

Axe-type Martial skill 【Dreadnought】 .

This skill prevented all damage to the user for a few seconds while they were moving, making it one of the most dangerous among all charging-type martial skills.

It was often used in party battles to blow away the opposing front lines and attack the rear.

"Haahaa!!"

Gargalla charged close to Holly, repelling her magic attacks, and swung his axe down.

For Holly, an experienced rear fighter, Gargalla's skill was nothing to be surprised about.

Rear line fighters who could use powerful magic were, along with healers, the first targets in party battles. Thus, they were well aware of the skills used to break through

the front lines and attack them. 【Dreadnought】 was especially famous for its effect, and several countermeasures existed.

“I’ve seen that too many times already!”

The instant the battleaxe was supposed to rend Holly’s body, her figure smoothly -but very quickly- bent and moved away.

She did not move far enough to escape the battleaxe’s range, but the blow that was supposed to crush her just blew her away.

Holly spun in mid-air and landed gracefully; her HP had been reduced by about 10%. Normally, one third should have been shaved off.

“You’re good. Haven’t seen many rear fighters like you.”

“I can’t be happy even if I’m praised by the likes of you.”

The skill Holly used was the Wind-type Magic skill 【Feather Step】 , which generated wind around the user’s body, to raise movement speed and lower received damage. It allowed acrobatic movements, but few managed to master it.

“Why not? Gotta accept compliments when you get’em!”

Looking genuinely excited and happy, Gargalla swung at Holly again.

In response, Holly created an elemental wall of ice and earth to stop Gargalla, increasing the distance between them in an instant. Her wand, pointed at Gargalla, emitted a thin purple bolt of lightning.

In the short time Gargalla would have needed to break down the wall, she had prepared the most powerful spell at her disposal.

“Blow him away!!”

Thunder erupted from the wand.

Gargalla was rushing towards Holly, but had jumped to the side when he saw her wand light up.

“Tch!”

The thunderbolt was supposed to blow past him, but changed directions in midair, following the man.

Gargalla barely managed to block it with his battleaxe. Despite managing to defend himself from Holly’s powerful strike, he wasn’t smiling anymore. He did not think that Holly had used a wall-type obstacle just to prepare an easily detectable attack with some homing properties from the front. His battle instinct told him not to let his guard down, and it was right.

“Gwah!?”

The second after Gargalla parried the purple lightning, thunder struck from above. That was the magic skill used by Holly.

“Kah, you really are tough!”

Not caring about his diminished HP, Gargalla charged towards Holly again. He had lost a mere 30% of his total HP.

Gargalla was a heavy fighter type, focused on STR and VIT. He was thus prepared to counter light and thunder magic, which excelled in speed.

“.....!!”

Even if her enemy was drawing closer, Holly kept calmly launching magic spells. A close combat bout between a mage and a magic warrior, however, would have a clear victor.

Even if she was VR-compatible, using attacks focused on speed meant that each blow was light. Some of the most powerful spells needed time to be charged.

Gargalla had seen through this, so he gave up on using skills and simply charged forward, ready to take damage.

Despite the barrage of spells, Gargalla swung the battleaxe, destroying Holly’s wand; however, its blade didn’t stop there. Along with the wand, the axe tore through her robe and rent her body asunder.

“Darling, I’m sor---”

Holly’s last words were silenced by the booming sound of the second swing of the battleaxe.

The first swing had cleaved Holly’s torso in two, while the second had crushed her head. The second blow was a critical hit with instant death properties.

Within the smoke and dust, a small white visual effect sparkled. When the view became clear again, nothing remained.

“OK then, next up the kids and the guards... hm?”

Gargalla was planning to bring down the entrance and break in, but looking at his map made him furrowed his brow.

The internal structure of all buildings, except public ones and the ones he was affiliated to, could not be seen from outside. The interior of buildings was treated like a different area.

The only way to see inside the buildings was to actually go inside and map them.

The map did not display any players, the buildings simply stood silently. All Gargalla could hear was the occasional scream or noise of crumbling buildings.

“I see, so that woman came out alone to buy them time to flee.”

If they really meant to defeat him, it would be ridiculous not to confront him in a group.

“Sure pulled the wool over my eyes. Guess I’ll just go back to Vlad and---!?”

A shadow suddenly appeared right behind Gargalla as he was about to turn back. The blade swung by the silhouette cut through his armor, but Gargalla managed to jump out of the way before receiving damage.

Gargalla still had not regained his balance, but the silhouette continued to attack fiercely. With a sound effect like shearing through the air, the attacker’s blade rushed towards Gargalla.

“Woohhh!!!”

Gargalla, while using his battleaxe as a shield, released the Flame-type magic skill 【Fireball】 towards the ground, using the wind caused by the blast to gain distance from his opponent.

A few seconds later the black-haired man, Shadow, appeared from the smoke and dust. His armor was in pieces, his HP less than half. Proof that he had broken through the monster hordes to get here.

“What’s this now? We’ve got a parade of interesting people today!!”

“You...”

Gargalla was overjoyed to witness the arrival of another strong fighter, while Shadow prepared his weapon, nothing but wrath on his face. The hate seething within had completely changed the usually mild-mannered man.

“YOOOOOOUUUU!!!!”

Shadow’s daggers swung at the same time as he screamed. It was a continuous attack based on the ninja’s superior speed and was boosted by skills. The advanced player’s attacks targeted Gargalla’s weak points as if sucked in by them.

“What, you’re way sloppier than I expected.”

The light streak-like slashes were blocked by Gargalla’s weapon and armor. He had regained his balance and now faced Shadow head on; receiving his blows diagonally cut their offensive power by half. It was an alternative use of the skill 【Parry】 , used to deflect attacks.

Gargalla’s armor was inferior to his battleaxe in grade, but it still was a high quality item, dropped by monsters in a dungeon. As long as he didn’t receive it head on, it would not be destroyed by a single blow.

“WOOOOOOHHHHH!!!”

“You didn’t hear me...? I said, YOU’RE SLOPPY!!”

Shadow attacked while howling like a furious beast, and Gargalla roared back.

Shadow’s attacks were fast, but nothing more; because of the fury clouding his

judgement, they lacked all the technique they originally had.

As a PK that had fought other players to the death many times, Gargalla would not overlook such a thing. He blocked the slashes with his gauntlets, let the armor's defensive power take the less powerful blows and drew closer to Shadow.

Gargalla kicked the ground to accelerate, then delivered not a swing with his trusted battleaxe, but a shoulder tackle making full use of his high STR and VIT. An orange-colored effect enveloped his body.

Barehanded-type Martial skill 【Shoulder Bomb】 .

It was a counter-type skill often used by players who, like Gargalla, focused on defense more than speed.

“Gwah!?”

Shadow was wary of the battleaxe, but in his enraged state he had failed to consider the possibility of a full body tackle. The dagger he instinctively pulled up as a shield was blown away by Gargalla's armor, leaving Shadow's torso open to the vicious blow from Gargalla's armor-clad shoulder. Shadow was blown away several meters, crashing into the orphanage's wall.

The reinforced wall cracked and partly collapsed, as clear proof of the power of Gargalla's tackle.

“G... wah...”

Shadow, crawling on the ground, desperately tried to stand again. Because of 【Shoulder Bomb】's effect, however, he was now affected with paralysis and could not even stand.

His anti-status effect equipment, along with his armor, had their durability reduced to zero by Gargalla's attack and disappeared. His HP was now less than 20%.

“The mage woman that was here before you was so much better.”

His words got a reaction from Shadow. With an expression that in the real world would have likely been shedding tears of blood, Shadow reached towards his dagger with his

barely moving arms.

“You’ve got more killing intent at least. If you had fought me together, it would have been fun, I bet.”

Sighing at this lost opportunity, Gargalla raised his battleaxe while looking at the writhing Shadow. Even if lamenting in pain, the killing intent had not vanished from his eyes.

Gargalla never spared promising players, even if there was hope for a future bout. Even if fighting at full power would have proved an enjoyable experience, if they couldn’t escape their fate at the time, he delivered the coup de grace without hesitation. That was one of the rules he imposed on himself.

“So long.”

The battleaxe came down.

The dully shining blade was about to sever Shadow’s neck---when, with a clanging sound, it was knocked away.

“What the?”

He looked at Shadow closer and noticed a half-transparent film covering his body.

“Tch, it’s over then. Earlier than I expected.”

The film was a town-only automatic skill that prevented all damage to players, 【Law of Order】. The fact that it was active again meant that the monster invasion event had ended.

Gargalla only realized when he saw it that he couldn’t hear the monsters roaring anymore.

“Guess I got too much into it. Well, nothing else I can do now.”

Even Gargalla couldn’t hurt other players now that the hometown had recovered its functions. There was no point in staying there anymore, so he left.

With Shadow’s eyes full of killing intent fixated firmly on his back, Gargalla left while

grinning evilly.

†

Upon hearing that Marino had been kidnapped, Shin rushed straight to the specified location.

He didn't even spare a thought about the monster invasion event being a coincidence or not.

Using one of the monsters prowling the streets as a foothold, Shin jumped on the roof of a building. Any bird monsters trying to blow him away would get swept away with skills, but Shin ran forward without even glancing at the items they dropped.

What filled his heart and morphed his expression was worry.

The piece of paper Luca had showed coordinates and Marino's condition. What worried Shin was that Marino's life was in danger.

The paper said that Marino was affected with "Bloodred Poison". If that was the truth, he had to reach the specified location as quickly as possible.

Unlike a normal Poison status, which would leave at least 1 HP, the Bloodred Poison would continue consuming the player's HP until it was healed or enough time passed. The continuous damage it caused was also much higher than regular Poison; with Marino's HP, she would not survive long.

"Please let me make it in time..."

Even though Kalkia was a medium sized hometown, it was rather wide. There were houses for tens of thousands of players, after all. With monsters in the way, not even Shin could traverse it quickly.

He had shortcut skills to speed up movement, but because of the restrictions imposed by the invasion event, they could not be used at the moment.

"Out of the way!!"

A dinosaur-like bipedal monster, Dynorex, poked its face in from the main road, but Shin blew its head away with a punch and secured a path. While the monster

decomposed in a myriad of polygons, Shin had already shifted his attention elsewhere.

“HYAAAHHHH!!!”

That moment, several silhouettes appeared from behind the monsters, targeting Shin.

The assailants were not one or two. It was clearly an organized group of PK’ers aiming to kill Shin. All of them, flashing twisted grins and readying their weapons, launched magic spells.

“Tch, of all the times...!”

Shin ignored the spells that would be automatically erased and rendered the PKs powerless with non-lethal skills.

There were also advanced players among them, however; many of them could not be stopped with just one blow. Shin would have never succumbed to them as long as he was careful, but he did not have a single second to waste.

“Better enjoy the party while it lasts!!”

“Shut the hell up... I said get out of my way!!”

Shin had no time to deal with the PKs, but now even the monsters were gathering around him.

One on one, it would have been nothing to worry about, but if attacked in swarms like that, even Shin could not solve the situation quickly.

With both monsters and players attacking, the buildings crumbled because of the fighting. Magic arrows and bullets flew in from everywhere.

Each one of them seemed to exist just to be an obstacle on his path.

“OUTTA THE WAY!!”

Warmth, kindness, and hope gradually slipped away.

In their place, worry, fear, and rage gradually filled his heart.

Just as if another person began to inhabit his body, the more time passed, the more the person called Shin changed.

All obstacles between him and his destination were an eyesore. An irritation.

His emotional change influenced his body too.

*Blow away the rubble with magic and create a path---*just as Shin formulated this plan, a PK appeared before him.

Shin could not react because of the now narrower field of view, but his body instinctively swung 『True Moon』 .

“Gah!!”

『True Moon』 ’s blade struck the PK’s chest, as if drawn towards it. It crushed the PK’s armor and pierced through to his back. A critical hit. The PK’s HP dropped to the red zone.

It wasn’t an instant death slash, but because of lingering damage the PK would last only a few more seconds. But despite being in mortal danger, the PK did not recover or leave and continued grappling with Shin.

“Haha, now you’re a murd---”

Unable to finish his sentence, the PK exploded in a shower of polygons.

But there was no need for him to finish his sentence. The word he had been about to pronounce was “murderer”.

“..... screw off.”

Shin regained his balance in midair and landed on a building.

He had taken a life. A human life.

But after committing one of the so-called taboos for humanity, what Shin found himself saying... were not words of regret.

---*Why are you in my way?*

I did what I could to avoid killing you, but you came to die regardless.

----what will you do if I am late because of you?

----what will you do if I get there and nothing is left?

Dead players leave nothing behind.

“No...”

Fear----the strongest emotion that Shin felt in this world was fear.

Many had high expectations of him. He was afraid of betraying them.

He fought with players other than himself. He was afraid that misusing his power could end up with him killing others.

Monster attacks decreased his HP gauge. He was afraid to see death creep closer and closer.

What was now filling Shin’s chest was the fear that Marino would die because she was involved with him. It terrified him more than betraying or killing someone, more than his own death.

“Guess I... don’t need to hold back anymore, right?”

Even if he held back, trying not to kill the PKs, they would use that against him. If he missed and hit a monster, he would have to defeat that monster completely too. Both monsters and PKs were trying to kill him without a care for his thoughts.

“You’re coming to kill me, so I can kill you too, right? There’s no reason to leave PKs alive, is there?”

These questions served the purpose of removing Shin’s self-imposed bonds and worked as an ultimatum to the PKs.

What returned to him were not words, but blades ready to kill.

“.....”

The approaching blade was met by Shin's 『True Moon』 .

After a very brief resistance, the PK's longsword snapped. 『True Moon』 did not stop, cutting through the opponent's armor and cleaving it in two along with the body it adorned.

“Khah...”

The PK, his body severed in half, left a guttural laugh behind as he vanished in a burst of polygons.

Shin looked at his arm, which had swung the blade to the end, and thought.

“Yeah, this way is definitely faster.”

He finally felt free from the annoyance he experienced before and hopeful about making it in time. There was no trace of guilt in him for the life he had just taken.

Humans are not shy of sacrificing others for the sake of their loved ones.

The people present there were also unworthy of any pity or pangs of conscience, even if they were sacrificed.

“(Don't get in my way. If you do, you die.)”

A single phrase to express everything Shin felt.

Cutting down the PKs that, relentless, came to attack him, Shin checked the shortest path to his destination. He released a magic skill that traveled on a straight path and rushed behind it, as to chase it.

No matter who or what blocked his path, he would slash, crush, break, and kill. For Shin, the PKs were now equal to the monsters invading the hometown.

“I'm coming.”

Faster, faster.

Using the wind caused by the magic skill's blasts and the enemies' attacks, Shin accelerated towards the destination. His avatar could not exceed the current speed,

but using other elements allowed him to go faster.

His feelings towards killing had changed, but his concern was not completely dispelled.

Maybe because he now knew about her illness, he couldn't stop picturing a suffering Marino in his mind. He kept trying to ignore such thoughts as he pushed forward.

About 20 minutes after he left the orphanage, Shin arrived at the specified location. It had taken him around two times the normal time to reach it.

There he found three people. Robin, Vlad... and Marino.

"Did I... make it in time...?"

Maybe she had recovered with items or skills, or she wouldn't have any HP left. The status ailment appeared to be still affecting her, as Marino's status clearly showed the words **【Bloodred Poison】**. She still had about 40% of her HP.

After confirming Marino's condition, Shin stopped for a moment. He made sure that no one was hiding nearby to ambush him and activated **【Hiding】**, preparing to rescue Marino.

Just then, however, Vlad pulled out his blade and pointed it at Marino's neck.

"I know you're there!! Come out!!"

Robin, who was next to him, shouted. They had sensed his approach, apparently.

"I-If you don't come out, I don't know what will happen to her!!"

As to stress Robin's words, the tip of Vlad's sword pressed harder on Marino's skin. Marino's HP, which were already lower than half, decreased a little more.

"....."

Shin felt something black and thick, like tar, swell in his chest.

It was different from the feeling of cutting down the PKs and monsters standing in his way. It was something clearer, a vivid desire for murder.

“I’m right here!!”

After activating several magic skills, Shin appeared before Vlad.

“Yes... now I’m finally free of him!! Now I just need to go back to the real world and everything will be alright!! Hahaha!! Hahahahaha!!!”

In utter contrast with the expressionless Shin, Robin was rejoicing. Shin did not know what was the reason behind this outburst of happiness, but it was hardly the time to think about that.

Marino, immobilized by paralysis, implored Shin to forget about her through her expression. But he would never grant such a request.

“I came, just like you wanted. Now let Marino go.”

“Shut up!! Now you just need to clear the game and everything will end!! Go back to clearing dungeons!! Noooowww!!!”

Robin’s clearly abnormal reactions started to concern Shin. Responding emotionally would be meaningless in cases like this.

Shin turned his eyes towards the smiling Vlad.

As he did, Vlad put a hand on Robin’s shoulder.

“Sir Robin, please calm down, or...”

“Ah... yes, I got it...”

Vlad appeared to be superior in the relation between the two; Robin quieted down like a put out fire.

“What’s your goal?”

“My goal, you say. Let me see. I suppose it would be this very situation.”

“What?”

Shin was confused, but Vlad retained his smile.

“You are strong. Among the players present in this world, you are worthy of the title of strongest. Despite standing on such a peak, you would have me allow such trash to associate with you?”

“.....”

Shin’s eyes narrowed.

He was basically saying that Marino was useless for someone like Shin.

Vlad’s gloating expression clearly showed that he fully understood how these words disgusted Shin. Shin could understand such a way of thinking.

“I couldn’t care less about your selfish nonsense! Give me back Marino!”

Shin ran forward even before finishing his sentence. He ignored the obviously inferior Robin and targeted Vlad, whom he believed to be the main culprit.

At the same time, the ground around the spot where Marino was lying swelled upwards, forming a barrier as to protect her and projecting spikes made of soil in four directions at the same time.

The branch-like protruding spikes knocked Vlad’s -who had quickly dodged- sword away and pierced Robin -who failed to react in time- in the right shoulder and left thigh.

Shin had activated the Earth-type magic skill 【Earth Branch】 , which was usually created around the user, around Marino instead.

Shin had not gone closer right away after being called out because the skill required a certain time before activating when used at long distances.

After temporarily separating the two from Marino, Shin went on to attack Vlad. He could not rest easy after just knocking his sword away.

There should not be any other players in hiding, but Shin focused on the grip on 『True Moon』 , thinking of getting rid of such a troublesome opponent as soon as possible.

“Oh my, you’re skipping the hostage and coming straight at me?”

In response to Shin's charge from the front, Vlad took out another sword. That same moment, a shadow appeared above Shin.

The creature that had pulled in its wings and suddenly started descending was an Elder Green Dragon. At level 701, it was a monster only advanced players could dare to face.

Vlad's main job was Dragon Knight. It was unusual for him to be fighting without a dragon, but it appeared that he had kept him on standby at a certain distance.

Shin glanced at the flying dragon and concluded it wouldn't be a threat. Based on the speed of its fall, Shin would lock blades with his opponent faster.

Shin's 『True Moon』 swung towards Vlad. But an instant before their blades clashed, a yellow effect enveloped Vlad.

The effect that struck 『True Moon』 emitted a loud, hard sound and shattered. Thanks to that Vlad could block Shin's weakened blow without losing his balance, albeit while carving a track on the ground with his feet.

“YOU...!!”

Shin's voice brimmed with anger. He noticed that the shattered effect came from the item that originally protected Marino. The item that Shin had given to Marino for self-defense now sparkled on Vlad's neck.

“As expected of a High Human. I would have been in real trouble if I had used my normal weapon.”

Vlad then jumped away from the clash. Shin tried to reduce the distance again, but the flying Elder Green Dragon unleashed its wind breath to oppose him.

As monster breath was an attack that possessed both physical and magical properties, even with high magic resistance Shin could not fully negate it. The damage itself was minimal, but the breath blocked his sight and made it difficult to attack.

In addition, there was something else clearly bizarre about Vlad.

(This is weird. Why does he have two of them?)

Shin was looking at the weapon Vlad was wielding.

In THE NEW GATE, some items had limitations in the number that players could equip at the same time. The sword that Vlad equipped on each hand, 『Excalibur』, was one of them; a player could only equip 1 at any given time.

“Never mind that now.”

It was not the time to think about that. What was needed now was to cut down Vlad as soon as possible.

Ancient-grade weapons had far higher durability than others, so destroying them would prove difficult. Shin activated another magic skill.

The thunder lance and light bullets, launched with no chanting and thus little to none preparatory movements, left afterimages in the air.

It was a blow that Vlad could not avoid as long as he hadn't focused heavily on AGI. It weakened as it closed in on Vlad, however, and ultimately took off just 10% of his HP.

“You raised your resistance with items, huh?”

“Correct. Thunder and light cannot be dodged easily, so I prepared adequate countermeasures.”

He had not been affected by the thunder skill's paralysis either. He had prepared countermeasures against status ailments too, evidently.

“Haha! To cross swords with the strongest is not bad at all either!”

After nullifying Shin's magic, Vlad leapt in the air and rode on the Green Elder Dragon's back. As dragon rider, he could unleash the full potential of his job, dragon knight.

Vlad and the Green Elder Dragon's stats rose, as the emerald-colored blade of light 【Effect Blade】 appeared around 『Excalibur』's blade. It was an effect that extended weapon reach if the player used weapons other than long ones while riding.

“Here I go!”

He had probably used a skill. Everytime Vlad swung his blade, emerald green slashes

flew towards Shin. Shin planned to blow them away with 『True Moon』 and shoot down the flying opponent with magic.

Thunder and light could not cause decisive damage, so Shin shot fire-elemental magic towards the sky. He let his MP do the talking and shot bullets of fire in all directions.

He combined fast and slow bullets in order to fill Vlad's surroundings with a barrage of fire.

“That’s quite haphazard.”

Looking at the balls of fire gathering all around him, Vlad chuckled dryly.

Because of the dragon's large body, he needed a wide enough space to maneuver. Expecting this, Shin placed his fire bullets at an altitude slightly higher than Vlad and his dragon's current position.

An advanced dragon such as the Elder Green Dragon would not flinch even if hit by fire bullets. But because of Shin's high INT, the offensive power of each bullet was ridiculously high.

Vlad did not try to force his way through the fireball hail, as he probably understood that if even just one hit the dragon's wings, they would crash immediately. Even a powerful dragon cannot fly freely once its wings are rendered useless. In that case it would simply turn into a large target.

“Time to die.”

All fire bullets were detonated at the same time. They did not strike directly, but the swelling blast they caused ravaged Vlad and his dragon. At the same time of the explosion, Shin ran towards Marino.

While riding the dragon, Vlad's movements were severely limited even within the blast. In this situation, he could not act quicker than Shin as the latter went to heal Marino's status condition.

The most important thing was to rescue Marino, not defeat Vlad.

Ignoring Robin, who had been blown away by the blast of wind caused by the explosion, Shin rushed towards Marino.

The moment before he could touch Marino, held in a slightly higher position by 【Earth Branch】 , Shin saw her disappear and be replaced by a scorched Elder Green Dragon.

“!?”

Shin swallowed his breath. He had an idea about the phenomenon he had just witnessed, however, and immediately checked his map. Marino’s response came from next to Vlad.

“ 【Position Shift】 , huh...”

“Yes, exactly.”

From the smoke caused by the explosion appeared Vlad, in tatters, carrying Marino at his side.

【Position Shift】 was a skill exclusive of Tamers and Dragon Knights, which allowed the player to swap locations with their monster partner. It was also applicable to party members, but Shin had not thought that Vlad and Marino could have formed a party and gritted his teeth at his own carelessness.

“Making her join my party was child’s play. It is not time for games anymore, though. The finale is upon us.”

“What?”

“There must be a reason why we took a hostage, don’t you think?”

“You want me to hurry up with the dungeon clearing, right?”

Hearing what Robin had said, Shin thought that the reason must have been that.

“Haha, oh please. If we just meant to urge you to act quicker, there would be no point of doing this here and now. As for the hostage-taking too, luring a player outside the Hometown would allow us to attack them without restrictions too.”

“What do you want, then!?”

“I said it right at the start. To take out the trash. But just assassinating her would have

risked to simply depress you, so we created a bit of a show. I know how attached you are to this woman. If she was killed in front of your eyes, what would happen to you, I wonder?"

"You bastard..."

The tone of Shin's words was chilling.

"Yes, that's it! That's the real you. Not soft or dull, but a blade sharpened to perfection. Yes, that's the face I wanted to see!!"

Vlad's laugh almost sounded insane.

Marino opened her mouth, as if trying to say something, but could not utter anything because of the paralysis still affecting her.

"Yes, this is the finale!!"

"You won't!!"

As Vlad raised his sword, Shin activated a magic skill. He had prepared more than one before the conflict.

Blue flames raged up from the ground and surrounded Marino.

"Gwah!!"

Burned by the flames suddenly appearing at his feet, Vlad let Marino go. Shin noticed it and immediately ran to her. Marino's HP were already below 20%; there was no more time.

Because of the passage of time, Marino's paralysis was almost gone; she stood up and ran towards Shin too.

The flames were now gone. Being in Vlad's party and considered an enemy of Shin's, Marino had been damaged too. Shin had chosen the magic considering this possibility too.

"SHIN!!"

“MARINO!!”

“Kah!!”

Vlad chased after Marino. But Shin’s acceleration, even if not boosted, would let him reach her first.

No one could get in the way now. Not monsters nor PKs.

He would protect Marino and defeat Vlad. Tell Luca that Marino was all right, so she wouldn’t worry.

That’s what Shin thought. That’s how it was supposed to go.

If only Marino still had some time left.

“Ah...”

Marino uttered a soft sigh. Like a marionette with her strings cut, she collapsed on the ground. Her hands fell too, unable to grab Shin’s.

“It appears that this was inevitable.”

Vlad had been the first to reach Marino. His burnt hands had not let go of 『Excalibur』 , and its blade had pierced Marino without the slightest hesitation.

Shin’s eyes opened wide.

Marino’s avatar, even if pierced by 『Excalibur』 , still existed. Strangely enough, even after being struck by an Ancient-grade weapon, she still had HP left.

“Did you do something? But as long as things are like this, it matters little.”

Shin was now closer to Marino, but not close enough to be next to her in one leap.

In front of his eyes, Vlad mercilessly thrusts 『Excalibur』 again.

To his surprise, however, the sword could not pierce Marino.

“!? This can’t be!”

Maybe because of the impact, Marino's body shook every time Vlad struck it. His sword, however, was repelled each time, with a metallic-sounding effect.

Immediately after Vlad had started attacking, the words "CONNECTION ERROR" appeared over Marino's avatar.

"Tch!!"

Apparently not seeing the newly displayed words, Vlad continued thrusting obsessively.

"STOOOOOOOOOPP!!!!"

With a scream, Shin's sword attacked Vlad. Even if his sword wasn't actually hitting her, in Shin's eyes Vlad was cruelly skewering Marino's body.

Swung with enough power to break it, 『True Moon』 clashed against 『Excalibur』 with a high-pitched sound.

"Gwah!?"

Because of its stats, 『True Moon』 could not go as far as shattering 『Excalibur』. The offensive power of this attack, however, could not be merely blocked; Vlad was thrown backwards by the impact, sent crashing into a nearby building.

"Marino!! Hey, Pull yourself together!!"

Shin chose to go to Marino instead of continuing to attack Vlad. When he held her, her eyes opened just slightly and met his.

Something was off. Shin was right in front of her, but Marino didn't see him.

"Ah... ah... I..."

She appeared to still be conscious; while her eyes swayed left and right, she was trying to say something.

"Aah... so this... is it..."

"Marino?"

“I’m... so... sorry... sor...”

“Why!? Why are you apologizing!!”

Marino’s lips continued uttering broken apologies. Not wanting to know what they could mean, Shin held Marino more tightly. She would not answer anymore, however.

“Finally... I... decided”

A hazy expression on her face.

“Let’s go home...”

Marino continued.

“Every... one... toget... her... not... game... real...”

“.....Marino?”

Marino’s words, spoken while she was looking at something not of this world, finally trailed away.

“Hey, answer me.”

“.....”

“We’re going back together, right!?”

“.....”

“Luca is... yeah, Luca’s crying. She’s crying a lot, I don’t know what to do.”

“.....”

“Hey... answer me already...!”

Marino did not respond. It was as if she had frozen after uttering her last words and did not move an inch anymore.

“ERROR. Player output cannot be detected. Please verify connection.”

An emotionless system message was returned instead.

“ERROR. Player output cannot be detected-----”

Shin could not understand what the system message meant.

“ERROR. Player output cannot-----”

No, he didn't want to understand.

“ERROR. Player-----”

Because that...

“ERROR-----”

Meant nothing but...

“ERR-----”

Marino had died.

“SHUT THE HELL UUUUUUPP!!!!!”

Shin's emotions had crossed the limit.

If he didn't let out such overwhelming feelings, he could go crazy.

Player output not detected. That meant that there were connection troubles or the player had died in the real world. Looking at how Marino acted until a moment ago, it was too convenient to consider a broken connection as the cause.

“Haha, well, it did not go exactly as expected, but I suppose that was fate.”

The sound of falling rubble reached Shin's ears. If Shin had looked in the direction of the sound, he would have seen Vlad standing back up. As price paid for receiving 『True Moon』's attack, he had lost an arm.

“.....”

“Yes, I was waiting for those eyes. People with something important to protect... they are so frail. Now, this very moment, you are perf---”

Without waiting for Vlad to finish talking, Shin’s sword arm moved. Thanks to the Movement-type Martial skill 【Ground Shrink】 he moved instantly next to Vlad and slashed towards his neck.

Vlad could not even react to Shin’s movements.



“!?”

Surprised by the metallic sound ringing near his neck, Vlad stood dumbfounded, as Shin silently brandished his 『True Moon』 .

Slashes like flashes of light struck sudden death points such as forehead and heart, while others were aimed at Vlad's legs to stop him from moving.

All of them, however, were repelled by the skill protecting the hometown. Not even Shin could do something in such a situation.

“Ku... hahaha. Looks like time's over. I'm looking forward to your future feats.”

Even after being blown away by the impact, Vlad left these words before teleporting away.

Shin looked at him leave, then sheathed 『True Moon』 . After a few moments, he let out a small sigh and turned towards Marino.

“.....sorry for dropping you.”

Shin hugged Marino again and apologized. His expression was no more filled with bloodlust and now looked peaceful.

Before his unnatural smile, a new message appeared.

“F-type Avatar number 193405. Will you acquire? YES/NO”

In the death game, empty avatars were apparently treated as items.

Shin read the message and slowly chose YES. Marino's body turned into a card and was deposited in Shin's item box.

Shin teleported to an area with a hill with a nice view. It was a small area Shin had obtained ownership of in an event.

“You liked this place, didn't you.”

Flowers of many colors bloomed on the hill.

The sky over the hill was clear and sunny throughout the day, the weather there would never be cloudy or rainy.

Shin laid Marino's avatar card down in a spot perfect for resting in peace. He activated a skill and the card sank into the ground, with a small gravestone being formed in its place.

The skill used by Shin was usually used by Tamers to make graves for their monster partners.

Monsters did not die if their HP reached zero, but in certain events parent monsters would give birth to progeny and die.

That was the only reason skill existed, and many players ignored it even did.

Shin could have kept the card with himself, but chose not to.

Not cremation, not burial. Carrying a body with him seemed wrong to Shin, even within a game.

"....."

Shin stood before Marino's gravestone. Despite the warm wind blowing around him, Shin felt cold to the core.

The cold had probably frozen even his tears, who wouldn't flow no matter how much he waited.

".....I'll come to see you."

After an unspecified amount of time, Shin whispered.

We will be together even after the death game. Even if that wish could not be granted, he will make her last words come true.

"Let's go back."

Marino's last words. Shin didn't know who she had said them to. Even so, he wanted to make them become reality.

“But---”

After serenely whispering again her last words, Shin’s expression changed completely. Or rather, all emotion disappeared from it.

“There’s someone in the way.”

Obstacles to the path leading back to reality. Obstacles to those who lived their lives earnestly.

“So please give me just some time.”

Shin’s equipment changed. From anti-monster equipment to anti-player equipment. To equipment meant to kill.

“I’ll keep my promise after I erase them all.”

Shin turned his back to Marino’s grave.

Maybe it was a coincidence that the teleportation point to the Hometown, hidden by trees, was now in the shade. Or maybe it reflected the state of mind of its owner.

Shin’s silhouette as he teleported, his facial features twisted in a grimace, made it seem like he was disappearing into total darkness.

C h a p t e r 3

黒 衣 の 死 神

THE NEW
GATE

Chapter 3

This monster invasion event created more casualties than any previous such event.

Starting with PKs disguised as town defense corps, it culminated in an invasion of monsters with much greater numbers and levels than usual.

Thanks to the efforts of many players, the assault could be dealt with in a relatively short time, but many players with production-related jobs as well as those who had chosen to stay in the city lost their lives. Many players just stood speechless before the stores and homes that were reduced to piles of rubble.

The bad news, however, continued.

A high-ranked member of the guild that was in charge of the town's defenses had been killed by one of the PKs that went on a killing spree during the monsters' rampage. There were also many casualties among the members closest to the guildmaster, meaning that the clearing of the dungeons would slow down.

Both production-type and fighting-type jobs had suffered immeasurable damage.

And the same thing happened at the orphanage too.

Because of the barrier's destruction thanks to Gargalla, the orphanage had lost its protection and had been severely damaged due to the battles between players and monsters.

Emil's expression after returning from the temporary shelter was dispirited. The children, too, stopped in their tracks as they arrived on the premises.

"Holly..."

Despite knowing how futile it was, Emil looked for Holly, who had remained behind to buy time for her and the children to escape, and stepped closer.

Soon, she found a man leaning against one of the orphanage walls - Shadow.

“Shadow!! You’re safe! I was worried, you know?”

“.....”

Even after the monsters had been wiped out, Emil could not open a chat connection with Shadow.

Shadow barely glanced towards Emil, but showed no other response.

“Did Holly... die...?”

“.....yeah.”

His answer left no doubts. Emil could not say anything more.

Even though she had already a suspicion of Holly’s death before asking Shadow, she still had to ask to make sure. When a player in the friend list died, their names changed from white to semi-transparent.

“Shadow? Where do you think you’re going?”

Emil tried to stop Shadow, who stood up and started walking away, silently. He was clearly very different than usual.

“.....”

“Hey, listen when----”

Emil grabbed Shadow’s shoulders as he walked away and forcefully turned him towards her. The sharp light in his eyes, however, left her speechless.

Emil herself was a competent fighter. She had fought alongside Holly and Shadow before and knew the type of expression he had when fighting.

However, she had never seen this expression on his face before.

The chill she felt while looking at him froze her.

“.....take care of the kids.”

Saying this to the immobile Emil, Shadow left in the opposite direction of the children.

His ragged equipment and unstable pace, coupled with the freezing atmosphere, made him seem like a ghost.

“-----”

Chilling whispers came out of Shadow’s mouth.

Unable to respond, Emil could only watch him leave.

”(I’m going to kill him, no matter what.)”

As he walked away, Shadow left a short message, filled to the brim with fierce killing intent, which to Emil felt more like a roar.

After burying Marino, Shin teleported back to Kalkia and went to check on the orphanage. The barrier he had put up to protect it would have easily stopped the monsters that invaded Kalkia; it was supposed to be one of the few safe locations in the city.

What he was greeted with, however, were the cries of the children in front of the broken down building.

“The barrier... is gone?”

Shin had a bad premonition because of this anomaly and examined the partly destroyed building. Doing so, he then found Ryohei and Teppei sitting against a door.

“Ah, Shin...”

“What happened?”

The ever-energetic Teppei looked now completely spent. Shin looked from Teppei, looking down quietly, to Ryohei, who, in a barely audible tone, whispered: “Ms. Holly’s dead.”

“...I see. Where’s Shadow?”

“Dunno. He’s not here, at least.”

Shin simply repeated, “I see.” He then opened the orphanage’s door. There, he saw Emil along with the older children trying to calm down the endlessly crying younger ones.

“Shin!!”

Emil noticed Shin coming in and quickly approached him. Maybe because of the heavy atmosphere the orphanage was enveloped in, her expression looked tense too.

“You’re all right.”

“Yeah... kind of”

She had reached him, but seemed to not know what to say.

“I heard... Holly died.”

“...yeah. You... well, I don’t know what to say...”

“Don’t worry about choosing words, please. She didn’t have much time left anyway.”

If the kidnapping incident didn’t happen, Marino might be still alive. There was the concrete possibility that a major stress had caused the attack.

It was pointless to think about that now, though. Even if players who died in the death game would wake up in the real world, this didn’t include Marino.

This kind of small hope didn’t exist either. Her death was something definite.

“.....where’s Luca?”

“Look, she’s over there.”

Emil pointed at Luca, sitting and hugging her knees. When she noticed Shin coming closer, she clearly gasped and ran up to him.

“Marino!?”

Luca’s gaze looked to Shin and then to the rest of the room, probably looking for

Marino.

“.....sorry.”

“Eh?”

Luca stopped. She didn't understand why Shin was apologizing.

Shin had no intention to hide anything, though. He knew that telling a small child like Luca about Marino's death was cruel, but he didn't want to lie.

“I... couldn't protect Marino. Marino's..... she's not with us anymore.”

Shin spoke while looking Luca in the eyes. She was silent for a while.

As she understood Shin's words, however, tears filled her eyes.

“Marino's... not with us?”

“We can't see her anymore...?”

“...yeah.”

Shin answered in a soulless voice. Every time he did, Luca's expression twisted more.

“No...”

The moment tears filled her eyes, Luca's rejection of being separated spilled out.

Not a moment later, she started crying loudly while calling Marino's name. Her voice was so loud, so filled with sadness, that the other crying children were surprised and stopped crying.

“.....”

Shin didn't know what to say. He didn't know how to console poor Luca, who was wailing while still hugging him.

He had failed in his promise of protecting Marino, but Luca didn't blame Shin.

Luca's tears and crying contained nothing but sheer, utter sadness.

"Sorry..."

Shin's whisper was drowned out by Luca's wailing.

He didn't move until Luca, tired of crying, fell asleep.

†

"Are you going?"

"Yes. Please take care of the children."

Shin placed Luca on a bed, then told Emil that he wouldn't be visiting the orphanage for a while.

Emil didn't try to stop him: she just looked on at him, worried.

"I don't know if it's fine for me to say something like this, but don't you go die. I'm sick of seeing people I know disappear."

Shin smiled to reassure Emil and turned his back to the orphanage.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to die-----I'm going to kill."

His last whisper did not reach anyone's ears.

As he left the orphanage, Shin entered a deserted alley and concealed his figure with a long hooded robe. It was the superior Ancient-grade 『Hollow Shade Tatters』, with all bonus points spent on concealment.

Just like the name indicated, it looked just like a tattered old robe, but it had the effect of making the wearer undetectable by 【Analyze】 or other search-type skills, as long as the wearer had 100 or more DEX than the caster.

If Shin wore it, the number of current players who could detect him could be probably counted on one hand.

Hiding within 『Hollow Shade Tatters』, Shin silently proceeded through the alley.

After about five minutes, he came upon a wooden door. It looked like a restaurant's backdoor, a perfectly normal sight for a back alley. Using an appraisal skill on it, however, revealed that it possessed a sturdiness unthinkable from its appearance.

Shin opened the door, which was actually made in a material sturdier than even Orichalcum, to enter in a dimly lit bar with soft music playing in the background.

The bartender was a man around 40 years old with ash gray hair slicked back. The atmosphere in the bar was calm and collected. The bartender was just as Shin heard and was the information broker he was looking for.

At a glance, the interior looked like a famed bar only true connoisseurs would know, but most clients were hiding their features with masks or capes. There was no board outside to signal the presence of a bar either.

This was a bar where all guests shared a common goal.

“Gimlet.”

The bartender came closer to his seat and Shin ordered a cocktail after placing a coin on the counter.

The bartender took the coin, looked at the red coin under it, then at Shin again. After staring at the new visitor for a few seconds, he took out lime and a bottle of gin to start preparing the cocktail.

While the bartender was preparing the drink, Shin received a voice chat call.

“(Are you a hunter? Or a hound?)”

The call had come from the bartender in front of him.

“(Hunter.)”

Shin answered the question in one word.

“(...your name.)”

“(Shin.)”

The bartender’s shaker stopped for a second, only to move again immediately, as if nothing had happened.

“I apologize for the wait. Here’s your gimlet.”

The bartender, who had prepared the drink in silence, offered the glass to Shin.

A piece of paper could be seen poking out from the coaster under the cocktail glass.

Shin downed the drink and took the piece of paper. Pretending not to notice the bar’s occupants eyes on him, he quickly left.

Shin exited the alley and arrived into a crowded street, then entered the first eatery he could find, ordered something, and finally opened the piece of paper. The piece of paper was wrapped a small, 1-cemel square card that contained a set of coordinates pointing to somewhere in Kalkia.

“It disappears after you open it, huh.”

Shin memorized the coordinates, but before he could discard the piece of paper, it had already vanished in a myriad of tiny polygons. The small card was still in his hand. While honestly admiring the intricacy of that method, Shin checked the presences in the surroundings, but did not find any relevant responses. No one was tailing him, apparently.

Shin wolfed down the food he had ordered and immediately headed for the location pointed out by the coordinates.

The location, near a teleportation point, looked just like any other two-story general store.

Shin knew, however, that the appearance was just camouflage. The store was lined with items, but other than the clerk no one was inside.

Shin took a random item and brought it to the register. When he paid, he handed the card to the clerk too.

“.....please go inside.”

The clerk was surprised an instant after seeing the card and reading Shin's name, but quickly returned to his former blank expression.

Shin proceeded in the back of the store, as the clerk had told him to. The corridor led to a room used for negotiating with customers. The clerk silently pushed a table aside and lifted a large floor tile, which revealed a set of stairs leading downwards.

"Please proceed by yourself."

"Got it."

Shin acknowledge the clerk's statement and descended the stone stairs.

The barely lit stairs formed a spiral; following them for a while led to a sturdy-looking door just like the one at the bar's entrance. Shin touched the handle and the door opened surprisingly easily.

All the players in the room beyond the door expressed their surprise at Shin's arrival, either through their expressions or gestures.

"So you came too."

Just as Shin was thinking what to do, a man wearing the same tattered cloak spoke to him.

Shin turned towards this familiar voice and found Shadow. Shin had heard from Emil that he had gone missing after the monster invasion event. Finding him here meant that the reason behind his disappearance was the same.

"I imagined you would be here."

Holly had died to buy time for the orphanage children to escape from the PKs' attack. It was not strange then for Shadow to be here, a base of the PKK guild "Avidya".

When "Avidya" was first formed, it was apparently a community for players whose companions had been killed by PKs to exchange information, but now it was composed of members who exchanged information and raised funds and others who actively hunted down PKs; a guild specialized in tracking and killing PKs.

As long as one followed the two rules: no betrayal and no hesitation of getting one's

hands dirty, anyone -women and children included- was allowed to join.

Of course, there were players who, like Shin, belonged to other guilds too.

The players who had created a guild with close friends, but were now alone, were many too.

As players could not belong to more than one guild at the same time, they were not official members but assisted the guild with information gathering, fundraising as external supporters, or as field troops.

The question the bartender asked Shin meant if he was a Hound (rear support) or Hunter (field trooper).

Whether one was allowed to join the guild or not, however, depended on the guildmaster's judgment. If a player was refused they would never receive any information from "Avidya", no matter how much they pleaded.

"If you ever get information about a man named Gargalla, tell me."

Shadow spoke with a hate-drenched tone Shin had never heard from him before.

"He's the one that...?"

"Yeah, I will have my revenge."

In the guild, players used their information, money or fighting power as currency to have others exact revenge for them or to obtain information on who they wanted to take revenge on.

Advanced players like Shin and Shadow would surely join the field troops. Even if facing against opponents they didn't know or never met before, as long as they were PKs they would swing their blades without hesitation.

"Then if you learn anything about a man named Vlad, please let me know."

Shin's information network had not found anything about Vlad's whereabouts.

PKs were originally all experts at hiding. Vlad was especially skilled; when Shin had met him in front of the orphanage Vlad had mentioned the name of the Savage Lions'

Lao, leader of the Explosive Legs corps, but the latter said that he knew no Vlad.

Apparently traitors had infiltrated the “Savage Lions” and Lao was now busy with finding the rotten apples.

“Hey there, you’re the new guys the guildmaster talked about?”

After talking with Shadow, Shin was thinking of asking around for the method to gather information, when a man with black bandages covering most of his face approached him.

Shin immediately activated 【Analyze】 , but because of the building’s restrictions the skill did not display any information. The store apparently also functioned as guild house. In a guild house, all skills other than combat ones had their usage restricted.

“.....yes, no mistake about that. Should we say our names?”

“Nah, we don’t use character names here. Members generally identify themselves using numbers. I’m called Six, I’m kind of in charge of the field troops. Your number will be One, the guy there gets Three. Use that from now on.”

“Do the numbers mean anything?”

“This is where field troopers gather. Numbers here obviously mean power rankings, right?... well, normally I’d have you show me how good you are, but you two are pretty famous. Especially this guy here, I bet it’s rare to find players who never heard of you.”

The man speaking to Shin and Shadow had clouded eyes, but it did not seem to be because of greed or other desires. Based on what he said, he seemed to know about Shin too, despite the 『Hollow Shade Tatters』 concealing him.

“My face is hidden, though.”

“You said your name to the bartender, didn’t you? He’s our guildmaster, Garanagal.”

The guildmaster himself was in charge of evaluating new members. Thinking about it, the bartender’s piercing gaze had that much intensity in it.

“There must be a One and Three already, no? If you keep changing names every time someone new joins, no one will know who’s who anymore.”

“No worries there. The rankings don’t change easily, and if they do we get noticed. One and Three were empty slots anyway. There are plenty of our members who went to attack a PK lair and never came back, after all.”

The two empty slots apparently belonged to two members who had left this world. Before doing so, however, they had apparently taken down a great number of high-ranked members of the PK guild “Ouroboros’ Hollow”. Six added that while they had failed in slaying the guildmaster, the guild’s scope of activities will likely decrease.

“So where can we get information about PKs?”

“Ask the woman over there. Her name’s Calmia.”

Six pointed at a woman wearing a light purple veil and Arabian-like clothing, who smiled as Shin and Shadow looked at her. Among all the players wearing equipment geared towards fighting other players, the high skin exposure of her attire stood out exceptionally.

On the table in front of Calmia was a crystal sphere the size of a bowling ball, which made her look like a fortune teller.

“I know little of the rules here. If you say we are field troopers, does it mean we’ll move following your orders?”

“Nah, that only happens when there’s a large-scale battle. Generally we move in small numbers to surround and beat down small groups, but that’s what the members with low fighting prowess do. For guys like you, others would just be in the way, I’d wager. Our Two, Four and Five are the same too.”

In simple terms, do as you like. Shin wondered if it was okay for the rules to be so loose, but it was the best situation he could have hoped for. He could leave the information gathering to them and just go around cutting down targets.

As Shin was pondering such thoughts, Six formed a fist with his hands, which seemed to shake slightly.

“All strong players went to capture dungeons and won’t cooperate with people like us. I don’t mean to say that I’m happy about your misfortunes, but I am excited that strong people like you joined us. Now I can finally... have my revenge too.”

Six' voice was trembling too. Looking around, Shin saw other players exhibiting similar reactions.

In this world existed an absolute standard of strength, the player's stats. This meant that strong players were untouchable by many others, a source of endless frustration for weaker ones.

Shin nodded to Six and, together with Shadow, went to Calmia's table.

"You're the new One, then. Six probably told you, but my name is Calmia. I organize all the information the hounds send us. If there's anything you want to know, just ask."

Calmia's calm, poised tone matched her alluring avatar very well. She had apparently been allowed to join Avidya thanks to her information management abilities.

Sometimes she would also use her good looks to infiltrate enemy territory. Of course, for someone with little fighting power like her to penetrate PK-controlled areas meant that there was no guarantee she could come back alive.

"Differently from the much rarer hunters, there're plenty of substitutes for the hounds. Plus there's no such things as truth serums in this world, so unless I talk, there's no way to know the information I hold. I would die before spilling anything, of course."

Calmia's smile vanished from her lips when she answered Shin's question if it wasn't dangerous for an information broker to join infiltration missions.

Others could fill in Calmia's function. Even if she disappeared, there would be no real damage to the organization as long as she didn't spill anything.

Depending on the situation, she wouldn't hesitate to become expendable. It was clear that she, too, was prepared for the worst.

"Now that we're done with the self introductions, I'd like to know about PK locations. Places where a lot of them gather are preferable. If you have a list, give me one and I'll just start picking them off from the top."

"...I suppose I should have expected that you'd say something like this."

PKs usually held bases outside hometowns. Because of that they often fought against monsters and had high levels and stats. Shin plainly stated that he wanted to face and

defeat multiples of such opponents at the same time, which prompted Calmia's incredulous reply.

"After I start hunting I won't be able to come back here for a while. How can we keep in touch?"

"Just register me as a friend and call me through private chat. I'll attach the list to a message card and send it to you. What is your friend there going to do?"

"I'm going to go with Shin. Gargalla and Vlad were together, right?"

"Yes, that's right. There are several witnesses... no, I suppose I should say victims. We have the information. They belong to the guild "Ouroboros". It seems that Gargalla is one of the top members of the guild. Vlad's an expert in sneak attacks, on the other hand. Cheating and luring others, apparently sometimes he doesn't even get his hands dirty."

".....I see."

Shin would have wanted such information earlier, but it was too late to think about that now.

"That's more than enough. Shin, will you lend me a hand?"

"Of course. He's the one that attacked the orphanage, after all. I meant to hunt him down after I was done with Vlad."

Vlad was a higher priority, but Shin thought that Gargalla required more caution. He had destroyed his barrier, after all: Shin expected that he would be stronger than Vlad, who he had faced in battle.

"These two are rather famous, but we don't have much useful information about "Ouroboros" itself. I'll tell the Hounds to gather information about them as top priority. Also, this is the list of PK guilds' bases and members that we are aware of at present. You two will probably be all right, but not everything will be as the list says, so make sure you stay sharp all the time..."

"We know that well. We won't let even one escape."

"They're all going down."

“I was talking about your own safety... but I guess that’s too late.”

Shin and Shadow thought that Calmia meant to say not to let a single PK escape, and replied accordingly. Hearing such replies, she couldn’t help laughing bitterly.

We are valuable advanced players for Avidya. She wouldn’t want us to die easily, or so Shin thought.

After leaving the store Shin and Shadow checked the list right away. They would crush PK bases starting from the closest one and proceeding in order.

“Let’s go, then. Will you change weapons?”

“No, please just give me a boost. The only weapon I’m going to use is this... the weapon I got from her.”

Shin proposed to offer Shadow a stronger weapon, but the latter refused with a stiff expression. Even if it could lead to his death, he didn’t want to use any other weapon.

“Please take this, then. It will surely come in handy when fighting against Gargalla.”

Shin gave Shadow an armband decorated with red gemstones, which had the effect of preventing instant death by leaving the wearer with 1 HP if they were hit with a blow that would reduce their HP from more than 30% to zero.

The item would just prevent death when a large amount of damage was inflicted in one blow and would not prevent instant death caused by blows to the head or heart, which ignored remaining HP.

Shin would have preferred to give Shadow items that prevented instant death in all its forms, but he could not equip them because of lacking stats. THE NEW GATE’s system allowed players to avoid accidental death more and more as their level increased.

Shin made sure Shadow equipped the armband, then they headed to the first location reported by the list.

It happened one night.

In the guildhouse of the PK guild “Liberacion”, a boy and a girl were surrounded by guild members.

The boy had a horn sprouting from his forehead and scales on his skin, while the girl had peculiar patterns on her body; judging from such visual traits, the boy was a Dragnil and the girl a Pixie.

While venturing outside looking for ingredients, they were suddenly surrounded by players and caught with no room to escape.

Now, in the area built within the guildhouse, the boy -called Masakado- was forced to fight against monsters. His opponent was a level 398 bug-type monster, a Stag Mantis, which was a cross between a stag beetle and a mantis, boasting four scythes and a pair of pincers.

Masakado’s level was over 200, but he had already resurrected a few times, so his stats were, on average, just a bit higher than 300. These were numbers rather worrying if facing against a Stag Mantis.

Even more worrying was the fact that the key to draw out his power as a Magic Swordsman, his sword 『Rune Blade』 had been snatched by the PKs. His sub job was Fist Fighter, but the most he could do now was avoid the monster’s attacks.

“Come on, come on! Run faster or you’re gonna die!”

“Serves ya right for acting all cool trying to protect the girl!”

“Looks like we’ll have a winner pretty soon!”

The PKs watching the fight from outside the arena yelled and jeered.

As long as the girl who was with him, Hilamee, was taken hostage, Masakado could not try anything. The only way out available to him now, was defeating the Stag Mantis.

“Shit!!”

Masakado swore and leapt away. Less than one second later, a scythe about the same size as he was, pierced the ground where he had been standing.

Bug-type monsters excelled at physical attacks and defense. Masakado, as he was now, would surely be killed if he received even just a few blows.

“-----!? -----!!”

Hilamee was trying to say something, but the gag on her mouth prevented her from formulating actual words.

“Why did this...”

The long game of tag against the superior monster had started shaving off Masakado’s powers of concentration. When would it end? Even if he really defeated the Stag Mantis, would they be saved?

He was supposed to be thinking of a way to rescue Hilamee and escape, but his overworked mind ended up thinking of things completely unrelated.

He was almost at his limit. Masakado started thinking of a last resort attack on the Stag Beetle.

“----eh?”

In front of Masakado’s eyes, Hilamee floated in midair. Precisely speaking, the PK that had captured her thrown the bound girl in the ring.

Hilamee’s body struck the ground, rolled a few times and stopped. The Stag Mantis was right next to her.

“You bastards!!”

“C’mon boy, go save her or she’ll be in danger!”

“Damn you...!!”

Masakado jumped at the Stag Mantis. The monster’s attention was focused on Hilamee, so Masakado’s jumping kick hit its head cleanly, causing the monster to stagger.

However, Its HP barely decreased and the monster soon regained its balance.

“Gah!?”

The back of the monster’s scythes, which it had swung wide to get rid of the annoyance that had hit it, landed squarely on Masakado’s abdomen. Due to the differences in physique and stats, Masakado was blown away. He crashed against the ground, his body grating against the floor of the arena.

The HP gauge displayed at the edge of Masakado’s line of sight had decreased by around 30%. In addition, the status display indicated he had been poisoned.

“-----! -----!!”

Hilamee tried to shout again. Uncaring, the Stag Mantis raised its four scythes in her direction.

The female pixie was a Mage with low defense. If she was struck by all four scythes, her HP gauge would surely be annihilated.

“Damn you... look at meeeeeeeee!!!”

Masakado used a taunt skill to force the monster to turn towards him. However, the Stag Mantis had already started its attack motions, and did not even look at him.

A few more seconds and Hilamee would die. He wouldn’t last much longer either. Just as a feeling of hopeless surrender was about to envelop Masakado’s heart...

“---that wasn’t a bad choice.”

The voice of a man, a voice he had heard before, suddenly resounded. At the same time, the guildhouse shook violently.

“Woooohhh!?!”

“What!? What the hell’s going on!?”

The vibration, strong enough to lift the ground up, caused confusion among the PKs.

A pale blue ball suddenly appeared in the center of the arena; the next instant, thunder

and lightning ran across the ring.

The booming thunderclap caused Masakado's sight to go black. It was the rare visual status effect caused by strong flashing of light or thunder, 【Blind】 .

No matter how much he squinted, Masakado could not tell what was happening around him. The PKs' screams, however, echoed clearly in his ears.

"Shadow, please take those two."

"Got it. Hey, stay quiet."

"Eh?"

The confused Masakado was forcefully grabbed by someone. There were two people next to him apparently. Judging from their conversation, a man called Shadow had just lifted Masakado on his shoulders.

Masakado instinctively fought back when he was grabbed, but stopped moving after Shadow dashed away. The speed at which he moved, far higher than Masakado's, would have caused him to fall if he struggled.

Shadow moved one step forward, paused for a second, then dashed away again.

Several seconds later, he leapt high in the air.

"Wha!?"

"!?!"

He heard a lament right next to him. He could swear it was Hilamee's voice.

"Stay still."

After they landed, Shadow urged them to stop struggling and jumped even higher. As with the first jump, they landed somewhere high and then jumped to a farther high place.

"I'm going to heal you. Quiet."

Masakado nodded quietly. He was saved from certain death at the “hands” of the Stag Mantis. He did not know what Shadow and his companion had in mind, but he had no reason to oppose them.

The status effect 【Blind】 disappeared and Masakado could finally see again; he immediately looked around for Hilamee.

“You’re safe... I’m glad.”

Hilamee had just been freed from her mouth gag. The man that was now untying the ropes binding her hands was probably Shadow.

He was a young man clad in ninja-like equipment. Masakado’s 【Analyze V】 barely revealed any information about him, but judging from his earlier movements, he was surely an advanced player.

“Use this and go back to town.”

Shadow threw a crystal to the two. Masakado frantically caught it and realized it was imbued with teleportation magic.

“I-is it really alright? This looks really expensive...”

For Masakado and Hilamee, who had been robbed of their possessions, it was a very welcome gift.

Teleportation magic had ranks too; the low rank allowed teleportation from outside fields and town buildings, the middle rank able from dungeons too, and the high rank also allowed from unique locations. The ranks were signaled by colors: low rank was brown, middle rank silver, and high rank golden.

There were some areas where teleport crystals could not be used, but the place where they were now was just a field. Using a golden crystal would be nothing but wasteful.

To teleport from a field to the town, a brown crystal was more than enough. Crystals imbued with high-rank teleport magic were rare, so for Masakado it must have looked terribly valuable.

“You’ll be in our way if you stay. Shut up and go. We can’t save you again if they come after you.”

Shadow then quickly dashed back to the PK guildhouse.

“Hey, that’s...”

Hilamee, finally free, pointed at the guildhouse. The structure was still being rocked by explosions, bursts of light blazing all around it, illuminating the night sky to the point that it was as bright as noon.

Human silhouettes could be seen jumping out every once in awhile. They were holding brown or golden crystals, suggesting that they were trying to teleport away.

Not one of them, however, managed to successfully make their escape.

One was burnt to a crisp by a blue flame that blazed through the guildhouse walls, another was skewered by a black spike arising from the ground, others suddenly turned into ice statues and shattered.

Masakado, or maybe Hilamee, held their breath. They had been told to return to their town, but the scenery of the guildhouse being destroyed and the PKs vanishing before their eyes froze them where they stood.

If the guildhouse looked like that from outside, things had to be even more chaotic inside.

“Ah...”

Suddenly, darkness enveloped the two. They took a few seconds to notice that there were no more explosions or bursts of light from the guildhouse.

“!?”

Finally, light descended again.

A pillar of light, large enough to cover the whole guildhouse, and powerful enough to blow away the surrounding trees and rocks.

“Is that... a skill...?”

Masakado had difficulty believing that there existed a skill that could produce such immense power. He could barely make out the shadow of the guildhouse, but that too

disappeared soon.

As the light pillar vanished, literally nothing stood in its wake.

Buildings vanished when their durability ran out. Everyone knew that much, but seeing something disappear without a trace like that filled them with something akin to horror. Needless to think how the PKs inside must have felt.

“Hey... someone’s coming.”

Hilamee pointed at two human silhouettes coming their way. One was the man that had saved them, the other was a player that Masakado and Hilamee both knew.

“That’s... Mr. Shin... right?”

“Yeah, I mean, he should be...”

Few did not know Shin’s name, his face, and reason behind his fame.

Masakado and Hilamee had been saved by Shin already in the past too. They knew that he wasn’t the kind of person to unleash utter destruction like that.

Looking at the place where the guildhouse once was, only a scorched patch remained. The scene they had just witnessed clearly showed what had happened there.

Shin had exterminated the PKs, all the players inside the guild. That was something the Shin that Masakado knew would have never done.

Masakado and Hilamee didn’t know what had happened to Shin. As such, they didn’t understand.

They neither knew the reason why he was there, nor why his equipment was different.

Or why his expression seemed void of all emotion, an expression they had never seen before.

“Ah, er, Mr. Shin...?”

Shin must have noticed their presence, but did not react to them in the least. Masakado gathered his courage and spoke to him, but there was no answer. Not even a glance in

his direction.

Shadow, walking next to him, did not say anything either.

“.....”

Shin and Shadow kept walking away; Masakado could not say anything more.

“What in the world happened to him...?”

Masakado's confused words were lost in the night, not reaching Shin's or anyone's ears.

That night, 24 players disappeared from THE NEW GATE's world.

It was the start of an unprecedented cleansing that raged on with storm-like fury.

†

“It's nice to see you again. Your achievements are getting more and more talked about, you know.”

Calmia chuckled while looking at Shin.

Almost one month had passed since Shin started his PK hunt. Even if he had kept his identity and figure hidden, the news that Shin was going around killing PKs spread quickly.

The pace was too fast, the massacre too one-sided. Too subtle for a major guild, while for a smaller guild not suffering any casualties would have been impossible. On the other hand, some players whispered that a certain person had not shown themselves in the dungeon clearing frontlines recently.

As Shin's disappearance and the start of the PK hunt happened roughly at the same time, the rumors eventually became that Shin had started performing a “PK cleansing”.

The rumors became more and more believable as witnesses, rescued by him, started reporting what they saw.

“They're more on their guard now. It's a pain.”

“Is that something the man who crushed dozens of PK guilds would say? Thanks to your rampage, it’s been a mess here these days, everyone crying and laughing...”

Normally, avenged players would not show their emotions openly, out of respect for others whose aggressors were still unpunished. But now, the numbers were too great, as were the expectations for the future, so Avidya’s guildhouse looked more or less like a banquet hall.

They praised and hailed Shin as a hero for destroying PK guilds with his powerful skills.

Others, like Shadow, did their part too, but the scale of destruction caused and people killed were too different for them to be mentioned.

“There are some players who disapprove of your ways though. I don’t think the major guilds will actually move, but they might attempt something, so be careful.”

Calmia looked worried. Shin nodded without any particular change in his expression.

Yes, even if he was killing PKs, murderers, his actions were judged in many ways.

Many said that revenge was meaningless, that he would just become the same as them, they lost their respect for Shin. Some of them started calling him “God of Death”.

“No problem. The only large guild remaining is “Ouroboros” anyway. I won’t let the smaller ones go though, I have no intention of stopping now that I’ve come so far.”

“Is that so? I can give you this information then.”

“At last...?”

“Yes, at last we have found Ouroboros’ hideout. Gargalla has been seen too. Vlad doesn’t seem to be around though. Based on the information we have, he hasn’t returned to the guild and is acting on his own.”

Shin remembered Vlad’s gloating expression. It was still etched clearly in his memories.

Maybe he was observing Shin from afar. That’s how deep the obsession he felt emanating from Vlad.

“I don’t know if Vlad will be there, but it seems that they will have a large gathering three days from now. You’ve been destroying PK guilds one after the other, so they might be meeting to develop countermeasures. The most skilled PKs still alive will likely be there, do be careful.”

“Got it. But having targets gather like that is pretty helpful for me. Being ambushed by high-class PKs would be pretty nasty.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard, okay? Some people try suicide attacks against PKs, but if everyone did that no one would be left...”

“I’m not as admirable as that. That’s the last large-scale PK guild; I’m going to make it leave the stage with a bang.”

Shin spoke what he truly felt.

He had no intention of losing his life while killing the PKs; he loathed the idea of dying alongside them even more than being killed by them.

He would use all means available. Only the PKs needed to disappear. That was the method Shin adopted.

“Maybe I should keep this for myself... but in a way, I feel like I have to tell him, hmm...”

After obtaining more details, Shin left Avidya’s guildhouse and went to the meeting point with Shadow.

Unlike Shin, Shadow was hell-bent on killing Gargalla, even at the cost of his own life. Shin thus was thinking of carrying out the next mission alone.

“...no, that won’t work.”

No matter how much he thought, the conclusion he reached was always to tell Shadow.

If Shin hadn’t lost Marino, he might have tried everything he could to stop Shadow.

Shin’s position, though, was the same as Shadow’s. To exact vengeance with your own hands. No one could stop that feeling.

Even if death would follow vengeance, they would not stop. The opinions of others

meant nothing. It was only about what the person themselves thought, that was the only question.

“It’s snowing.”

Shin looked up at the sky and saw pure white snow starting to fall.

When Shadow heard about Gargalla’s whereabouts, a twisted smile appeared on his lips.

†

“Things under your nose are the hardest to find, as they say.”

“That’s right. The hometown’s underground... they said it would be made into a dungeon in the next update. I didn’t even think that it actually existed.”

Shin and Shadow were walking in a large space located under Kalkia. It was not an underground waterway. Instead, it was a series of small and big rooms connected by corridors of various sizes.

Ouroboros’ hideout, as Calmia’s information network had found out, was in this underground space.

Being a section still not implemented in the game, there were no bosses or monsters roaming about, nor any treasure chests or traps.

The entrance wasn’t easy to find either, so it would be difficult to find if one wasn’t aware of its existence.

“Looks like they bothered setting up some traps though.”

Shin and Shadow passed without activating traps that would have likely meant sudden death for players with stats around 400. During their PK guild extermination missions, they had gained deeper knowledge of anti-player traps.

The two proceeded through the corridors with silent footsteps. The information they had only covered the entrance and a bit farther. It was possible for monsters and traps to be present in the depths of the underground space.

“Someone’s there.”

They spotted a humanlike silhouette in the corridor ahead. Shadow hid, just in case, while Shin moved closer to check it.

The silhouette’s name was displayed in red characters; definite proof that it was a PK. Next to the name, there also was a snake biting its tail -Ouroboros’ logo- clearly visible.

The PK was coming from underground and heading outside, unaware of Shin’s presence. When the PK passed next to him, Shin placed a tracker, usually used with monsters, without being noticed.

The guild’s executives, with the guildmaster above all, had to be eliminated first.

When guild members died, the guildmaster alone would be notified of their demise immediately. Other members could also know if they looked the dead member up, so being noticed early would increase the number of escapees.

In unusual groups, like PK guilds, the guildmaster often had particular charisma, so if they escaped there was the risk of them creating a similar organization again.

Shin and Shadow kept exploring further, putting tracking markers on PKs as they passed them.

“There are more and more people around here. Looks like we hit the jackpot, but they’re acting strangely.”

“Yeah, looks like they’re fighting.”

On Shin’s map, the markers in one specific section were moving wildly.

There was some kind of commotion going on, even in the few seconds that Shin looked at the map, several marks symbolizing players had disappeared.

At first they thought that another member of Avidya had attacked the hideout, but the other members were hunting down PKs that didn’t belong to any guild or survivors from guilds they had crushed.

Even if they did attack, Shin would have been informed beforehand.

“Could there have been a mutiny or something?”

“Could be. It happened in other guilds, after all.”

Most PKs shared common interests or ways of thinking. But because of that, in some cases they could turn their blades against their own comrades.

Among all PKs, some had lost to hopelessness after Shin and Shadow started their hunt, while others had gone on rampages in their own guilds.

“We’ve infiltrated easily enough, but a careful guildmaster might manage to flee.”

“Let’s split up. Use the commotion as a lure and look for whoever is the guildmaster. I’ll go that way, you take the opposite direction, Shin.”

Shadow proposed to go in the direction of the commotion.

“Wouldn’t it be better if I went that way?”

If the guildmaster was there, Shin could blow him away along with the fighting PKs with his magic.

“No, if the guildmaster comes to quell the commotion, I’ll ambush them. It would be a lot worse if they avoided the commotion and left here. If it’s about chasing people, you are faster and have a wider detection field too.”

There wasn’t much time for debate. Shin had no reason to stubbornly oppose Shadow’s proposal, so he nodded and ran off.

A few minutes after separating from Shin, Shadow reached the location where the PKs were fighting. He used all the concealment-type skills he could to make sure he was not found.

He had used the support items Shin had given him along with everything his Ninja job had, so the fighting PKs had not noticed his approach at all.

“Gwah!?”

“Shit... why...”

Hidden in the shadows, Shadow observed the fighting going on in front of him.

He wouldn't interfere. Having the PKs kill each other would make his burden lighter, after all.

“Don't go shitting your panties there, ladies.”

The speaker was the cause of the commotion. With a sigh, the man swung his giant axe. Thanks to the combination of centrifugal force and his own muscles, the sword-wielding fighter he opposed was cleaved in two along with his weapon.

“This is the last major guild. If you don't do something, the High Human will come get you, ya know? So why do I have to hear people talk about running away?”

The man's name was Gargalla. The despicable man who murdered Holly. An opponent to kill at all costs.

Every time Gargalla swung his battleaxe, the PKs surrounding him disappeared. Shadow did not let his emotions take over and attack. That had caused him to fail previously.

“(Shin, I found Gargalla.)”

Shadow connected a chat to Shin and surprised himself by how calm he sounded.

“.....really...”

“(Yeah, I'm sorry but let me do this. If anything happens, the rest is up to you.)”

“(.....)”

Shin didn't answer. Shadow knew, however, that he wouldn't give up on finding the enemy to come to his location.

“I... I have to kill him.”

Shadow quietly breathed out.

Unlike the time when rage and hate had clouded his mind, he was now coolly analyzing Gargalla's movements.

"You all sound pretty damn boring now!!"

Another one, another PK left this world. Be it saints or vicious criminals, all players disappeared the same way when they died. Nothing remained.

"....."

Shadow kept observing Gargalla.

While fighting, Gargalla would sometimes turn his back to Shadow. Every time he did, Shadow registered a red effect blinking on Gargalla's neck.

That was the sign meaning an attack would result in instant death. It appeared when the system judged the opponent to have shown an opening, an effect of the Ninja skill **【Blink of the Death God】**. "Opening" stood for the lag time after attacking or activating a skill, when the player was defenseless and attacks could hit more easily.

The blinking light was reflected in Shadow's eyes several more times, but he did not move.

Advanced players would sometimes show openings on purpose, and **【Blink of the Death God】** could not differentiate between voluntary and involuntary ones. A player that had just gained the skill would rely too much on it and attack, only to be counterattacked.

The possibility of Gargalla having noticed his presence was low. But Shadow, who had fought against him, knew how honed Gargalla's battle instinct was.

Thus he waited for the best chance to strike.

"You want to go down fighting, don't you. Why run when someone stronger is coming to get you, then!"

The number of PKs fighting against Gargalla could now be counted on one hand. With another couple swings from his battleaxe, they would all probably disappear.

Shadow attacked when Gargalla had raised his axe to cut down the last remaining PK.

“-----!!”

As if he appeared out of thin air, Shadow snuck behind Gargalla. The blade in his hands precisely aiming for the man’s neck.

“Ngh!?”

Gargalla reacted to the silently approaching blade in a surprising way. The attack had come from his blind spot, but despite that, he jumped in the other PK’s direction, barely escaping the clutches of certain death.

Shadow’s blade had slashed Gargalla’s neck, but thanks to the last-second dodge he had managed to keep his head attached to his body.

In real life such a cut would have severed an artery, but the result in the game was only a loss of around 10% of Gargalla’s HP. The 【Bloodred Poison】 status inflicted by Shadow’s dagger, however, gnawed at Gargalla from within.

Before confirming the consequences of his attack, however, Shadow had concealed himself again.

“...this wasn’t one of the people here.”

Gargalla had an idea of who could have so splendidly enacted the Ninja hit-and-hide strategy.

“Ooh, yeah, now I get it. I did hear that there was a fierce ninja with the people going around killing PKs.”

Gargalla flashed a vicious smile. He bashed the other PK, who was scampering away, with his battleaxe and examined his surroundings.

He couldn’t use recovery items. If he tried to, Shadow would strike when the opening generated.

“.....”

In the now completely silent room, only the sound of something burning could be heard.

Then the sound of something suddenly falling.

“!!”

Gargalla reacted instantly. The moment he looked at the direction the sound came from, something glinted in the darkness.

“Tch!!”

The slash, coming from the opposite direction of the sound source, grazed Gargalla’s legs and vanished.

Gargalla could only see the effects of the attack. Slashes that appeared out of nowhere, as if they had come from another dimension, were Shadow’s trademark in THE NEW GATE.

“Damn, can’t really see shit...!!”

Attacks that made full use of movement skills, concealment skills, and Ninja abilities. That was the true nature of the advanced player called “Shadow the Shadowless”.

From the legs to the neck, to the arms, then to the neck again.

The never-ending storm of swords clashed against Gargalla’s armor in bursts of sparks. The speed-based attacks were light, however, and could not exceed his defense.

On the other hand, Gargalla could not find a target to attack. However, he did not just stand around and be attacked; he managed to block the slashes at the last second.

Attacking deactivated concealment skills. Even the most experienced players could not avoid a certain time lag after the attack before activating concealment skills again. Normally the opponent would detect them as target after the first attack.

This did not affect Shadow, however. His mental operations were faster and smoother than most players. He attacked and disappeared immediately, almost as if he was on autopilot.

Shadow’s continuous attacks had not caused serious damage to Gargalla, but the 【Bloodred Poison】 status he had inflicted at the start was eating away at Gargalla’s HP

gauge, as the latter could not recover.

Shadow was not targeting critical spots, but also parts that would delay Gargalla's movements, such as joints and openings in the armor. When the opponent was starting to get used to such attacks, Shadow would strike critical spots again.

The incessant attacks continued. Finally, Shadow's blade stretched towards Gargalla's neck again, but the latter did not defend himself.

"!?"

The blade reached the man's neck, but was repelled without cutting anything. Because of this development, completely different to what had happened until now, Shadow's rhythm was disrupted for a moment.

"RRAAHHH!!!"

Not Gargalla's axe, but his fist lunged at Shadow. Protected by a gauntlet and boasting high STR, it was a fearsome weapon by itself.

"Sssh!!"

Having been seen, Shadow could not disappear again; he readied again the repelled blade in a battle stance and parried the attack.

Sparks flew between the gauntlet and the short sword. Shadow didn't oppose the force pushing him back and put distance between himself and his opponent.

"You're finally out in the open, huh. Totally different from last time though."

"....."

Gargalla's tone was impressed, but Shadow silently took out an item.

The item's name was "Miracle Drug of Blinking Life". Shaped like a round pill, it boosted the user's stats immensely but, in exchange, would soon take their life.

The time limit changed based on the user's HP, but not even Shin could fight for long after using it. Shadow even more so.

Now that he could only confront Gargalla head on, he would use any means available.

If he had fought alongside Shin, he probably would not have needed to go so far. He was throwing away his life. Shadow himself understood that much.

He could not have done that, though. It would have meant nothing if he didn't defeat the opponent before him, Gargalla, with his own two hands.

In his heart, Shadow whispered an apology. Then, he swallowed the "Miracle Drug of Blinking Life".

"...-----!!!!"

The moment he felt the item started being effective, Shadow charged towards Gargalla.

Maybe it was because he didn't think Shadow would attack from the front, or maybe because his speed was more than expected.

Taken completely by surprise, Gargalla barely managed to repel the blade aimed at his neck and swung his battleaxe in response.

The repelled shortsword struck Gargalla's chest, making sparks against the armor; Gargalla's breastplate was damaged but could not be pierced.

The battleaxe cut through the air, aimed at Shadow, who used his shortsword to forcefully change the attack's trajectory.

A feat of strength only possible thanks to the item's boost; now Shadow's STR was not inferior to Gargalla's.

Gargalla pulled back his battleaxe while parrying Shadow's follow-up attacks with his gauntlet, then used the axe to push against him.

Shadow stopped attacking and attempted to increase the distance between them, but a sudden chill running down his spine made him give up on this too. He could not overcome the battleaxe's momentum and used his shortsword to clash against it.

"You got good instincts."

Gargalla's smile suggested that he knew what Shadow tried to do. Based on his avatar's stats, it was easy to imagine that many players until now had tried to best Gargalla using speed.

Shadow guessed that the chill he felt was caused by Gargalla's countermeasure against speed-based players.

"See if ya like this, then!!"

Gargalla held his battleaxe with his right hand and spread the palm of his left hand. An instant later, a battleaxe just like the one in his right hand appeared in Gargalla's left hand as well.

Using that opening, Shadow made use of Gargalla's power to increase the distance between them. At the same time, he threw the shortsword he was holding at Gargalla.

Gargalla tried to knock the projectile down, but the shortsword changed directions in midair, dodging the battleaxe and aiming for his neck.

Gargalla flexed his neck, however, the flying blade passed right next to it and ended up stabbing the ground.

The Throwing and Wind combination skill 【Trick Throw】 allowed one to change the direction of the thrown weapon in midair. Gargalla had guessed how many times the direction could change during flight.

After throwing the shortsword, Shadow quickly materialized twin swords. Wielding these weapons with boosted AGI at the expense of durability, he attacked Gargalla again.

This time Shadow did not attack from the front, but unleashed attacks from many directions, using the walls and even the ceiling as foothold. Making use of the Movement-type skill 【Flying Shadow】 , he increased the unpredictability of his attacks.

Shadow had little HP left; the time left for him was probably less than one minute.

But even in such a situation, he did not lose his cool. Aiming for the instant he could deliver the final blow, he used everything he could in the room as footholds for his movement and attacks.

A frenzied run that, in such a confined space, made it look like he could control space.

The light streaks drawn by the twin blades in mid-air surrounded Gargalla like a barrier.

“...ooh.”

Shadow ran. The sounds grew smaller and smaller.

“Ooohh!!!”

Shadow jumped. The flowing scenery became slower and slower.

“Oooohhh!!!!”

Shadow slashed. The cuts on Gargalla’s body gradually increased.

“OoooOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAHHHHHH!!!!”

Shadow roared, following the emotion bursting from within.

A roar that ultimately turned into a scream, as Gargalla’s armor saw its durability decrease exponentially.

“What the hell got into you all of a sudden!?”

Even Gargalla could not help being shaken by Shadow’s sudden acceleration.

The “Miracle Drug of Blinking Life”, in exchange of the ultimate price it required, granted the user an explosive stat boost. Added effects, such as the ones players normally used, were nothing in comparison.

Normally it would not be possible to use it to the fullest. In this moment, however, a power that players would subconsciously limit was under Shadow’s complete control.

A force of desperation, that lasted only dozens of seconds. Shadow used that fleeting time to decide the outcome of the battle.

Gargalla could not keep up with Shadow’s movements anymore. Shadow first concentrated on his opponent’s right leg, to restrict his movements. The moment

Gargalla lost his balance, Shadow went for his neck.

“Nnghh!!”

Maybe it happened because Shadow had already targeted his neck many times. Gargalla had predicted such an attack and raised his battleaxe in defense.

The twin swords had low durability from the start: clashing against Gargalla’s battleaxe, the armor shattered them.

“Kh!?”

“Out of time, huh?? You’re outta luck too!!”

His weapons crushed, Shadow landed and remained immobile for a moment. Gargalla’s battleaxe rose again, towering behind his back.

Shadow wasn’t sure whether his armor could withstand such an attack. There was no time to dodge it by sidestepping either.

Gargalla was sure to have claimed victory. The small opening birthed by such confidence was exactly what Shadow was waiting for. The shortsword he had thrown previously was stabbing the ground at his feet.

“And now----”

Shadow was kneeling, his back facing Gargalla. He quickly took the short sword and jumped backwards.

Charging backwards at your opponent was an absolutely reckless move, but Gargalla’s battleaxe managed to react. Because of the unexpected movement, however, it did not succeed in splitting Shadow apart.

Shadow’s back clashed against Gargalla’s armor. The next instant, Shadow stabbed his own chest with the shortsword.

The blade pierced Shadow’s body and continued towards Gargalla’s chest armor.

Normally, it would have been repelled. But the accumulated damage created a different result.

The shortsword's blade pierced the sturdy armor and stabbed the flesh it protected. A little, just a little more, and it would reach the heart.

"It's over!!!"

The blade still stabbed, Shadow activated a skill.

It was the Sword and Flame combination skill **【Purgatory Thrust】**. A blade of fire formed from the shortsword, filling the distance from the blade's tip to the heart, extending out of Gargalla's back.

Critical hit. An absolute instant death attack, ignoring remaining HP.



“Hah, not... ba-----”

Gargalla's body turned into polygons and scattered before he could finish his last sentence.

Shadow kneeled down, the shortsword still lodged in his chest. Because of the last skill he used, he barely had 5 seconds left.

“Aah...”

A strengthless groan escaped his lips.

His love burnt, his hate exasperated, his sadness fed him to keep him going. But the conclusion he reached was just the reality that he had killed people.

He had his revenge. His mission was complete. Nothing remained in his chest, however.

He did not think that revenge was a fruitless thing.

It was not fulfilling either, though.

“Shadow!!!”

Five seconds until the flame of Shadow's life flickered away. The last person to call his name was the man who shouldered the same pain as he, the friend that had walked down his same path.

“Shin.”

He had reached the end first. Because of that, Shadow thought that he had to tell him.

Maybe Shin would reply that he didn't want to hear that from him. But Shadow felt that he had to be the one to say it, because he was in the same position, because his words could maybe reach Shin's heart.

“Don't... end... like... th...”

Shadow saw Shin run to him as if through a cracked lens. He couldn't feel his body anymore. The end had come.

Had his words reached him? The vanishing Shadow could not know.

†

“Out of my sight.”

Shin received Shadow’s message about Gargalla as he was blitzing through the guild, still concealed by the robe. Everytime he found a PK he judged if they could be the guildmaster or not, then purged them one by one.

Since fighting had broken out within the guild, finding the guildmaster had become the top priority.

Before Shin’s 『True Moon』 , average weapons and armor meant nothing.

Some PKs had formed a party and confronted him, but the frontline members’ swords, spears, armors and shields were torn apart as soon as they entered Shin’s range, together with any other equipment on them.

The rear lines’ mages, too, saw their spells nullified as they themselves were burned to a crisp by magic. Arrows and other projectiles could not overcome Shin’s Ancient-grade gear; here, too, magic annihilated everything in its wake.

“Where’s the guildmaster?”

“I d-don’t kn---”

The PK’s head flew from his neck before he could even complete his sentence.

Shin continued to search for the guildmaster, employing his detection abilities to the fullest.

Gargalla was for Shadow to take his revenge. Shadow would probably manage to kill him, even if it meant his own life. Sharing his same emotions, Shin knew that well.

“Tch.”

Shin loudly clicked his tongue. He was irritated at himself for letting Shadow go.

He understood Shadow’s feelings so much that it hurt. The hate burning the flesh, the

sadness twisting the mind. Their feelings towards the target of their revenge could not be described in just a few words.

At the same time, though, he couldn't help but think if it was really a good idea to let him go on his own.

Based on the information he had, Shadow had about a 30% chance of winning. If he used a certain item, 80%.

But in the latter case, even if Shadow won the chance of his death was 100%.

".....damn it."

That was Shadow's battle. If Shin got involved, even if anyone would say that it was to save Shadow's life, for Shadow himself he would just be in the way. If their positions were reversed, Shin too would scream at him to stay out of the way.

Even so... even so. Even if he had chosen the path of revenge, even if he killed without hesitation, he could not be indifferent to a comrade's death.

"Found you!!"

Shin had headed to the area with the highest number of responses within his detection area. Before him now stood Ouroboros' guildmaster. Apparently trying to flee, they were advancing in the direction opposite to Shin's position.

Shin didn't know where the border between the underground space and the guildhouse was, but as he was not using teleport crystals, it appeared that they were still inside the guildhouse.

Normally it was possible to teleport freely from a guildhouse, but when attacked by enemies the teleport function was turned off, to make it impossible to run away immediately. The remaining options were just two: to escape or to beat back the enemy.

Always concealed, Shin activated 【Enchant - Magic Boost】 and jumped over the group's location. Without an instant of hesitation, he fired the spell.

"Die."

【Elemental Blast】 , a spell including seven different elements.

Flames, water, earth, wind, thunder, light and darkness all bared their fangs at the running PKs.

Some were burned to ashes, others were skewered, swallowed or torn to shreds.

Utter, unbridled destruction. The group Shin attacked was not allowed the slightest chance to counterattack, struck by a completely one-sided attack that reduced it literally to nothingness.

Shin checked that there were no survivors, then started running again. He used 【Ki Manipulation】 to boost his physical abilities and traversed the guildhouse in an instant.

“Shadow!!!”

He frantically charged in the room where Shadow’s response was. Gargalla’s response was no more.

The kneeling Shadow turned his face towards him. Something bright was trickling down it.

Shin saw that his few remaining HP were decreasing and felt that Shadow had completed his revenge. He quickly understood that Shadow had used the 『Miracle Drug of Blinking Life』 .

Shadow looked at Shin with eyes that looked like dying flames. His lips moved as he tried to say something.

“Don’t... end... like... th...”

He couldn’t finish the sentence.

Shadow burst into a mass of polygons before Shin’s eyes. The twinkling shapes were so bright and beautiful it was difficult to imagine that they meant someone’s death.

“.....”

Shin understood what Shadow was trying to say and fell silent.

As Shin had been thinking about Shadow, Shadow too had been probably thinking about him.

“Hyaaahh!!”

“.....tch.”

Shin clicked his tongue as his silhouette became a blur.

Even if he fell down, his blade would not become dull. The PK that had attacked him from behind turned into a mass of polygons as he touched the ground, unaware that he had been cut down.

All players were supposed to be the same when they died. The last moments of that PK, though, looked like tainted poison in Shin’s eyes.

C h a p t e r 4

光

と

影

THE NEW
GATE

Chapter 4

After bringing down Ouroboros, Shin returned to Avidya's headquarters.

As he entered, the eyes of all present turned to him. While there were some individual differences, most gazes were still turbid and sullen, but much less than they were a month before.

"Welcome back. I see you've kept your word."

Calmia's tone seemed brighter than usual.

"Not exactly, our side suffered losses too."

"...so that's why he's not there by your side."

Shin's expression didn't change as he spoke, but Calmia stopped breathing for a second before talking. She didn't know about Shadow's death yet, apparently.

Probably because they had heard the conversation, the surrounding people started whispering among themselves.

"Did he get his revenge?"

"Yes, he looked really satisfied."

"I see. That's good, then. That's the reason we all gathered here, after all."

Calmia looked sad, but relieved at the same time. Avidya was a guild formed by members that swore to exact their revenge. Even if they died in the process, as long as they had achieved their goal, guild members would praise them rather than mourn their loss.

"Are you alright?"

"What do you mean?"

Calmia asked Shin after taking his hand. Her expression suggested that she was worried about him. From her hand, however, no warmth could be felt.

“When the person next to them falls, some stop going forward. There is not much I can do, but consoling such people is one of my duties.”

Shin understood well enough what Calmia meant by “consoling”. She “could not do much” because of the restrictions imposed by the game.

“No problem. Shadow carried his convictions through to the end. I’ll just do what I set out to do.”

Shin’s hand, that Calmia had placed against her ample bust, was pulled away with enough strength as to not seem unkind. Even though his beloved, Marino, was no longer with him, he didn’t feel the urge to approach other women.

Shin lightly glared at Calmia, who quickly apologized.

“I’m sorry if I bothered you. You probably don’t know, but Ouroboros was responsible for my little brother’s death too. I’m really thankful to you for what you have done. This is pretty much all I can do to express my gratitude.”

Shin now understood the reasons behind her actions. Although her hands were pushed away, Calmia looked straight at Shin, tears welling up at the corners of her eyes.

“We’re just using each other. There’s no need to express gratitude or anything.”

“Even so, I want to.”

Shin’s expression was still unchanged, but Calmia smiled at him. Shin clicked his tongue and turned away.

“Well, I suppose we went off topic a bit too much. I have something to tell you today.”

“You should have said that first.”

“I’m sorry. I was honestly shocked by what happened to Shadow, and I wanted to give my thanks to you for avenging my little brother.”

“Fine, fine. So, what do you have for me?”

Calmia’s expression turned completely serious when she answered Shin’s question.

“We are still in the middle of investigating Vlad, but we found Robin in the process. The priority’s lower than Vlad’s, but you were looking for him too, right?”

After starting the PK hunt, Shin’s hostility had focused so much on Vlad that he had almost forgotten about him. After hearing Robin’s name, the aura enveloping Shin suddenly changed.

Despite being inside a game, several members felt this abrupt transformation and flinched.

According to Avidya’s research, Robin did not belong to any PK guild, so it was clear that he had not killed any players yet.

Robin had kidnapped Marino and handed her to Vlad though. Because of this, he was one of the people Shin wanted to take revenge against.

“I’ll go right now. Where is he?”

The words coming out of Shin’s mouth sounded completely different from before. His expression didn’t change, but his tone now sounded much darker and fiercer.

“Calm down. The hounds are keeping track of him, so if something happens I’ll know right away.”

Shin learned of Robin’s whereabouts from Calmia, materialized his katana and left the guildhouse.

With his figure concealed, Shin walked through dimly lit streets and back alleys, like a wandering ghost, like a god of death.

†

Guided by the information obtained from Calmia, Shin arrived at a woodland area to the north of Kalkia. The woods were quiet, the low-leveled monsters within prowling about silently.

It was a location that rarely saw strong monsters and did not have any particular events associated with it, so it only contained a few lodges and nothing more.

“Robin is apparently using the third lodge as his base. No one knows what exactly he’s doing though, as he never leaves it.”

“I see. I’ll go by myself, please stay out of this.”

“Of course. There’s no one in Avidya that would get in your way now. Just let me stand by here, in case anything happens, all right?”

Saying this, the Hound concealed himself. Shin’s detection field registered his presence, but there was no need to point that out. Shin turned his back to the man and headed towards the lodges. The area was outside any hometown, making buildings and players susceptible to attacks.

In Shin’s map, the players inside the lodges were showed clearly. They were not friends or support characters however, so their names were not displayed.

The Hound’s information was surely correct, but to be completely sure Shin started from breaking down the 【Wall】 and 【Barrier】 erected around the lodge.

“Type V, huh. I guess it’s enough for a place like this, but it’s still too frail.”

Shin’s hands did not need to reach 『True Moon』, hanging from his waist; his left hand cut through the air in a rough motion and, with the sharp sound of glass breaking, the barriers protecting the lodge were destroyed.

A player from the neighboring lodge, alarmed by the sound, came out to see what was going on.

“W-what are you doing?”

“Taking my revenge, you got a problem with that?”

“.....leave my lodge alone, all right?”

Maybe because he had sensed the aura Shin emitted, the player who had come out trembled and quickly turned back to his lodge after meekly voicing his request to Shin.

The player in the lodge on the opposite side had probably heard this exchange, because he closed the windows without the smallest protest.

Looking at the map, Shin noticed that a player was exiting the lodge on the side opposite to where Shin was.

“.....”

Without saying a word, Shin moved his right hand through the air and struck. The lodge crumbled on the player who had attempted to escape.

Shin walked closer to the wrecked lodge and found Robin under a fallen log.

“Y-You are...”

Robin had likely realized that the man standing before him was Shin. His expression warped with fear.

“You know what I’m here for, don’t you?”

“I-I had no other choice!! I would have been ruined, you know!! I have a family to raise in the real world. That man was the only one I could trust to change things!!”

“First of all, where is Vlad?”

Shin’s question utterly ignored Robin’s desperate excuses. Robin had cooperated with Vlad, so he might know about his whereabouts.

“I d-don’t know anything... I haven’t met that man... Vlad, since then. He won’t answer my contacts either... we were never close anyway. He just u-used me!! I’m a victim here!!”

Seeing that Shin did not move an eyebrow while listening, Robin hurriedly changed the subject. His eyes darted everywhere, frantically looking for a way to escape.

The weapon at his waist was still in its sheath, untouched. Shin, however, could kill Robin faster than the latter could take out a crystal and teleport away.

Either Shin allowed him to go or someone else had to act as a decoy while he escaped. In all other cases, this was the end of the line for Robin.

“You have no idea where Vlad could be?”

“I, I, I didn’t know something like that would happen!! He didn’t tell me that he would kill her!! We even had recovery potions for the status ailment!! If you would have just accepted---”

Robin’s excuses stopped abruptly, followed by the acute sound of a katana resting again in its sheath.

Judging from Robin’s behavior and the current situation, it was clear that he had indeed only been used.

If so, there was no point in leaving him alive another moment. With his head detached from his torso, Robin disappeared in a burst of polygons, but Shin didn’t spare a glance and turned away from the pile of rubble that used to be Robin’s lodge.

As Shin was leaving, a bright voice, in strident contrast with the location, stopped him.

“So the rumors were true! You’ve become pretty good at cutting people down.”

“.....”

Shin turned towards the voice without a word. There he found a petite, young-looking girl with short white hair and big, round eyes.

She was wearing an oriental garb with rather high skin exposure. This stressed the mounds on her chest, which were already too pronounced for her physique. However, what stood out the most was the giant poleaxe, almost as long as the girl was tall, wielded by her tiny hands.

Shin didn’t need to cast **【Analyze】** to know who this unique combination was.

“Milt.”

“Long time no see. When was the last time we met, three months ago maybe?”

Milt approached Shin with a friendly smile.

Milt herself was a PK, but a rare case; she was not included in Avidya’s target list. The reason was that she killed only in self-defense or during duels to the death that both

parties agreed to.

She was treated as a PK because, if her opponent agreed to fight to the death, she would kill without any hesitation.

“What do you want from me?”

“I heard you were looking for Vlad, so---”

Milt stopped halfway through the sentence; Shin had closed in on her in a second, grabbed her by the neck and pushed her down to the ground, 『True Moon』’s cold blade on her neck.

“If you know anything, talk.”

“Ha, haha! The Shin I see now will be OK, I guess”

“.....”

“Don’t leer at me like that. I’ll tell you everything.”

Milt let go of her poleaxe and raised both hands. When Shin withdrew 『True Moon』, she let out a sigh.

“I’m sure you’ve looked everywhere too, but he won’t be found easily. Because he probably has no intention of attacking anyone now. It’s not possible to catch him in the act again.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Well, he managed to warp his greatest prey with his own hands, after all. He’s not going to risk killing others and have their deaths overwrite that experience.”

Milt talked of something Shin could not comprehend. To burn people’s deaths into your memory was already far too depraved for him.

“Vlad was obsessed about you more than anything. He’s likely been observing you and gloating, I guess. You’re in a state close to what he called ‘the ideal’ last time we talked after all. He’d probably be glad even if he’s found and killed by you.”

“Disgusting bastard.”

“You don’t need to understand people like that, you know.”

Milt’s shoulders dropped as she talked. Shin had no intention of understanding either, so he urged her to continue.

“Vlad’s keeping track of your movements. His main job, Dragon Knight, is one that stands out easily, but his sub is Ninja. He switched main and sub job now, to hide better. Ninjas have the best concealment abilities among all scout-type jobs, after all. He’s using all sorts of items and equipment to hide, so he won’t be easy to find.”

“You mean that he’s watching now too?”

“Probably, with binoculars or something like that. Well, that would mean the plan I thought about would work though.”

Milt spoke plainly. Shin tried to extend his detection field to the max, but could not find any players other than Milt and the lodge players whose presence he had confirmed before; no trace of Vlad.

As Milt had said, if he was using items and skills specialized for seeing long distances, it could be possible to observe locations even from outside detection fields.

Milt’s theory was not too bizarre after all; it could not be discarded as improbable.

“What’s your plan, then?”

“For me to join up with you. I’m pretty strong myself, but still nothing special compared to you. If he sees someone like me getting all close and personal---.”

“He’ll come to stop it, huh.”

“Bingo. Shin stopped hunting PKs to flirt with some broad. Vlad wouldn’t stand for that, I’m positive.”

Milt’s plan was to use Vlad’s obsession against him, to lure him out in the open.

“Won’t he be more alert if you’re involved?”

Unlike Marino, Milt could fight. If that was the case, Vlad might not think that Shin had given up on fighting for flirting.

“I was good friends with Mari, actually. We never really talked about it, so it’s not strange for you not to know.”

“You... and Marino?”

Shin furrowed his brow at Milt’s words. He had never heard anything of the sort from Marino.

“Yes, it happened by chance, because our situations in real life are pretty similar. We couldn’t say anything openly... but we talked a lot just between the two of us. Mari was sick, wasn’t she? In real life, I’m actually stuck on a hospital bed too... but the only other one who knows about this is Lucky Cat’s Catnip.”

“Is that so...”

Catnip knew about Marino too. The “Milmeow” she had mentioned before was Milt, then.

“Vlad had researched Mari thoroughly. I don’t know how he found out, but he knew about the connection between us. He asked me about her himself, so there’s no mistake about that”

Milt knew so much about Vlad because she had used the PK’s information network, not the normal players’ or the revengers’. The PKs were wary of her though, so she could only obtain limited information. Shin’s PK hunt had caused serious damage to the network.

“He shouldn’t find it too weird for me to take Mari’s place then. It could provoke him even more. I don’t dislike flirting in public, so there’s that too.”

Saying this, Milt tried wrapping her arm around Shin’s, but the latter stepped back to avoid her approach and thought about what to do.

Avidya’s hounds hadn’t found any useful information about Vlad. It was originally difficult to retrieve information about PKs not belonging to any organization. He could have asked Calmia could act as his partner in this operation, but in a dangerous situation, she couldn’t protect herself.

“If it means hunting him down, I can do this.”

Shin concluded that it was worth trying even if the plan would turn unsuccessful and agreed to Milt’s proposal.

“OK, I don’t mean to ask for this in return, but I have a request too. May I?”

“What’s that?”

“After Vlad is taken care of, I want you to fight me. To the death.”

Shin peered at Milt with surprise and suspicion in his eyes.

Milt said “to the death”, but as long as she didn’t pull off a series of incredible feats, she had no hope of winning. A duel to the death would have been suicide for her.

“If you just want to die, do it somewhere else.”

“I want you to be my last, Shin. Because I don’t want to go back to reality.”

“.....let’s go to Tsuki no Hokora first, then talk more. This isn’t the right place.”

“Okay.”

Shin temporarily formed a party with Milt and returned to Kalkia via teleportation, then chain teleported to Tsuki no Hokora.

“Welcome back.”

Schnee welcomed Shin home, but Shin walked passed her without a word, had Milt sit down in the living room, and started preparing tea.

“.....what?”

“Ah, er, you look quite used to it, I was just thinking.”

Milt was slightly surprised to see Shin prepare tea for them both.

“Anyone can make tea. Rather than that, let’s pick up where we left off.”

Shin took a sip of tea, then urged Milt to continue.

“As I said before, I’m stuck in a bed in real life. I can’t live if I’m not hooked to machines. I can speak, but my arms and legs won’t move like I want them to. I had to come to this world to finally understand how freely a body can move. But no matter how much I move here, reality doesn’t change. No... maybe because I had a taste of freedom here, reality became even harsher for me.”

For Milt, just staying alive meant having to pay expensive medical fees.

She could live on, thanks to her parents’ hard work, but looking at her parents growing thinner and more emaciated as she grew up, her heart couldn’t stand it anymore.

“We were never rich, so paying the hospital fees to keep me alive has always been a huge burden on them. Mom and Dad are always smiling, but that made it all even more painful. I... I could feel it. Their hands caressing mine... growing thinner and weaker over time.”

Modern medicine couldn’t cure Milt’s disease. Either her parents would reach their limit first, or Milt would.

“I have a little brother too, but it looks like he’s unhappy with my parents caring about me so much. If I’m not around anymore, all their love will go to him. The financial burden will also disappear — good things all around.”

“In a documentary on TV, I saw parents say that they’re happy just to see their child alive. From the standpoint of someone being kept alive, it’s not like that?”

“I don’t mean to say that everyone sees it like I do, nor do I think so. My head’s the only thing working perfectly, so maybe I think too much... making them sad would be painful, of course, but.....”

Milt was asking to be killed, but there was no sadness in her view.

“If you think so, then wouldn’t suicide be an option? It might be impossible in real life, but in this world you could end your life yourself.”

“I thought about it at first, but... but thinking of killing myself with my own hands is too scary. So I thought about having someone do it for me.”

Milt wished to die, but death was still terrifying. Milt herself admitted what a contradiction that was.

“I can forget about that fear in battle. I want to die while feeling truly alive.”

That was one reason why she had continued seeking duels to the death.

“...you won’t regret it?”

Shin released a wave of pure killing intent, which blew through Milt’s hair like a gust of wind.

“Yup. I couldn’t do anything myself... but this, only this, I’ve decided it on my own.”

The killing intent unleashed upon Milt was enough to make any average player turn pale and shake violently, but she did not even bat an eyelash.

Even PKs, used to end others’ lives, saw fear rear its ugly head when death approached. Milt had mentioned being scared of death, but to Shin, it seemed that she had completely accepted it.

The emotions he felt from Milt contained imbalance, yes, but also great tranquility. Somehow, she reminded him of Marino.

“Got it. Once we’re done with Vlad, I’ll be your opponent.”

For Marino and Milt, death has always been very close. They had had a longer, deeper relationship with it than Shin ever could.

Shin had killed a great number of PKs. One more wouldn’t be a problem at this point.

“Thank you. Let’s get the plan moving right away then! Back to town for some lovey-doveying!”

After thanking Shin, Milt’s enlightened atmosphere vanished somewhere as her mood turned to hyper excitement.

She now grabbed Shin’s arm firmly, determined not to let him go this time.

“.....”

Shin, silently watching Milt holding his hand and guiding him, teleported back to Kalkia.

Eager to show their intimacy as clearly as possible, Milt had wrapped her left arm around Shin's right arm. Leaving the choice of their destination to Milt, Shin contacted Calmia via chat.

“(I have something to tell you about.)”

“(Oh my, it must be the first time you sent me a direct chat.)”

Shin couldn't go to Avidya's guildhouse with Milt in tow. As they wanted to pretend that he had given up on revenge, visiting that blood-drenched place was out of the question.

“(If there are any guild members with grudges against Vlad, I want you to tell them something)”

Shin explained to Calmia about Milt's plan and the circumstances leading to it, lastly asking her to relay this. He had talked with Milt and decided how to finish Vlad.

“(---I see. Your method will definitely be really humiliating for Vlad. I'll tell them.)”

“(Please do. I'll contact you if there are any movements.)”

Shin cut off the chat and asked Milt where they were going. He had been focusing on the chat, his legs moving to automatically follow Milt.

“Catnip's place, there are always a lot of people there after all. Perfect for rumors to spread.”

“Aah, I see.”

Catnip's store, Lucky Cat, was a favorite destination of Shin and Marino's. Many players there knew Shin's face, even if they weren't aware of his strength. Being a confectionery, most of the visitors were female players. If he went there, hand in hand with a female player other than Marino, rumors and conjectures would surely spread very quickly.

Shin didn't think that Vlad was observing him at all hours; but if he caught wind of

such a rumor, whether he acted or not, he would surely become restless.

“OK, will he move then?”

Shin felt that it would be great if anything was born from this. He had listened seriously when Milt talked about her situation, but not even the Hounds had managed to pick up any hints about Vlad, so he doubted Vlad would exhibit the kind of careless behavior Milt suggested.

For the current plan to succeed, that was a necessary condition. If Vlad had already lost interest in Shin, the plan would be completely useless.

“He will.”

Shin had whispered to himself, but Milt replied with confidence. Shin didn’t know what exactly made her so sure.

“Obsession is something that doesn’t just go away, not even if you think you’ve had enough. He staged something so huge for you and saw you change, he’s not going to be able to just turn the page on it.”

Milt stated her thoughts firmly, a serious expression on her face.

At the same time they had arrived at the Lucky Cat, so before Shin could say anything Milt had opened the door to the store.

The interior of the store was mostly the same as Shin remembered from his last visit, crowded as usual by female players.

Among them, wearing cat ears and tail, Catnip was serving her customers.

“Meow meow!? Shimeow and Milmeow, now this is a rare duo! Long time no see, both of you.”

Catnip noticed Shin and Milt and approached them with her usual “cat-like” talk.

Her gaze towards Shin, despite the peppy tone of her voice, was melancholic. She knew what he had been doing for the past month, surely.



“We talked via chat, though. We haven’t met face to face like this since about one month ago, maybe?”

“Because you never stay in one place, Milmeow. Finding you would be a miracle, meow... but more than that, I’m more interested to know why you two are so friendly, meow? You look just like lovers, meow?”

“Hehehe... that’s exactly what we are!!”

Milt squeezed her body even closer to Shin and made this declaration with a louder tone of voice. Shin felt multiple eyes on him and looked around, noticing that most gazes were fixated on his arm.

Staring at his left arm were all the (few) male players present and some of the female ones.

The male players’ stares burned holes in Milt’s watermelon-like assets pressed on Shin’s left arm.

Shin considered Milt’s presence as just one part of the plan, so he decided to smile in order for the rumors to spread even more easily.

“Meowhat!? So even Shimeow fell to the charm of Milmeow’s breasts!? Open your eyes, meow!! Small girls with watermelon chests don’t exist in real life!! I know the truth, meow. That chest is a lie!”

“You’re horrible!! Let me dream in this game world at least!!”

“What are you two saying...”

Shin gave a tired look at the two and the absurd conflict they had started.

“(I’ve heard everything. I’ll do what I can to help.)”

Shin had noticed that she was acting far too strange, and his suspicions were confirmed when Catnip sent him a chat.

It was difficult to imagine from the noisily meowing silhouette before his eyes, but the voice that reached his mind was cold and dry. Her melancholic eyes also contained a somewhat cold streak.

“(Catnip, you shouldn’t make eyes like that.)”

Shin was not in a position to tell others, though. Catnip, however, was someone Marino had been friends with. Shin himself felt that he had become less liable to emotional changes after Marino’s death, but he felt that he had to say it.

After showing off for a while, they purchased a few items and left Lucky Cat.

The rumors were probably already spreading; Shin felt more and more eyes fixed on them.

†

About one week after Shin and Milt started their plan, it began.

Even in the orphanage, a place where rumors rarely spread, the news of Shin’s PK hunt had reached the children’s ears.

“I told you already, big bro Shin is fighting so that no one will be a victim anymore. It’s a bad thing, yeah, but.”

“There’s no police in this world anyway.”

Some didn’t share such feelings, though.

“Bu-but Shin is doing dangerous things.”

Despite knowing that PK hunting meant killing people -so it was a bad thing- Teppei and Ryohei claimed it was unavoidable. Luca wasn’t convinced however.

Despite her young age, Luca knew how terrifying PKs could be. That was precisely the reason why she was worried about Shin’s safety, endangered by his proactive hunting of the PKs.

Today, she was sitting at the orphanage’s gates.

“After he defeats all the PKs, he’ll come back... I think.”

“Ryohei, don’t talk like you really know.”

“Hey, what else can I do? The grownups won’t tell us anything else!”

“Shin, won’t you come back? We can’t meet anymore...?”

After listening to Teppei and Ryohei’s conversation, Luca’s eyes filled with tears.

The two boys hurriedly tried to calm her down and went to call an adult to confirm that Shin would return.

“Uuuh...”

Luca wiped her tears with her sleeves and raised her head. In front of her stood the gate she stared at every day since the attack one month ago.

“.....”

A thought developed in Luca’s head.

She didn’t know when, if ever, Shin would come to the orphanage again. If so, she should just go meet him.

It was still a little past nine in the morning; there was plenty of time.

The adults didn’t allow children to go out of the orphanage on their own. However, there was no one around now, so she could sneak out.

Luca looked around, confirmed that there really wasn’t anyone in the surroundings, and quickly sprinted away. She hurried through the orphanage’s gate and hid on the opposite side. Now she couldn’t be seen from the inside.

“Oh? Aren’t you one of Shin’s little friends?”

“!?”

The sudden voice made Luca jolt. Timidly, she looked in the direction of the voice and saw a smiling young man. He had said Shin’s name, so maybe they knew each other.

“Oh, I apologize for surprising you. I was looking for Shin, so I was wondering if you might know where he is.”

“Me too... I’m looking for Shin now.”

“Is that so? So you’ll go look for him in town?”

“Everywhere.”

“Everywhere? You mean, in the field and in dungeons too?”

Luca answered the young man’s question by forming two tiny fists and nodding.

“Yes!”

“However, it seems dangerous for someone of your level to go in the field, don’t you think?”

“Eh?”

Luca had been dragged into the death game after her account had been created just to fill in a spot. As a result, she barely knew anything about how the game worked, having stayed in town since her first login. She couldn’t understand what the young man meant.

“Hmm... oh? Looks the like the orphanage is getting noisy. Could it be that you snuck out?”

“!?”

The young man’s guess made Luca’s body shrink. Ryohei or Teppei were probably calling for her. She could hear Emil’s voice too.

“Did you want to see Shin so much that you snuck out of the orphanage?”

“.....Yes.”

Luca silently nodded to the young man’s sudden question.

Shin might disappear, like her brother and his friends did, like Marino did. Luca didn’t want to do nothing and just be separated like that.

“Hmm... hmm... oh, fine. I was looking for Shin too after all. Why don’t you come with

me? The frontlines have turned quieter since he left, so lately things have been pretty boring.”

“Ehm...”

“If we stay here, someone from the orphanage will come soon, you know?”

“Ah... er... I’ll go!!”

Any average player would be wary of following someone they’d met for the first time. Luca, however, was urged on by hearing the voices from the orphanage, growing closer and closer, and her desire to see Shin, so she ended up nodding to the young man’s proposal.

The young man, with a bigger smile, took Luca’s hand and started walking away. They quickly became lost in the crowd, and impossible to find for anyone from the orphanage.

“What is your name?”

Luca remembered that she hadn’t heard the name of the young man walking with her, so she looked up at him and asked.

“Oh, I didn’t introduce myself, did I. My name is Hameln. Pleased to meet you.”

The young man----Hameln introduced himself.

Hameln, one of the masterminds behind the recent tragedy, smiled innocently as he led Luca through the crowd at a leisurely pace.

“Well then, let me ask straight away, do you have any idea where Shin could be?”

“He talked a lot about clearing dungeons...”

Hameln, with Luca in tow, was walking through Kalkia’s main street. Being an MPK, a PK that used monsters to kill other players, his name and face were not known.

“Hmm, they say he’s hunting down PKs, so he’s probably outside the hometown.”

Hameln, holding his chin, started thinking.

Using an information broker was an option, but there was a high chance that the same broker would sell the information of Hameln's visit to others. There was the chance for Shin to come to him because of that, but Hameln thought that it was still too early to meet him.

His visit to the orphanage was to confirm if Shin continued to hunt PKs even after crushing the largest guild.

Vlad, the man who snatched away Shin's beloved, was still alive. Hameln thought that he would contact Shin after he was done with Vlad.

"A dangerous place?"

"For Shin, the dungeons available now are still safe enough. The only exceptions could be the bosses, I suppose. But I don't think that Shin would fight bosses now, so there's no danger."

Hameln wouldn't say anything to further Luca's concerns; for him, Luca was in the position of someone to protect.

What Hameln wanted to observe was the will of people when facing against adversities. Most small children died before being able to show such willpower.

For this, he would protect her. To assess her willpower while fighting against the adversity that, one day, would surely visit her.

That was the only important thing. He was the one to create the adversities to show the will to fight against, but if, as a result, the child died without showing that willpower, it wouldn't faze Hameln in the slightest.

His own desires were everything to him. That was the kind of player Hameln was.

"I guess we have no other choice. Let's try betting on the piece of information I heard."

Hameln's shoulders dropped, and he walked forward again. The destination was a place with very few people, an area where several lodges stood. According to the information Hameln obtained, it was where Robin, a man who collaborated with Vlad, was supposed to live.

"You look pale, young lady, are you alright?"

“.....I’m okay.”

Despite Luca’s answer, she did not look okay at all. As it turns out, she had received messages and calls in her chat asking where she was.

In this world, much like the real one, it was very easy to contact others. Luca had followed Hameln, pushed by the situation’s momentum, but thinking calmly about it, she was now afraid to be yelled at.

Sneaking out of the orphanage to go look for Shin seemed like proof of courage, but now she was imagining the adults yelling at her, and she trembled. She had appeared resolute at first, but she had just followed her impulses. Luca was, after all, just a child.

“Let’s say you were kidnapped, then.”

“Eh?”

While Luca was still reeling from the surprise, Hameln sent a message to Emil.

The message’s contents said, “I am going to use Luca to stop Shin”. For Hameln, who was used to being hated, being treated like a kidnapper was nothing he was concerned about.

“With this, at least they won’t yell at you for sneaking out. They’ll be more worried, but that can’t be helped, I guess. Ah, you should say in chat that you’re being threatened.”

Hameln was talking of very serious things, but continued with his casual tone.

“Why do you help me?”

“Help? That’s not right, I’m afraid. I’m not here with you because I want to help you after all. I just think that, for Shin, for a person in his current state, the emotional words of a child like you would be more effective than an adult’s realism-imbued speeches.”

Young age, surprisingly, works wonders as a weapon. After adding this final comment only to himself, Hameln asked Luca a question.

“I suppose it’s too late to say this now, but I am planning to use you. But, now and only

now, I can let you go free. What will you do? Will you come with me? Or will you go back to the orphanage?”

Hameln repeated the question he had first asked Luca at the orphanage. Waiting to hear what her young will would choose, Hameln grinned.

“...I, I go. I will go together. If I don’t... Shin will go somewhere far.”

Luca answered while shaking slightly.

Hearing her answer, Hameln’s smile widened.

“Is this a woman’s instinct, I wonder? Or maybe, you know even if you don’t actually understand it.”

“Eh?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

Hameln voiced his thoughts out loud without realizing it. He then changed topic with an ambiguous smile.

“Shall we go, then?”

“Where do we go?”

“A place where he might be. Well, the information is old, so I can’t be sure though.”

His shoulders dropping again, Hameln summoned one of his contract beasts. A magic circle appeared on the ground and a blue tiger-type monster about two mels long, a Weyger, appeared.

Its fangs and claws were of a transparent blue hue, two large strands of white hair extended from its forehead over its back. Its level was 423. For Luca, just being pushed by its paws would reduce her HP to zero.

“Eek!?”

Luca’s body shrank in fear at the sight of the Weyger’s sudden appearance.

“Don’t be scared, this is just our means of transport.”

Following Hameln’s orders, the Weyger crouched down. The monster looked up at Luca, as if it was telling her “hop on, miss”.

“The faster we can move, the better. Please, get on.”

Encouraged by Hameln, Luca timidly mounted the Weyger. The monster made sure that Luca firmly grabbed its fur, stood back up slowly, and started walking next to Hameln.

“It’s so fluffy.”

“Gaarfn.”

Luca rode, hugging the Weyger’s back. The feeling of the monster’s soft fur was probably very pleasant, as she looked giddy now.

They Weyger snorted proudly, as if it was boasting about the quality of its fur.

“It’s pretty popular as a pet too, after all.”

“Gah!”

To Hameln, instead, the monster snarled as if clicking its tongue.

“Okay then, our destination is just ahead. I set the Weyger so as to protect you, so don’t go far from it, okay?”

Hameln checked that the monsters at the destination were of a level much lower than the Weyger.

“Okay.”

“Gaarf!”

The Weyger growled, as if saying “leave it to me!”

“I guess monsters have likes and dislikes too?”

Puzzled by the Weygar showing a very different reaction to Luca than to himself, Hameln walked on. Soon enough, several small lodges appeared.

“I suppose we arrived too late. My my... the information was old, so I guess I should have made sure he was alive first.”

Hameln whispered while rubbing his chin in front of a completely wrecked lodge.

The information he had obtained stated that Robin lived in one of the area’s lodges.

There was no guarantee that Robin was in the ruined lodge, so Hameln decided to gather information in the surroundings.

“My apologies, I would like to ask you something.”

Hameln told Luca to wait and knocked at the door of the lodge next to the ruined one. A few seconds later, a pudgy male player appeared from inside.

“What do you want?”

“I’m looking for a person, do you happen to know a player named Robin?”

“Oh, you knew the neighbor guy?”

The man’s answer suggested that the inhabitant of the collapsed lodge was indeed Robin. Hameln denied and the man continued.

“You didn’t? Well, whatever. It happened a couple days ago, a player with a katana wrecked the house all of a sudden. It made no sense to me to feel something like that in a game, but... I felt it for real. Killing intent. He looked real dangerous, so I thought I should leave him alone and hid inside right away. They talked for a while... but the guy inside, in the end, went like this.”

The man made a horizontal sliding gesture across his neck with his hand.

The meaning was probably that the head had been cut off. The two talked a little more, but there was no clue about Shin’s possible next destination.

“Is that so... thank you very much for your time.”

Hameln bowed deeply and closed the door.

“Shin isn’t here?”

“Yes, it appears to be so. The only hint left is that rumor, then...”

“Rumor?”

“They say that Shin has a new girlfriend, and that they flirt in public with no shame at all... honestly, I can’t believe that Shin would get a new girlfriend now though.”

If large PK guilds still remained, he might have trusted his instincts and waited in ambush. The only ones remaining, however, were very small ones and solo players, so that plan was unusable.

Hameln couldn’t use information brokers either, so the last resort was to rely on a rumor he found repugnant.

“He’s in a place with many people?”

“That would be natural. But even as a rumor, it concerns me that it spread so quickly.”

It felt almost as if it was being spread on purpose.

“...ooh, I see, so that’s the plan.”

After thinking about it, Hameln realized something and suddenly looked very convinced.

Even if he was going around crushing PK guilds, Shin’s main target was still Vlad. Hameln, who knew both, realized what Shin’s true aim probably was.

“Do you know where Shin is?”

“I can’t say I know yet. But I figured out what he’s trying to do. I wanted to do this without Vlad knowing, but if I say I will cooperate we can probably get information out of him.”

Hameln sent Vlad a message immediately.

“(Hello, it’s been quite a while. There’s something I would like to ask you, could you please spare some time for me?)”

When Vlad answered the chat, he appeared very irritated. Hameln, thinking that his behaviour exceeded his expectations, greeted him.

“(What do you want from me then? You of all people wouldn’t contact me without a purpose.)”

“(Well, that is true. I wanted to have a chat with Shin, do you have any idea where he could be? I caught wind of a strange rumor, so I thought that you might know more about that too.)”

“(I know. That woman is getting ahead of herself, isn’t she.)”

Hameln thought that the situation was bound to move rather quickly and smiled to himself.

Where had his peerless caution gone to? Vlad acted very differently from the last time Hameln spoke to him.

With most of the PKs exterminated, organizing large-scale operations required a great number of people and resources. The PKs with high fighting power, especially, had been carefully eliminated, so it was impossible to trick them to use them as assassins either.

“(Your cooperation during the invasion was valuable, so if you tell me his whereabouts, I can help you. I still have the items too.)”

“(What do you plan to do when you meet him?)”

Vlad probably instantly calculated that Hameln could have helped bolster his inferior fighting power; his voice sounded much more collected than before.

“(I just wish to talk with him. I doubt things will end peacefully though.)”

“(You’ll just get killed if you do.)”

“(I can probably buy some time if I use my monsters as shields. I’m just interested in what he’s actually thinking at present.)”

“(..... so be it. I will contact you once I have a plan.)”

From Vlad’s tone of voice, Hameln perceived that Vlad had decided that he was going to make use of Hameln.

Hameln became an MPK because he wanted to observe the willpower and emotions of players when attacked by monsters. He was thus very skilled at reading others’ emotions.

The conversation had proceeded so smoothly it almost seemed like a trap. Despite the frail bond of trust between them, Vlad had been too reckless. His frustration had probably peaked.

“Well then, we should contact Shin now... what’s wrong?”

If he doesn’t answer to chat, just send him a message. Hameln was thinking this, when he noticed that Luca was crying.

The Weyger was licking her face, trying to console her.

“Shin... Shin is going away!!”

Hameln guessed that Luca had been talking with Shin via chat. Shin was about to step over a line that should not be crossed.

“I thought that he would come back once he had gotten his revenge, but this is a quite boring development.”

There was nothing more boring to observe than humans who had fallen into desperation. It was not uncommon for people who had embraced hope to end like that, but it was not what Hameln expected to see.

“We have the chance to see a grand stage with our own eyes... I’m sorry for dear Vlad, but I have to do something about it.”

Hameln crouched down, his eyes at the same height as Luca’s.

“Do you want Shin to come back?”

Hameln asked his question with a serious tone, his usual ambiguous smile gone from his lips. After a brief moment, Luca strongly nodded.

“Even if it means that your life will be in danger?”

Luca nodded again, with no pause this time.

“Very good. Please wait here then. If what I will say now happens, materialize it.”

Smiling again, Hameln gave a card to Luca. A spherical object and the number “10” were pictured on it.

“Shall we contact her, then?”

Timing was crucial. With this in mind, Hameln sent a message.

†

A week had already passed since they started standing out in public on purpose.

Shin was thinking that the plan’s effects should be showing soon, when he was contacted via chat from Emil. Maybe thinking of the possibility that he wouldn’t respond, she sent a message card at the same time.

“(Luca has been kidnapped by Hameln!!)”

“(Luca!?)”

Shin could tell Emil was unnerved as he listened to her story, yet he found it a bit bizarre.

Hameln was a player that liked using monsters to attack players, an MPK. His fighting level was rather high, but he seldom fought other than for self-defense. He apparently acted following his own rules; after entering Avidya, Shin had heard scattered reports about him.

Hameln was reported to have a light and easy personality. Yet, rather than engage in all PK activity, he seemed to focus on medium to large-scale battles.

Shin had briefly met him during the last invasion event, but he couldn't help feeling it was strange for Hameln to take a hostage.

“(I thought I had set up the orphanage barrier again?)”

“(It looks like Luca went out on her own. But her expression was strange... I'll send you the message Hameln sent me.)”

Emil's message arrived soon: it read “I borrowed the young lady, I'll send her back after a while”, almost like a bad joke or a prank.

“Were you able to contact Luca?”

“I did, but she only replied that she was going with Hameln, and nothing more.”

Shin found the situation more and more difficult to comprehend.

Chat mode was a completely private mode of communication; it was impossible for others to overhear. Even if she had been taken away or threatened, it was possible to inform others without the kidnapper knowing.

Since Luca had not said anything like that, it was possible that she had followed Hameln of her own free will.

Shin asked for more details and learned that just before disappearing, Luca had bickered with Ryohei and Teppei over whether Shin would return or not.

“(Until Hameln's message arrived, those two said that she had gone looking for you. I have no idea what's going on either... I wasn't sure if I should have called you or not either.)”

“(..... I see.)”

Barely half a day had passed since Luca's disappearance. After thinking for a while, Shin tried to contact Luca via chat mode.

“(..... Shin?)”

After a few rings, Luca answered. Her voice sounded timid, scared.

“(Emil told me Hameln kidnapped you.)”

“(Uuh... I’m sorry...)”

“(That’s fine for now. So, are you alright?)”

“(Yes, he’s helping me look for you.)”

He’s helping you?

Shin found Luca’s words nothing but puzzling. Hameln, a famous PK, was helping a little kid find someone? It was far too bizarre.

Shin asked more questions and found out that Hameln was apparently looking for him too. That he hadn’t hurt Luca in any way and had set a monster to protect her.

(Why would he be looking for me?)

The last time we met, Hameln seemed interested in him. Maybe it was an extension of that, but there was no reason to take Luca with him. During the invasion event, he had attacked not Shin himself, but the whole hometown, so he shouldn’t be obsessed with Shin like Vlad was.

There should be no reason for Hameln to bring a dead weight like Luca with him.

“(Luca, Hameln is dangerous. Emil and the others are worried too. Go back to the orphanage)”

“(Shin, when will you come back?)”

“(Well, I...)”

I’ll be back right away. That’s what Shin wanted to reply, but the words didn’t leave his lips.

Then, he realized. That even after exacting his revenge, he had no intention of going back.

Shin looked down and saw his hands. They were perfectly clean, but all he saw were stains of blood and guts. He felt blood dripping between his fingers. The smell of iron

prickled his nose.

(This is pretty horrible.)

He couldn't touch others anymore. Maybe he had realized it already, unconsciously.

“(Luca, I have to return everybody to the real world. I made a promise with Marino.)”

“(...hn.)”

“(I have to focus on clearing the dungeons from now on.)”

“(We can't, meet anymore?)”

“(Don't worry, I'm not going to die.)”

The words “we will” couldn't come out of his mouth.

“(I am going to end this world. Luca, Emil, Ryohei, Teppei, everyone will be safe. So just wait.)”

“(Shin?)”

“(I'm going to be busy, so we can't meet until then.)”

“(Shin!!)”

“(Luca, go back to the orphanage.)”

Shin cut off the chat after this last order.

Considering Hameln's fighting power, Shin had to go confront him himself. Their location, however, was the lodge area where Shin had cut down Robin. Even if Shin went there now, by the time he arrived they would probably be somewhere else.

Hameln would probably try and come in contact sooner or later. He probably would not put Luca in danger either, so Shin decided not to go look for her and wait for Hameln to make his move.

Shin chuckled at himself, thinking that he had turned rather cold.

“Shin, looks like Vlad is on the move.”

As if she had waited for Shin to finish his chat, Milt -who had been walking next to him- called to Shin. Milt, not Shin, had received a message.

“Tell me more.”

Shin urged Milt for details, while at the same time connecting to Calmia via chat.

†

Vlad’s proposal was to offer Milt a place to die.

For a long time now, Milt possessed humorous nicknames such as “Mini Berserker” and “Poison Lolita”. After the death game started however, she was only known by the nickname “Deathwish”.

As she had told Shin, the method she had chosen to solve the contradiction of her desire to die but fear of suicide was to engage in fights to the death. It didn’t matter whether the opponents were monsters or players, Milt threw herself into battle without a speck of caution, so that nickname stuck to her quickly.

The reason why she wasn’t stopped by other players, even if she appeared while they were fighting bosses ,was that she took the highest risk of all when fighting.

“(I guess that he came to know that I told you that I wanted you to kill me. Though, it’s not like you’re acting like my boyfriend so I can die without regrets.)”

Thanks to Catnip’s help too, the rumor that Shin and Milt had become lovers had spread in the blink of an eye.

Not only Shin, but Milt was also rather famous, so the speed at which the rumor spread surprised even them. Thanks to that though, Vlad moved earlier than expected.

Shin was surprised that Vlad contacted Milt while she was with him: her expressed desire of being killed, no matter at whose hands it was, had probably worked in their favor.

Concealed through **【Hiding】** , Shin and Milt waited for Vlad, keeping a chat open

between them.

Vlad himself intended to be Milt's opponent apparently. Shin and Milt were supposed to be lovers, so Vlad probably wanted to once again snatch Shin's beloved away with his own hands.

“(Pretty sloppy.)”

“(Proof of the pinch he's in. Well, it's also a result of your relentless PK hunt.)”

The designed area was a place ideal for duels; few people or monsters ever visited it.

It was a perfect location to set up an ambush. The cloudy sky made it even more difficult to see Shin and Milt.

“(Come alone, without telling Shin. That's really bad, if you ask me.)”

“(..... could it that he's actually an idiot? I thought that he would make something more impressive in the end.)”

“(Shin, let me remind you that you're the one that made that impossible. You crushed all the places that Vlad could use, didn't you?)”

Shin didn't answer Milt's slightly exasperated tone.

As they killed time with such exchanges, Shin's map registered a marker coming closer, speeding through the nearby forest. After activating 【Clairvoyance】 and 【Through Sight】 , Shin's eyes could see Vad riding on an Elder Red Dragon.

“You came alone?”

Vlad landed with his mount and cast the question to Milt. He looked slightly different from before.

His formerly very well kept long hair was now disheveled, the previously gleaming silver armor now emitted a dull glow. As a whole, he gave a sort of faded, stained impression.

“You requested me to, didn't you? What are you saying now?”

“I heard you were lovers, so I thought you would bring him too.”

“If you know the reason why I was with Shin, you shouldn’t be surprised that I’m alone. I came without telling him anything, as you ordered me to. I wonder if he’s looking for me now... that’d make me a bit happy.”

Milt gave a little smile after saying this; Vlad looked at her like he had found something unspeakably filthy. His whole body expressed the utter disgust he felt.

“It’s impossible for someone like you to have moved his heart.”

“You look pretty pissed all the same though. Was I clinging to Shin so irritating?”

Every time Milt provoked Vlad, emotion seeped away from his face. Inversely, his killing intent grew and grew.

“I shall put you out of your misery.”

Still riding on the elder dragon, Vlad pointed 『Excalibur』, its blade of light extended, towards Milt.

“Too bad, that’s not going to happen.”

Before Milt could even finish her sentence, a slash flew at Vlad from his blindspot.

Maybe thanks to the instincts cultivated through his fighting job, Vlad barely managed to parry the attack with 『Excalibur』; the sword was unable to withstand the attack’s power however, and was blown away.

“Kh!! Greed!!”

Vlad touched the ground and called for his partner dragon’s name. The Elder Red Dragon, however, could not answer; aftershocks from the slash had severed its wings and front legs. One single slash had shaved about half of its HP.

“So you ca----!?!”

Vlad looked towards the source of the slash, a smile widening on his lips, but was constrained by chains of light and thorns colored red and black.

The thorns disappeared thanks to Vlad's struggling, but even the muscular strength of an advanced player like Vlad couldn't make the chains budge.

It was a combination of the Light-type Magic skill 【Arc Bind】 , which boasted high constrictive power, and the Dark-type Magic skill 【Thorns of Impurity】 , which inflicted several status ailments.

"A little surprise attack, and you're already helpless?"

Shin, who had destroyed the Elder Dragon's head with a Light-type spell, spoke softly while looking, expressionless, at the collapsed Vlad. He felt no delight in having captured him.

Vlad was now affected with four negative statuses: 【Bloodred Poison】 , 【Blind】 , 【Hi-Paralyze】 , and 【Curse】 . He couldn't move a single finger, let alone break free of the chains.

"Haha, did you come to exact your revenge?"

Vlad couldn't move, but still flashed a twisted smile.

Despite his sight being clouded by 【Blind】 , he recognized Shin from his voice.

"Yeah."

Before his most hated enemy, Shin was perfectly calm.

He felt hate. But this hate, burning quietly within, had lost a flame hot enough to shake his emotions.

Shin didn't know when that happened. He couldn't tell if it was something good or bad.

"I won't be the one to kill you though."

The obsession wasn't gone. Anger and hate remained.

Now, however, he would not let his emotions swing his blade.

Following Shin's signal, six players appeared from the woods. They had not been detected because they were all equipped with gear made by Shin.

“What’s this response...?”

The blind Vlad was confused by the approach of the players’ presences; naturally enough, as Shin, the one supposed to finish him, had not moved one step.

“It can’t be...”

“Oh yes, it can.”

The Ancient-grade weapons in hand of the approaching players gave a dull glow. Even the players with less-than-superior stats, thanks to the weapons’ bonuses, could inflict significant damage.

“.....stop.”

Without a moment of hesitation, the weapons rose in the air and swung down on Vlad.

“STOP!!!”

One blow couldn’t be enough to cause large damage. On the contrary, this let Vlad feel, as crudely as possible, how his HP was gradually decreasing.

“I SAID STOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOPP!!!!”

He was being killed by people he didn’t know. This reality pushed Vlad to scream.

Shin had already turned his back; he wasn’t looking at Vlad anymore.

“Why!?! I am the one you hate!! Why is it these people!! These nobodies!?!”

Vlad probably couldn’t feel Shin’s expression, emotions, or even his eyes.

That was Shin’s revenge. To be ignored by someone you were so obsessed about. That reality would surely be painful above anything else to Vlad.

“Shitt!! HAMEL----”

The last scream died behind Shin. Vlad’s presence was no more.

“Well, that was over quickly.”

“That’s what revenge really is.”

Shin was looking towards Milt.

“I’m grateful for your help. Honestly speaking, I didn’t expect things to go so well.”

“I only did it for my own goal, so don’t mention it. Rather than that, when they go away... okay?”

“Yes, I’ll keep my promise.”

The six players watched Vlad disappear, silent from start to finish. The man who appeared to be their representative gave several equipment cards to Shin, quietly bowed, and left.

Shin watched them go, then turned towards Milt.

“We can start anytime.”

“Okay, I won’t hold back then.”

A giant poleaxe appeared in Milt’s hands. Enveloped in blue flames, it was the lower Ancient-grade 『Breogand』 .

“Let’s have some fun!!”

『Breogand』 slashed through the air, accompanied by Milt’s war shout. Even heavy weapons could move as swiftly as normal lances and axes thanks to Milt’s STR.

It was an attack that could even damage Shin if he was struck; he drew 『True Moon』 and blocked it.

“It’ll be over soon.”

The frontal clash caused 『Breogand』’s blade to shatter.

There was a stat difference between Shin and Milt, including the weapons’ bonuses, that 100 or 200 points could not fill. In a world where a video game’s system ruled all,

it was an all-too-clear difference.

“Hey, what were Mari’s last words?”

Milt asked as their blades were still locked.

“...she said that she wanted everyone to go back together.”

“I see, Mari... she made her decision.”

Milt’s water spirit, Undine, released several bubbles, but Shin swatted them away with his left hand. The lightning spell he launched as a counterattack seared both Undine and Milt.

“I’m so envious... we had lost all hope in reality.”

Only Milt’s HP decreased, one-sidedly. The sparks shooting between their blades cast a shadow on her face. Her expression contained a mix of admiration and jealousy.

“This is the time you should say, ‘You can do it too!’!”

“Only someone ready to carry your life on their shoulders could say that!!”

Milt shouted loud enough to not let her voice drown in the sound of the grinding metal, and Shin howled back.

In the 15th clash between their weapons, 『Breogand』’s blade shot in the air. Milt lost her balance as consequence, and Shin readied 『True Moon』 at his waist.

“I’m really----”

Milt instinctively used 『Breogand』’s hilt to protect herself. Shin’s blow, as if guided by it, struck cleanly.

“-----envious.”

The slash was stopped for an instant by 『Breogand』’s hilt, but was then cleaved in two along with everything else in the blade’s path.

Katana-type martial skill 【Shiden - Helmet Smasher】 .

The technique, that caused great damage to any weapon or defensive gear, unleashed its offensive power to the fullest.

“Thank you.”

Milt pronounced her last words with a smile.

Shin looked at Milt turning into a burst of polygons and disappear, a complicated emotion beating in his chest. He had never thought to be thanked by someone he killed.

“You are finished, yes?”

Maybe he had lowered his guard, maybe he was lost in thought.

Shin had not noticed the approaching presence until it talked to him.

“Hello there, it’s been a while.”

“.....Shi, Shin...”

Shin turned around and saw Hameln with Luca.

“Why are you here?”

“I heard from Milt. I suppose she couldn’t stand to see you go down this path either.”

Both being PKs, it wasn’t strange for some connection to exist between Milt and Hameln. Shin, however, couldn’t understand why Milt would tell him about this place.

“For me too, it is truly not interesting at all for you to be like this.”

“What did you say?”

“Let’s just say that I’m a busybody. I just do what I feel like after all. The rest is up to you. Do your best.”

Hameln then used a crystal and teleported away. Only Luca was left, a card in her hands.

“Didn’t I tell you to go back?”

“But Shin, you won’t come back!!”

“That’s-”

“Shin, you’re coming home with me!”

Luca ran up to Shin and tried to take his hand. But before her hands could touch his, Shin moved away.

Luca’s hands would get stained with blood. Or so he felt.

“Shin!!”

There were less than five steps between him and the screaming Luca. That small distance separated them like the steepest cliff.

“Nh!”

Luca held high the card she was holding. What appeared was a grenade-like item, that would explode after a set time.

“Nh... eh?”

“Luca!?”

Luca seemed unaware of the nature of the item she was holding. Shin stepped closer in an instant and took it out of her hands, then launched it high towards the sky.

After a few seconds, with a bang-like sound, a small cloud of white smoke appeared above.

It was just a smoke bomb.

“.....what?”

“Nh!”

Shin looked suspiciously at the unexpected happening, when Luca firmly grabbed his

hands.

“Let’s go back, okay?”

Luca’s words, strangely enough, were the same as Marino’s.

If Shin used just a little too much strength to shake Luca’s hands away -her level being in the single digits- he could easily blow away her HP.

Shin looked at her hands on his. The blood on his hands seemed to be staining hers too.

“I...”

“Let’s go back!!”

The edges of Luca’s eyes brimmed with tears. Even so, she gripped Shin’s hands as strong as she could.

“Let’s go back...”

Shaking her off would be all too simple. But it wasn’t as easy as that.

That same moment, an opening broke between the clouds in the sky.

The newly shining sunlight illuminated Luca, as if clearly separating the two; Luca was in warm, bright, yellow light, Shin in misty darkness.

“.....eh?”

It was as if the difference between him and Luca was being clearly shown. Shin noticed it and was about to laugh at himself, when his eyes caught something else, something unbelievable.

On top of his and Luca’s, there was one more hand. Next to Luca, stood Marino. That moment, Shin forgot everything.

Luca pulled Shin as she walked. Completely lost, he followed her without the smallest resistance.

Shin was showered in sunlight, as if he was being pulled out of the darkness.

“.....”

Shin's eyes were temporarily blinded by the dazzling light.

He closed them for just an instant, but that instant Marino disappeared.

“.....”

Was it a mirage? Shin asked himself, then he felt the warmth of Luca's hand on his.

No, that was definitely not only Luca's. He had held that hand countless times. Even after becoming a murderer, he couldn't forget that warmth.

That was Marino, without a doubt.

“Are you telling me to go back?”

The Marino he saw in the light looked sad.

“(Let's go back.)”

The same words that Marino said seeped inside Shin's heart.

He looked down and saw a small hand gripping his. He felt something inside melt away and disappear.

“Shin, are you crying?”

“I don't... I don't know...”

Shin felt all his strength leave his body and fell to his knees.

Something warm seemed to be flowing down his cheeks.

s t a t u s

ステータス紹介

THE NEW
GATE



Name: Shin
Gender: Male
Race: High Human

Main Job: Samurai
Sub Job: Blacksmith
Adventurer's Rank: S
Affiliation: Rokuten

● Stats

LV: 255

HP: 9999

MP: 9999

STR: 999

VIT: 999

DEX: 999

AGI: 999

INT: 999

LUC: 36

● Battle Equipment

Head: Hades Muffler (Prevents critical hits, disruption of senses, concealment/ambushes)
Body: Hades Long Coat (Prevents piercing attacks, Reduces sustained damage to 50%, Resists all elements)
Arms: Hades Gauntlets (Prevents theft & traps, Grants damage counter)
Legs: Hades Leg Guards (Prevents restrain & debuffs)
Accessory 1: Hades Ring (Prevents all status ailments, etc)
Accessory 2: Age of Gods Earring (Auto-casts all buffs, Auto-heal, etc)
Weapons: True Moon (Original hand-made weapon from Red Pearl Blade) (Prevents weapon-destroying attacks, penetration ability, magic attacks (only on blade), Increases attack speed, user limitation)

● Title(s)

● Apex of Katana skills
 ● Apex of Blacksmithing
 ● Apex of Sorcery
 ● Holy Sword Blacksmith
 ● Demon Sword Blacksmith
 etc

● Skill(s)

● Heaven Slash
 ● Mind's Eye
 ● Flying Shadow
 ● Magic Enchantment
 ● Creation of Magic Tools
 etc

Other

● Fastest player to max all stats
 ● Owner of Tsuki no Hokora
 ● PKK (Player Killer Killer)



Name: Vlad
Gender: Male
Race: High Lord

Main Job: Dragon Knight
Sub Job: Ninja
Adventurer's Rank: B
Affiliation: Ouroboros

● Stats

LV: 255
HP: 6322
MP: 5183
STR: 579
VIT: 483
DEX: 599
AGI: 421
INT: 406
LUC: 42

● Battle Equipment

Head: Dragon Manipulator Forehead Guard (VIT bonus [M], INT bonus [M] - only when riding a dragon)
Body: Dragon Manipulator Light Armor (VIT bonus [M], DEX bonus [M] - only when riding a dragon)
Arms: Dragon Manipulator Gauntlets (VIT bonus [M], STR bonus [M] - only when riding a dragon)
Legs: Dragon Manipulator Greaves (VIT bonus [M], AGI bonus [M] - only when riding a dragon)
Accessory: Dragon Claw Pendant (Boosts stats of contracted dragon(s))
Weapons: Excalibur (Prevents weapon-destroying attacks, User limitation, HP self-heal (M), attack range boost, Damage cut [M])

● Title(s)

● Vice-instructor of Spear skills
 ● Vice-instructor of Bare-handed skills
 ● Agitator
 ● One with Dragons
 ● Ally of Dragons
 etc

● Skill(s)

● Quick Spear
 ● Howling Spear
 ● Dragon Rise
 ● Powered Throw
 ● Summon Contracted Beast
 etc

Other

● PK



Name: **Gargalla**

Gender: **Male**

Race: **Human**

Main Job: **Magic Swordsman**

Sub Job: **Berserker**

Adventurer's Rank: **A**

Affiliation: **Ouroboros**

● Stats

LV: 255

HP: 8930

MP: 2075

STR: 810

VIT: 652

DEX: 408

AGI: 378

INT: 322

LUC: 61

● Battle Equipment

Head: Berserk Tribe Helmet (VIT bonus [L])
Body: Berserk Tribe Armor (VIT bonus [XL])
Arms: Berserk Tribe Gauntlets (DEX bonus [L])
Legs: Berserk Tribe Greaves (Prevents Knockback)
Accessory: Substitute Pendant (Prevents Sudden death)
Weapons: Giant Slayer (Boosted damage to superior opponents [XL])

● Title(s)

● Apex of Sword skills
● Apex of Axe skills
● Instructor of Barehanded skills
● Giant Killer
● Exterminator
etc

● Skill(s)

● Grand Blade Rondo
● Vicious Slash
● Fireball
● Shoulder Bomb
● Dreadnought
etc

Other

● PK



Name: **Hameln**

Gender: **Male**

Race: **High Pixie**

Main Job: **Tamer**

Sub Job: **Alchemist**

Adventurer's Rank: **B**

Affiliation: **None**

● Stats

LV: 255

HP: 4788

MP: 6219

STR: 502

VIT: 403

DEX: 672

AGI: 343

INT: 604

LUC: 56

● Battle Equipment

Head: Bright Prince's Silk Hat (Status effect attachment boost [L])

Body: Bright Prince's Top Attire (Damage cut [S], Status effect attachment boost [M])

Arms: Bright Prince's Gloves (Boosts affection increase rate of commanded monsters [L])

Legs: Bright Prince's Boots (Prevents restrain)

Accessory: Tamer's Earring (Boosts monster capture rate [L])

Weapons: Bright Prince's Stick (Boosts monster capture rate [L], Substitute ability)

● Title(s)

● Apex of Shield skills

● Fake Gentleman

● Monster Collector

● Army Leader

● Contractor of Demon Servants

etc

● Skill(s)

● Remote Conducting

● Confu Wave

● Temptation Pulse

● Forced Subjugation

● Summon Contracted Beast

etc

Other

● MPK (Monster Player Killer)



Name: Milt
Gender: Female
Race: High Pixie

Main Job: Conjurer
Sub Job: Berserker
Adventurer's Rank: A
Affiliation: Ouroboros' Hollow

● Stats

LV: 255
HP: 7657
MP: 3722
STR: 776
VIT: 221
DEX: 603
AGI: 539
INT: 400
LUC: 67

● Battle Equipment

Head: None
Body: Oriental Battle Garb - Body (HP bonus [M], Damage reduction at set % [XL])
Arms: Oriental Battle Garb - Arms (DEX bonus [M], Critical damage increase [M])
Legs: Oriental Battle Garb - Legs (AGI bonus [M], Critical damage increase [M])
Accessory: Scarf of Enticement (Enemy accuracy reduction [L])
Weapon(s): Breogand (Effective against Players [L], HP absorption [M], user limitation)
 Mirbal (Effective against Players [L], magic skill damage increase [M], user limitation)

● Title(s)

● Master of Magic Poleaxes
 ● Martial Arts Fairy
 ● She who Dances on Death's Doorstep
 ● Protection of the God of Battle
 ● Blue Manipulator
 etc

● Skill(s)

● Impact Slash
 ● Heavy Stamp
 ● Blue Rush
 ● Feather Step
 ● Spirit Summoning
 etc

Other

● PK



PDF by: traitor#ZEN