

風波しのび  
Kazunami Shinogi

NEW  
NEW  
NEW

ザ・ニュー・ゲート

NEW  
NEW  
NEW

11. 蒼海の水底

# **THE NEW GATE**

**- Volume 11 -  
Depths of the Azure Seas**

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**[ Shin Translations ]**

THE NEW  
ザ・ニュー・ゲート  
GATE

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Kazanami Shingyi

11. 蒼海の水底

Illustration : KeG



## ARNO TOOLE

22 y.o. | Dolphin Mermaid  
Receptionist in Marine City Barbatos'  
Adventurer's Guild.

## SHIBAIID ETRU

521 y.o. | High  
Dragnil.  
Shin's support  
characters  
since the game  
Era. First King  
of the Kilmont  
dragon empire.

## SCHNEE RAIZAR

521 y.o. | High Elf  
Shin's support character  
since the game era. She  
waited for Shink for 500  
years.

## TIERA LUCENT

157 y.o. | Elf  
Assistant at Tsuki no  
Hokora/Moon Shrine. Her  
hair is mostly black due to  
the effects of a powerful  
curse.

## FILMA TOLMEYA

521 y.o. | High Lord. Shin's support  
characters since the game era. Dependable  
"big sister" and mood maker of the party.

## KAGEROU

Grufagio Yarde  
monster bound to  
Tiera with a  
contract. It's true  
form is a large wolf  
monster.

## YUZUHA

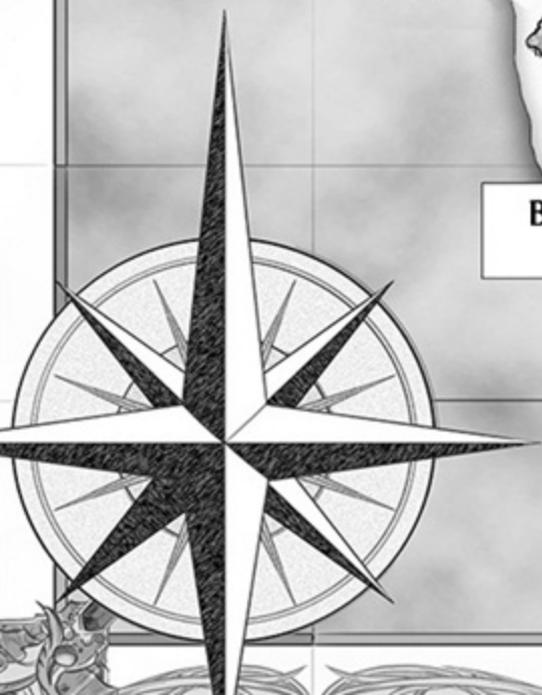
Elementail Tail monster saved  
by Shin. It's appearance is of a  
baby fox, but it can change to  
human form.

## SHIN

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

## Elnia Continent

Sea



C h a p t e r 1

海 洋 都 市 ^

THE NEW  
GATE

# Chapter 1

The Black Priestess Shrine guildhouse, on the island country of Hinomoto.

Inside Tsuki no Hokora, which had been materialized in a woodland area within the guildhouse's premises, Shin narrated his past.

About the days before the Dusk of Majesty, when this world was still the death game, when — even if for the sake of protecting innocent people — he committed countless PKs — murders.

Tiera slowly inhaled a deep breath after hearing Shin's story.

"It's something in the past now. 'Oh, so that's what happened, okay'. You can just see it like that if you want."

Shin's smile did not hide any shadows.

Everything would be OK.

With this conviction in mind, Tiera nodded.

"Could it be that what possessed me before was your former lover, Marino?"

The night before, Tiera had performed a ritual dance similar to the Japanese Kagura. The spirit that had taken over her body at the time housed a deep affection for Shin.

There couldn't be many people with such deep feelings for him.

"It's possible but... I don't know. You snapped out of it before I could tell."

While talking to Tiera about his past, Shin also realized that it could have been Marino.

"Aah, honestly, I don't appreciate things like that being done through my body though."

Tiera probably remembered the kiss as she hid her mouth with her right hand, her cheeks flushing a bit.

“Er... next time, I’ll do my best to dodge.”

Even if he had been entranced by something else, Shin felt guilty about kissing Tiera against her will.

“Er, well, I too want to know who it was that possessed me, okay? So, well, if it happens again, it’s okay to prioritize finding out who they are, you know!”

Since it was possible for it to be someone connected to Shin’s past, Tiera probably said that out of concern for him. Her words and behavior were very contradictory, but Shin chose to think that was her reasoning.

“While I’m thankful to hear that, wouldn’t you hate it if it happened again?”

“You don’t have to worry! It could happen when I’m doing priestess things too!! A-and besides...”

Tiera’s words stopped.

She held her hands together and looked around, visibly fidgeting.

“Besides?”

“I-It’s nothing. Really nothing, so forget all about it.”

Tiera mumbled something, but in the end cut off the conversation without saying anything clearly.

The sun was already high in the sky, indicating that it was almost noon.

Tiera held her still blushing cheeks to cool them off and hurriedly said that it was time to eat lunch, thus forcibly changing the topic.

“That’s right, they’ll probably call us soon.”

Shin felt that it would have been better not to press the matter further, and agreed to Tiera’s proposal.

They both stood from their chairs and exited Tsuki no Hokora. Tiera, who was walking ahead of Shin, suddenly turned around.

“Thank you for telling me such a painful story, Shin.”

“No need to thank me. Pretty boring, wasn’t it?”

“Not at all. I’m glad I could know more about you.”

Tiera replied with a smile.

She did not regret learning about Shin’s past. Her expression stated that clearly.

“Actually, that scene from my past that you saw... I used to see it often in my dreams.”

“Your mother’s memory?”

“Yes. The time when I first met you too, I would dream about it sometimes. Every time, I would get awful headaches and feel depressed for the whole day.”

Tiera spoke while looking up at the sky as they walked towards Black Priestess Shrine’s guildhouse. Shin had returned Tsuki no Hokora to its compressed form.

“But ever since I received that from you, I haven’t had that dream anymore.”

“That?”

“You know, this.”

Tiera then took out the Geyl coin from her robe that Shin had given her when they first met. The coin reflected the sunlight and sparkled vividly.

“I feel at peace when I hold this. Maybe because there’s your magic power inside.”

Shin looked intently at the coin and noticed that it indeed had the same aura as the items inside his item box.

“It isn’t supposed to have an effect like that, but I’m happy if it’s useful to you... why don’t we make it into a pendant? So you don’t risk losing it.”

Tiera kept the Geyl coin in a small pocket with metal fastenings.

It was also very valuable in this world, after all. Shin thought that the more closely it

could be kept, the better, so he made that suggestion.

“That would be a great help, but is it alright?”

“We can do it in a flash. After all, metal forging is my strong suit.”

“Please do so, then.”

Shin stopped, took an Orichalcum ingot from the item box and, as if molding a lump of clay, quickly shaped it into a chain. He then took the coin from Tiera, molded the Orichalcum around it, fixed it to the chain and finished the pendant.

“Oh, could you make the chain longer, please?”

“Longer than this? How much?”

Shin increased the chain’s length as Tiera requested, even though he felt that it had become too long to wear the pendant around the neck.

“Did you really want it this long?”

“Yes, that’s right. Most people would think it was a fake, but experienced people could tell that it’s real. I need the chain this long so that other people can’t see the coin. If it’s here, no one can see it as long as they don’t come close to my face and peek, right?”

Tiera then leaned forward a bit and pulled down the neck of her shirt to show Shin the coin’s position.

No matter how much he knew it was not right, Shin’s gaze was drawn to Tiera’s cleavage. The Geyl coin, attached to the long chain, was nestled right in the middle.

“I-I see. That’s why you needed it that long.”

“Yes, that’s... s-see? If someone comes this close I can react, right!?”

Finally realizing that the stance she had taken put her bosom in full view, Tiera hurriedly stepped back. Her cheeks flared red again.

She seemed shaken and quickly looked all around to make sure that no one else had seen them.

“...ehm, thanks.”

“Sure, that much is nothing.”

The two started walking again. Soon enough, they met Schnee and Yuzuha, who were also headed to the guildhouse, and joined them.

“Did you finish talking with Kuchinashi?”

“Yes, I’ll tell everyone when we are with Filma and the others. Looks like there’s new trouble brewing.”

The enemies the Black Priestess Shrine’s guildmaster, Kuchinashi, talked about, the Seven Deadly Sins, grew more powerful as the event progressed. Their location was currently unknown, but it would be better to defeat them as soon as possible.

Thinking that it was better to also have the Golden Company research their whereabouts, Shin decided to send a message card.

When Shin’s group arrived at the guildhouse they found Filma and Shibaid with Oodenta Mitsuyo and Onimaru Kunitsuna, two of the Five Supreme Blades, already sitting at the lunch table.

“You’re late.”

“Sorry for the wait, the talks went on longer than expected.”

Shin apologized to the slightly irritated Mitsuyo. She had let him and Tiera have time alone, so he was thankful for that.

“Oh really.”

“Lord Shin, as you can see she is feigning a lack of interest, but Mitsuyo has been fidgeting all this time, wondering when you would come back.”

Kunitsuna, an excited grin on her face, looked as if she were positively enjoying herself as she made her report.

“Hey, Kunitsuna!?! What are you even saying now!?!”

“Did I say something wrong? It’s rare to see the proud Mitsuyo all restless like that after all.”

“W-why you...!!”

Kunitsuna probably hit where it hurt. Even while glaring at her, Mitsuyo’s eyes darted towards Shin.

“...what?”

“No, nothing at all. Let’s eat, first of all.”

Mitsuyo looked like she was blushing: her glare was thus not scary at all, but Shin felt that poking her further would prove dangerous, and decided to leave it alone.

“Do any of you have any plans for the rest of the day? Kuchinashi told me something interesting, so I’d like to let you all know too.”

Shin proposed discussing the Seven Deadly Sins, to which all present agreed.

After the meal, the whole group assembled in the room assigned to Shin.

“.....the Seven Deadly Sins, hmm. Clearly they can’t be ignored, but there’s not much we can do until they are found, is it.”

“Agreed. 500 years ago, the players used human wave tactics and somehow pulled through. Our group doesn’t even have 10 members, we just don’t have enough manpower for that.”

After hearing what Shin had to say, Schnee and Filma replied: the former with a very serious expression, the latter while shrugging.

When Shin said that he already requested the Golden Company to search for the monsters, the group agreed to wait for a reply.

“So there are creatures like that in this world...”

Mitsuyo seemed impressed to learn of the existence of such monsters, to which Shin replied brightly.

“We’ve never seen their final forms, though. Though considering Fuji’s fighting power, I’m sure it’ll be alright as long as a pack of final forms doesn’t gather.”

“If the Five Supreme Blades are together, it would take a really tough enemy to take us down, yes.”

Mitsuyo and the other Blades, like Kagutsuchi of the sacred mountain Fuji, were treated as boss monsters in the game. Because of this, both their stats and HP were much higher than the players.

They surpassed the players’ max values of 9999 by far, so if they fought together, even raid bosses would be felled.

Now that Kunitsuna and Dojigiri Yasutsuna had returned, their defenses could be said to be perfect.

“Tomorrow, if nothing else comes up, we’ll go back to Fuji. The earlier you’re all back together, the better, I’m sure.”

“Ah... yeah.”

Shin was kind of concerned about Mitsuyo’s somber look, but as business was done, the group split.

Nothing of particular importance happened afterward: after dinner, Shin was swinging his [Kakura] in the small garden where he had found Tiera the previous night. He was wearing a bathrobe supplied by Black Priestess Shrine, as to be able to go take a bath right after training.

“You got a bit better than last time we fought.”

Shin thrust [Kakura] into the ground and turned towards the voice. He was focusing on training, but had noticed Mitsuyo approaching.

“Whew, if you say that, it means that it was worth the effort.”

Mitsuyo stepped out of the corridors’ shadows into the moonlight. She had removed her shoulder and breast armor: now she was only wearing an oriental-style attire with a miniskirt.

“We’re going back to Fuji tomorrow, right?”

“Yes, I doubt anything else will happen here anyway.”

The group had not stayed in the guildhouse after clearing the dungeon because they were wary of possible dangers. The miasma in Cadaver Realm had been purified thoroughly, so there was little to no chance of anything new arising.

“I see. If so... could I ask you one last request?”

“A request?”

Mitsuyo had come talk to him by herself probably because she didn’t want Schnee and the others to hear.

“I want you to use me. Even just for practicing techniques or something.”

“You mean, that I would just have to swing the katana [Oodenta Mitsuyo]?”

“Yes, that’d be enough... but rest assured, it doesn’t mean that I feel anything for you.”

Mitsuyo probably saw through Shin’s thoughts, because she gave a little troubled laugh.

Mitsuyo’s actual body was owned by Kagutsuchi, but the [Oodenta Mitsuyo – Shinuchi] she currently inhabited was Shin’s possession, so he could comply with her request if he wanted.

“Got it. That much is nothing.”

Thinking that he had said the same line earlier in the day, Shin took Oodenta Mitsuyo -now in katana form- in his hands. The unsheathed blade glistened under the moonlight.

Shin attached the sheath to his robe’s belt, gripped the hilt with both hands and took a stance.

“Shah!”

From a frontal straight stance, Shin went to upward diagonal, downward diagonal, sweep, then thrust.

He added Saegusa Karin's teachings to the techniques he had learned from a certain person during the game. What he learned were just the basics, though. Much of Shin's style was self-taught.

The sound of the katana cutting the air and Shin's shouts resounded through the garden.

Thus around 10 minutes passed.

Mitsuyo's Mind Chat—in katana form, she couldn't talk, so her voice directly reached Shin's mind — gave the signal, and Shin stopped.

"It's enough, thank you."

Mitsuyo, back in human form, had a faint smile on her lips.

"Did this mean anything for you?"

"There's no special meaning. I told you that I have no special feelings for you, right?"

Even so, it looked like being wielded by Shin had meant something to Mitsuyo, as she looked satisfied.

"I wanted to be wielded as one of your weapons, even just once. If there was any meaning, that was it."

"Not that wielding one of the Five Supreme Blades was unpleasant, of course."

"I know. You have a powerful katana you're attached to, right? I'm a weapon too, so I'm honestly a bit jealous of a katana treasured like that."

Mitsuyo then returned to her room, saying that she would be turning in.

Left alone in the garden, Shin looked up to the sky with mixed feelings in his heart.



The next day, after making sure that the Cadaver Realm had not undergone any changes and that no miasma outbreaks had occurred, Shin's group left the Black Priestess Shrine's guildhouse to return to Fuji.

“If anything happens, just contact me via chat.”

“Yes, we’ll try to handle things by ourselves if we can, but if we’re overwhelmed, I’ll call you.”

They had already said all they wanted to, so the farewell was a short one.

Along with Kuchinashi, the Black Priestess Shrine members who had bonded with Shin’s group the most saw them off.

“Please take care during your travels. I look forward to seeing you again one day.”

“...I’m thankful to you for saving my sister, but I’ll never let you have her!!”

While Rindou Kotone spoke with words of longing, Suzune glared at Shin.

“Same till the very end, huh...”

Suzune didn’t forgive Shin and Kotone’s friendship, after all.

Kotone added that Suzune too was truly thankful, but being grateful for Shin’s assistance was apparently a separate matter from letting him have her sister.

Schnee, Tiera and the others also bid farewell to Ayame and the other priestesses.

The greatest number, however, gathered around Shibaid, who had held a training session for the priestesses.

“Wow, that’s some popularity.”

“Some girls even said that, if only he was free...”

“Seriously?”

“Dead serious. Finding a marriage partner is tough in this world too, you know.”

Kuchinashi sighed quietly, mumbling that she couldn’t let her girls marry just anyone. Shin felt a vague discomfort learning that there were connections with the real world in curious places.

“(It would be a big relief for me if you took in Kotone though, Shin. There’s plenty of ambitious men out there pestering us to make her their bride.)”

“(No more, please. I still haven’t given up on returning to our original world, actually. Besides, even if I were to spend the rest of my life here, I have Schnee.)”

“(She only has eyes for you, hasn’t she? She’s always looking in your direction, it’s really easy to figure out.)”

During the chat, it was then Shin’s turn to sigh. He told Kuchinashi that “(That’s probably on purpose)”. There surely was a reason for Schnee to act so openly in front of someone she had just met.

“Okay, this looks like it could go on forever, so let’s go!”

Feeling kind of sorry for the girls sending burning gazes towards Shibaid, Shin climbed onto the horse carriage. After making sure everyone else was on, he motioned for Kagerou to go.

The carriage started slowly but quickly picked up speed. Unlike the time when they had first arrived at the Black Priestess Shrine, they were now traveling on a road used for transporting goods, so Kuchinashi and the other priestesses disappeared from sight very quickly.

“Take care!”

The carriage proceeded towards Fuji, Kotone’s voice trailing behind it.

The travel back to Fuji was completely uneventful. Monsters wouldn’t get close to the group in fear of Kagerou. And since thieves and bandits were routinely hunted down by the Kujou clan and the samurai affiliated with it, meeting any would be rare in itself.

The group stopped on the way in a large city to refill their supplies, but made no other detours, advancing towards Fuji at an explosive speed. This would leave all travelers and merchants they happened to cross paths with speechless.

“We’ve already arrived? Happy times really go by quickly.”

Kunitsuna spoke while looking up at Fuji, when the group got off the carriage just before Aokigahara.

“With a travel speed like that, it’s pretty obvious.”

Nodding to Kunitsuna’s words, Mitsuyo looked at the carriage, a bit melancholic.

As anthropomorphized weapons, Mitsuyo and her comrades were bound to certain areas. Normally, they would never be able to go on adventures like the one they shared with Shin.

“Now that I think about it, I was attacked the last time I was here.”

Thinking they shouldn’t just walk in silence, Shin talked about when he was attacked while traveling with Karin and Kanade.

“Oh, were you really? Was the assassin that fled part of the Rokuhara?”

“Could be. The ones who stirred up trouble have quieted down, so there’s no point in dwelling on it.”

When Shin finished talking, the group had crossed Aokigahara and reached Fuji. The mist shrouded the mountain as always, but posed no problem.

There was no reason to engage in battle, so the group proceeded while avoiding the monsters they occasionally spotted and quickly arrived at Kagutsuchi’s shrine.

“Yachi, we’re back.”

Mitsuyo approached the Eight-Headed Orochi, which extended his necks to examine the group. The monster seemed to understand her words, as the “shaah” uttered in reply appeared to mean “welcome back”.

“Hmm, I see that you’re back safe and sound.”

Mikazuki Munechika emerged from inside the shrine: she had probably sensed the incoming presence of Shin’s group.

“It’s been a long time, Munechika. —-Haven’t you gotten prettier?”

Kunitsuna immediately noticed that Munechika’s appearance was now different from the usual.

“Just like Mitsuyo, now I am a Shinuchi.”

After Munechika’s explanation, Kunitsuna — who had already heard about the process from Mitsuyo — was easily convinced.

“I thought that you would look cuter, like Mitsuyo does... but I see, your beauty increased instead. That’s why Mitsuyo was kind of miffed, then.”

“I thought that only appearance would change, but the armor did too after all. But Yasutsuna and Tanetsugu praised Mitsuyo too, saying she had become prettier.”

“They laughed about it, I bet.”

Mitsuyo, pouting, joined in on Munechika and Kunitsuna’s conversation. Her ponytail shook as she quickly looked to the side.

“That’s not true. We might be weapons, but our bodies are those of women. Decorating our appearance is enjoyable for us too. I too would be interested in looking cute.”

“That hairdo, however... rather than making you purely cute like Mitsuyo, gives a stronger feminine allure. The neck area, for example.”

Munechika spoke her mind honestly, and Kunitsuna added her precise observations.

Having an appearance more childlike or adultlike could influence greatly the impression given to others.

“Kh, I can’t deny that...”

Regardless of what she said, Munechika had just lightly tied her hair, but still emanated a sensual charm that made it difficult to believe that she was wearing armor. Mitsuyo’s shoulders dropped.

“—-look at them, they’re sure having fun.”

“Hmm, their comrade came back safe. Of course they’d feel elated.”

Filma and Shibaid smiled while looking at the reunited Blades’ playful exchanges.

“Piyo!”

“Kuu!”

Nestled on top of Juzumaru Tanetsugu’s head, Kagutsuchi — now in chick mode — cried with its wings spread out. In response, Yuzuha raised her tail from her position on Shin’s head. The two descended from the respective heads they were on and initiated some sort of conversation.

Shin and Tanetsugu looked at each other and laughed wryly.

“Everyone, I wish to thank you for saving Kunitsuna.”

The only one to properly express gratitude was Yasutsuna.

“Our task is over, then.”

“Yes. However, I have been saved by you, sir Shin. If you ever require my assistance, I shall be at your side.”

He was probably serious through and through. Yasutsuna’s expression was firm.

“...hey, Yasutsuna? Don’t go hogging Shin for yourself, okay?”

“True, that wouldn’t be good at all.”

Munechika and Mitsuyo moved behind Yasutsuna in the blink of an eye. They each grabbed one shoulder, strongly enough to make a creaking sound.

“No, I had no such intention...”

Apparently, Yasutsuna was not receiving damage; however his reply was slightly confused by the developments.

“I’ll contact you if anything happens. Let me check if I can send you message cards.”

The Five Supreme Blades belonged to the monster, or weapon, category.

Shin knew that it was possible to send message cards to this world's inhabitants, but was not sure if it was possible to do the same to humanized weapons. He thus tried to send a blank message, which was delivered without problems.

"I see, with this we can get in touch at any time."

Munechika seemed impressed, but Mitsuyo, next to her, appeared frustrated.

"Ggh... why don't we have any creation skills!?"

"My my, as usual you are full of surprises, young man. By the way, sir Shin, it does pain me to ask you this after everything you have done for us, but would you listen to an old man's request?"

"I don't know if I'll be able to grant it, but what is it?"

Shin asked Tanetsugu for details.

"Oh it is simple enough. I thought I would like to become a Shinuchi as well. Seeing how Munechika and Mitsuyo changed, I grew interested, you see."

"Hmm, that is true. We cannot change appearance as humans do, after all. Asking sir Shin to do even more for us would be..."

Yasutsuna seemed interested in the Shinuchi too. He had just thanked Shin for saving him, though, so he looked conflicted, standing next to Tanetsugu.

"I see, that wouldn't take too much, so there's no problem. There's a Ley Line here, and increasing its defenses wouldn't hurt for sure."

Shin too was interested in seeing how they would change, so he accepted the two Blades' request.

Kunitsuna too expressed the same desire, so Shin set on working on all three of them.

The time was already past 5 in the afternoon. The strong sunlight on the peak made it hard to tell, but the sun was already setting.

“I’ll make preparations for dinner, then.”

“Ah, I’ll help too.”

Entrusting Schnee and Tiera with dinner, Shin headed to the smithy.

He had already reinforced [Mikazuki Munechika] and [Oodenta Mitsuyo], so he had more or less learned the “trick” to it, more or less. Because of this, Shin was done in about one hour.

Shin left the smithy and walked through the corridor towards the living room, when about five meters from the living room, he found Schnee standing there.

“Did everything go well?”

“Yeah, I made them all into Shinuchi.”

“That’s good. I’ve made some preparations too.”

“Preparations?”

Schnee looked at Shin, somewhat fidgeting. He had no idea what she could have meant by “preparations”. He found it puzzling that she was blushing though.

Had something happened before dinner? So thought Shin, when Schnee abruptly started talking.

“W-will you have dinner first? Or have a bath? O-or, have... have m—”

Schnee couldn’t say it till the end, and covered her red hot face with her hands. She was obviously too embarrassed. Her long ears, poking from her silver hair, were blazing red too.

“Eh!? Wait a second, Schnee!!! If you say that much, you have to say it to the end!!!”

“I can’t!! I can’t do something as shameful as in-inviting Shin to...!”

After Schnee crouched down in embarrassment, Filma — who had been using a concealment skill — revealed herself.

“What are you even doing...”

Shin had noticed Filma’s presence, so he looked at her as to say, “I need an explanation”.

“I heard Cashmere and Hecate talk about it once. This is a wife’s proper greeting to her husband in your world, right Shin? A great welcome, to soothe the husband’s exhaustion while also encouraging prosperity for the family line!”

“I’m sorry for Schnee, who got all embarrassed like this... but that isn’t a proper greeting or anything... some people do say it though.”

Shin corrected Filma’s information, careful not to touch upon the wife-husband part.

He wanted to add that a phrase like that was only in manga, but he had actually seen his parents enact the situation once, so he couldn’t deny it outright.

“Really? Hecate and Cashmere really said that they would have liked to welcome their husbands like that, though.”

“Yeah, I heard that too. Hecate was looking for a partner, wasn’t she.”

Shin remembered hearing something about that during one of their offline meetings.

Rokuten members were mostly minors: Hecate was the only adult. As soon as she had found a job, she had quit being a hardcore gamer. For Shin, the impression of the real world Hecate was of a hard-working adult woman.

She was slender, beautiful, with a dimple near her eye. Her personality wasn’t bad either, so it was a mystery why she couldn’t find a boyfriend.

“Well, putting Hecate aside... Filma, don’t tease Schnee too much, okay?”

“I wasn’t teasing her. Without some stimulus, the relationship doesn’t progress.”

“Don’t talk about that here!”

Like Shibaid, Filma also wanted Shin and Schnee to become one soon. The difference was that Filma used a very direct approach.

“It can’t be helped, can it? If you disappear, then it’s all over.”

“...so you heard.”

Filma seemed to know that Shin was looking for a way to return to his home world.

“Though, I have no clue about how to do it.”

“And that’s precisely the reason why we should move now. If you find a way, it’s all over, isn’t it?”

Filma was looking at Shin, but not in her usual joking way.

“Filma, that’s enou—-”

“Sorry, but in regards to this, I’m prioritizing Schnee over you, Shin. I’m sure you know why, don’t you?”

Filma interrupted Schnee’s words and pressed further. Shin knew the reason well, of course.

Filma Tolmeya was Shin’s second support character. She was without a doubt Shin’s support character, but her original position was supporting Schnee. That influenced Filma in this world too.

“I understand, once again.”

“Then—”

“Filma!”

Schnee interrupted Filma’s words this time. Her powerful shout stopped Filma in her tracks.

“I’m sorry, Shin. I’ll talk with Filma properly about this.”

“Hey, Schnee! Are you really fine with th-”

Filma was ready to double down, but Schnee put a finger over her mouth and smiled.

“I’m all right. I have no intention of giving up either.”

“...hah, okay then. I’ll keep quiet for now.”

Schnee’s clear declaration, in front of Shin too, made Filma give a small shrug and nod.

“But, you know.”

The next instant, Filma took Schnee by surprise and stepped next to Shin, whispering something in his ear.

“Now I’d join in too, you know?”

Filma then kissed Shin’s cheek.

“W-what!? Hey!!”

“Filma!?”

“Schnee, you have to do at least this much!”

Filma fled into the living room before they could say anything else.

To think she’d go so far... thought Shin while touching his cheek and watching Filma go.

“S-Schnee? That look is kind of painful, you know...”

Shin realized that she was staring at him and fretted. Schnee came closer, silent.

“.....”

She finally took Shin’s head with her hands and pressed her lips on his.

The pressure felt just now completely vanished, Schnee gave Shin a gentle kiss.

“I can... do this much.”

She must have been nervous. After the kiss, she turned beet red again, as if opening a pressure valve.

“Le-let’s go eat! Everyone’s waiting!”

Not able to endure the embarrassment anymore, Schnee fled into the living room just like Filma had done.

“...what am I going to do?”

Filma’s concern for Schnee, Schnee’s feelings for himself... he could understand them. However, However, Shin had not given up on returning to his home world.

“If that wasn’t a possibility, I’d be OK with it in a heartbeat.”

Let’s go back — so Marino had said before dying. Her words were deeply engraved in Shin’s heart.

Shin himself felt a longing for his home world. It wasn’t just because he had spoken to Tiera about his past, but he strongly felt that he couldn’t just throw away the world he was born and raised in so easily.

“Well, I better go now.”

With a small sigh, Shin headed to the living room.



“So this is the Shinuchi?”

“Well, I can see why Munechika and Mitsuyo were so smug.”

“Hmm...”

After the meal, Shin gave Yasutsuna, Kunitsuna and Tanetsugu their respective Shinuchi, but their responses were all different. Only Yasutsuna and Kunitsuna expressed their excitement and interest, while Tanetsugu showed disappointment.

“Er, what happened to Tanetsugu?”

“Hmm, it appears that I cannot transfer my consciousness into this blade.”

According to Tanetsugu, the revival version of the katana could not serve as a vessel.

“The revival version won’t do, then?”

Based on what had happened until now, only weapons forged from scratch or obtained during the event could be used to transfer consciousness.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t want to go through that again...”

Shin could forge [Juzumaru], but to do so would mean going through the same ordeal as when he repaired [Dojigiri Yasutsuna]. All weapon recipes were different too. Even though he was able to forge one of the Five Supreme Blades, it didn’t mean that the others were any easier to make.

“No, you have already done enough for us. Enough with my selfishness.”

Tanetsugu’s whole body clearly expressed how dejected he was, but he accepted the situation.

“Ooh, so this is how I change!”

“As expected, my change was similar to Munechika’s.”

Next to the resigned Tanetsugu, Yasutsuna and Kunitsuna expressed their joy and surprise at their new Shinuchi forms.

Yasutsuna was still lean but now looked more muscular; his facial features were more solid and rugged, like a young general who had trained his technique and accumulated experience.

Kunitsuna, like Munechika, was even more beautiful than before. Instead of gaining lustrous hair or whiter skin, she gain more prominent curves, giving her an hourglass figure.

“How regretful...”

Looking at his overjoyed comrades, Tanetsugu’s shoulders dropped even more.

“Munechika and now Kunitsuna!! Just what kind of joke is this!?!”

Mitsuyo, who had already been made into a Shinuchi, shouted. It wasn’t clear whether she was angry or crying.

“Shin! One more time, you have to reinforce me one more time! If you do, I will become like them toooo!!”

Unable to accept the difference in their transformations, Mitsuyo pressed Shin.

“I... could... do it... but... in your case, Mitsuyo, it might go totally against your wishes... you changed in a way completely different from them, after all.”

Mitsuyo grabbed shin by the neck and shook him, but Shin freed himself from her grip and replied.

“Th-that can’t be...”

“Well actually, just because you’re small doesn’t mean you’re not powerful. For example, dwarves, so...”

Not all dwarves were short in stature: only some of the NPCs from the original game were smaller, compared to other species. Normally speaking, however, Shin’s explanation was not too far off the mark.

“But why... why only me...”

“I really can’t say.”

Mitsuyo’s appearance settings were different from Munechika’s and Kunitsuna’s from the beginning. Shin thought that could be the reason, but was not sure, so he avoided saying anything clearly.

“Just give up. At least you were able to become a Shinuchi, unlike me.”

“I know, I know... I just feel like acting a little spoiled.”

Mitsuyo pouted and breathed deeply; maybe that helped her change her mood, as she didn’t look irritated anymore.

“Oh, to think that you’d act spoiled to someone other than us.”

“...and what would you mean by that?”

Tanetsugu laughed innocently to Mitsuyo’s evil smile.

“That you’ve become much more expressive. Now, don’t look so scary. It’s just an old man’s rambling.”

“Is it really okay for you to give us your Shinuchi, though? Even though you can replicate them, they must be valuable items for you Shin.”

Munechika changed the topic and asked Shin about something that concerned her, but in response he took out two stacks of item cards.

“That’s fine, the more allies we have, the better. Oh, and take these, as miasma countermeasures.”

Munechika couldn’t tell what kind of items they were by looking at the cards’ illustrations, so she looked a little lost.

“What are these?”

“These are accessories and one-time use items. They’re all easy to use; the accessories just need to be equipped, while the items just have to touch miasma to activate.”

What Shin gave Munechika were accessories that neutralized up to a degree of miasma and items that could delete accumulated miasma. The one-time use items had a more powerful effect, but naturally could only be used once. The accessories’ effect was weaker, but lasted much longer. Using them in combination granted complete protection, as long as the miasma wasn’t too dense.

“We can’t thank you enough.”

“Don’t say that. It would be a problem for me too if this place was taken over. Besides, Yuzuha found a companion... well, if I can call Kagutsuchi that. But she’d be sad if it was hurt.”

Shin then looked towards Yuzuha and Kagutsuchi, who were playing on the table.

“Did Kagutsuchi recover its powers, by the way?”

“Yes, its actual body was turned to crystal, right? A bit after you left to rescue Kunitsuna, the crystallization was dispelled. The chick form was just a copy housing Kagutsuchi’s consciousness, but now it has returned to its actual form.”

Just like Yuzuha, Kagutsuchi was apparently able to alter its form to a degree. It couldn't take human form however.

"Looks like it took a liking to that form. It gets all quiet if you hold it."

"Yuzuha said something similar, now that I think about it. Its original form was huge, so it probably never experienced something like that."

Yuzuha had grown, but probably the little fox mode was the one she enjoyed the best. She often used it to sneak under the covers of Shin's bed and sleep too.

In the game their role was to test players, so maybe they were fond of humans.

"Piyo!"

"Hmm, is that so... Shin, Kagutsuchi has something to tell you. Can you call your comrades too?"

Kagutsuchi landed on Munechika's shoulder and cried softly.

As Shin's party gathered, they were invited to go outside.

As they all did, Kagutsuchi flew from Munechika's shoulder, turning into a golden flame.

"So this is Kagutsuchi's original form."

The golden flame gradually formed beak and wings: in a few instants, it had become a large phoenix.

Flaming sparks scattered all around, but emitted no heat.

"I thank you for your assistance."

Kagutsuchi's voice sounded with a deep gravity which well fitted its current appearance. The reverberating echo expressed the divine beast's presence adequately.

"As a gesture of thanks, I shall bestow the protection of my holy flame upon you."

Shin and party were then enveloped by golden flames. This fire wasn't hot at all, and

it disappeared after a few instants.

The Gift list in Shin's menu then displayed the message "NEW!". Shin mentally opened the menu and found that the Gift [Holy Flames Protection] had been added.

Its effect was to weaken fire elemental damage exceeding a certain level. Below that level, it would be neutralized.

In more concrete terms, only Schnee-level attacks could deal decisive damage. It was a very powerful protection, who could even be called fire damage nullifier.

"A-are you sure... sir?"

Surprised, Shin replied casually, but thought that it wouldn't be appropriate to speak like that to Kagutsuchi in its current form, so he corrected himself.

Kagutsuchi did not seem to mind: after merely uttering "I am", it returned to its chick form.

"Piyo piyo."

Looking at how it flapped its small wings, it looked like Kagutsuchi was saying "it's all good, just take it and go".

"Understood, I'll make good use of it."

Kagutsuchi had nothing else to say, so the group returned inside Tsuki no Hokora.

The following day, it was time to descend the mountain.

"Once more, we are in your debt. Do come visit again."

"You have to!! Definitely!!"

"Please do before Mitsuyo explodes from impatience."

"Take care in your travels."

“My my, I doubt there’s anything to worry about though.”

“Piyo!”

Shin’s group left Fuji while Munechika, Mitsuyo, Tanetsugu, Yasutsuna, Kunitsuna and Kagutsuchi saw them off.

Their next destination was a port town to find a ship heading to the Eltnia continent.

The group crossed Aokigahara, boarded the horse carriage which, led by Kagerou, started running through Hinomoto’s roads.

Unlike before, they made sure to slow down to a normal speed every time they ran into groups of merchants or travelers, in order to not stand out.

The reason was they had already heard rumors of a mysterious convoy running at an incredible speed on the roads around Fuji. Shin’s party had traveled at high speed when they went looking for Kunitsuna too, so the rumor must have spread further.

Luckily, the witnesses reported the mysterious cart to be running in the area opposite to the port town the group was directed to; if Kagerou was cloaked as a horse with illusion magic, they wouldn’t stand out much anymore.



“As expected of a port town, there are some amazing fish dishes here.”

Once they reached their destination, the group hid in a forest to change the carriage back to an item card, then proceeded on foot. Just walking aimlessly around town, they could see many stalls selling fresh fish. There were species Shin knew from his original world and monster fish sausages unique of this world, forming a wide range of products.

“Two weeks is a pretty long time...”

Tiera sighed after learning of the passenger ship schedule. A ship had left just the day before, and it would be some time until the next one left port.

The group was not exactly in a rush, but waiting two weeks in a town without any leisure activities was pretty boring, so they started looking for trade ships heading to

the Elnia continent.

About one hour later, the party learned from a sailor that there was a ship planning to leave two days later, so they went to negotiate a way to board it right away.

At first, the crew rejected their overtures as they did not have enough space, but the captain ultimately accepted them when Shin and his party said they would also act as escorts.

Shin and Tiera's adventurer ranks were still low, but Shibaid had an A ranked adventurer card. It was a card that Shibaid used while still being able to hide his true identity. The Adventurers' Guild owed a lot to him, so they made an exception by issuing it.

"They probably wouldn't have let us on if it was just us without Shibaid."

"That's true. Shin is rank D, and I'm still F to boot. Master is rank C on paper, so I bet they think we're dead weight."

Tiera had been promoted to rank F after taking care of the aftermath of Balmel's defense battle.

Some were of the opinion that she should have been promoted to a higher rank, but the offensive power of the bow which slew so many foes was not hers only, so she was only promoted one rank.

The nature of Shin's accomplishments had been a topic of much debate within the guild. There were apparently some disputes going on too, so he chose to head to Kilmont before finding out the results.

Just before that, the business with the Church happened, so at present, no one actually knew what rank Shin was.

"The sea's more dangerous than land, after all. The first time I fought at sea, it was really different, and I could hardly get the hang of it."

The same type of escort mission increased in rank if it was at sea instead of land.

"We're a party with an A-rank adventurer and all skill inheritors, that should be more than enough for them."

As Schnee said, now Tiera possessed skills too. Other than the 【Analyze】 skill Shin taught her, she had acquired skills for offense, support, etcetera.

Tiera could use her bow, while Schnee, Shibaid, and Shin could use their skills to fight enemies above or below the water. Thanks to these negotiations, they could split their duties with the escorts already on board without trouble.

Normally, ships protected themselves with long-range attacks. If worse came to worst, Shin's group could act as decoys to lure the enemies far from the ship where they could be shot: it was one of the possible strategies.

Considering the crew and the ship's safety, no one would object to having an escort-specialized party on board.

“Looks like it'll be a peaceful trip this time.”

The group spent the time prior to their departure by going over battle strategies and sightseeing. Two days later, Shin and his party were onboard, gazing at the horizon. It did not look like they would be attacked by monsters such as the Gale Serpents; the ship proceeded without any delay.

“There aren't many pirates or monsters in this part of the sea, but if anything happens, we'll be counting on you guys, all right?”

Aral, an adventurer and the ship's permanent escort, approached the group. He had red hair cut short and features that reminded the others of a wild animal.

Shin replied politely, not wanting to look like a cocky newbie adventurer.

“Please leave it to us. Our rank might be low, but we have some experience fighting at sea.”

“That's good to hear. Though, unexpected things happen at sea. There's a rumor among sailors that a ghost ship appears in these parts, you know?”

“A ghost ship?”

Aral's tone suggested that he just wanted to give Shin a scare. For Shin, however, it

wasn't just a joke. One of the area bosses in the game era was a true ghost ship, that appeared in certain sea areas.

Shin replied to Aral, asking him please not to scare them, and the adventurer grinned and left.

“The ship, hmm...”

Shin remembered one of Rokuten's guildhouses, the 2nd Assault Ship Celciutos. He heard that not even the Golden Company found it, so he thought that it might have been adrift somewhere.

Unaware of Shin's thoughts, the ship's crew guided the ship with sails swelled in the wind and cut on through the waves. The weather did not turn sour and the ship sailed on under a perfectly blue sky. No traces of the ghost ships of Celciutos. Finally, two days after departure, the ship reached the Elnia continent.

“So this is Barbatos the Marine City. You would think it's a city of pirates, with this name.”

“They say they have geothermal energy-powered hot water pools here, you know?”

Filma, who had heard this piece of information from the captain, waved at the ship as the group disembarked.

“Pools, huh. They probably bathe in seawater normally though.”

All sorts of dangerous monsters dwelt in the sea, and some were even able to move around on land.

Rather than building walls or setting nets to protect the land from the dangerous sea creatures, the buildings and leisure facilities were completely separated from the sea and were therefore safer and easier to maintain. Because of this, the “Marine City” did not have a single beach.

“Since we're here, we might as well check it out if we have time. We don't have to worry about monsters. The baths are unlike the sea or lakes, so it'll definitely be fun.”

“Yeah, once in a while we might as well forget our troubles and just play around.”

Before being trapped in the [Drop of Erathem], Filma barely had any freedom to enjoy leisure activities. Shin had also had no chance to really stretch and play around since coming to this world, so he agreed to her proposal.

“We need to buy some swimsuits then. I guess we should eat something first?”

The time was already past 1 PM. The group had decided to eat lunch at Barbatos, since they had not eaten anything after their breakfast.

Shin and the others began looking for a place to eat, while trying to calm down the overly excited Filma.

“—here, then?”

“Yes. Cook’s subordinates -Zazie, Lapwing, Bell and Shell- should be here. But this is... unexpected.”

While heading toward Eltnia, Shin decided to stop by Barbatos because “Shigureya,” Rokuten member Cook’s home, was located there. Apparently, it still functioned as a restaurant.

Four of Cook’s subordinates, being long-lived races, were still active: the restaurant received guests from outside Barbatos too, or so said Aral.

Just as they had heard, Shin’s party found an incredibly long queue before them. People from all ages, genders, and species were neatly queued in one line.

“It doesn’t look like it’s just a one hour wait, huh.”

“I sent a message, so there should be some action soon.”

Shin spoke while looking at the queue and Schnee replied to him.

After a while, two young girls ran out of the doors. They had very similar faces, horns on their heads, membranous wings on their backs, and scaly tails poking out from under their clothes.

These two girls were Bell and Shell. Both had eyes deep red in color, but Bell’s silver hair covered the right half of her face, while Shell’s black hair covered the left side of her face.

“They look just the same, even now.”

Shin referred to Bell’s kitchen frock and Shell’s maid uniform. Based on this, the remaining two of the four were likely wearing one a cook’s uniform, the other a kimono.

“Found Schnee!!”

“Found Filma!!”

Bell and Shell pointed in the direction of Shin’s party and shouted cheerfully. They mentioned Schnee’s name, but as she was camouflaged, no one recognized her.

“Found Shibaid!”

“Found Sh–”

“Girls? Aren’t you a bit too noisy?”

Schnee interrupted as they were about to shout Shin’s name. The girls instantly froze, just like frogs facing a snake’s glare.

Shin and the others all thought the same thing: *ah, she’s angry.*

“My message to Lapwing clearly stated not to create a fuss, did it not?”

“I-I’m sorry!!!”

They probably ran out without listening until the end. The two apologized and quickly returned inside the store.

“This sort of commotion feels nostalgic too...”

“Though, having our names shouted like that in public is pretty troublesome.”

Because of the exchange with Bell & Shell, Shin’s group had attracted some attention.

As they thought that it would probably be better to come back some other time, Schnee suggested entering the restaurant from the back door. Lapwing had replied to her message, apparently.

The group left the store's front and entered a backstreet that had little traffic. When they reached Shigureya's back door, they found a woman waiting.

She was Lapwing, who had been communicating with Schnee via message.

Black hair tied behind her head and a kimono designed with ease of movement in mind.

Her green eyes had a gentle light within them, just as Shin remembered.

"I was waiting for you. I apologize for the trouble Bell and Shell caused."

"Don't worry about it. I'm glad to see that nothing seems to have changed."

Led by Lapwing, the group entered Shigureya and was led to a special private room.

The restaurant, having exhausted their ingredient stock for the day, had just closed. Only those customers who were still eating were inside.

"Your meal will be ready soon, please wait."

After hearing that the group planned to eat lunch at Shigureya, Lapwing said "leave it to us" and accepted the request with enthusiasm. There were still ingredients left for the staff, apparently.

"Here is your water."

"Please use these handkerchiefs."

As Lapwing left, Bell and Shell appeared inside. Their movements indicated that they still felt guilty in front of Schnee, but when she forgave them, they smiled while announcing today's menu.

"By the way, Zazie's cooking, right?"

"Zazie's focusing on cooking!!"

"When she gets like that nothing can stop her!"

Bell and Shell replied to Shin's question, their expressions suggesting "She's a helpless

one, that girl!”

“Should I go call her?”

“No, I just wanted to say hi. We’ll probably meet her later anyway, it’s fine.”

Shin shook his head to Bell and Shell’s simultaneous question. He didn’t feel like interrupting her cooking just for a greeting. In the past, Shigureya’s boss and thus the head chef, was naturally Cook.

Zazie and Lapwing were both vice-head chefs. Their cooking skills were on the same level. While in battle, Lapwing excelled in land combat and Zazie in sea encounters.

Bell and Shell, the waitresses, did not excel in cooking but in terms of fighting power were both above Zazie and Lapwing.

“Thanks for the meal.”

Zazie and Lapwing came after the party finished eating, as if they had been waiting for the right timing. Next to the kimono-clad Lapwing stood the slender yet muscular figure of Zazie, wearing her chef’s frock. At first glance, it would be hard to tell that they worked in the same restaurant.

In contrast with Lapwing’s mellow, gentle manner, Zazie was the “wild” type, well fitting her short red hair. She looked much more like an adventurer than a cook.

“Did you get even better at cooking?”

“If you truly think so, then my efforts have paid off.”

Lapwing nodded with a smile.

“So, what brought you here today?”

Zazie finally spoke, with a low-pitched voice well fitting her appearance. Her brown eyes gave an intense look, just an inch short of glaring.

“I thought of paying you a visit, since we were in the area and all. Sorry to have you set a private room for us.”

“No, it would not do to inconvenience a friend of lord Cook.”

Despite her words, Zazie’s expression suggested that she found it all a pain in the butt.

If one didn’t know that her sour expression was something she was born with, it would look like she was really irritated.

“...let me ask one thing. Mr. Shin, have you not come because of that rumor?”

“Zazie, please. It’s ‘lord’ Shin.”

“No, that’s fine. Rather, what’s this about a rumor?”

Shin appeased Lapwing and asked for further details about the rumor.

“In Barbatos’ seas, there’s an area called Kuwain. A sailor claims to have seen a gigantic ship there. He is an elf, who knew what Celciutos looks like too.”

“You mean to say that the ship in question was Celciutos?”

“Yes.”

Zazie looked at Shin with a sharp glare.

The light in her eyes came from the strong resolve of looking for and finding Celciutos — the Guildhouse of her master, Cook.

“Change of plans then. Tell us more about the current situation. If possible, we’ll secure it.”

The ghost ship mentioned by Aral... Shin thought that it could be what they were looking for.

Apparently, the elf who had seen the mysterious ship was not in Barbatos anymore: he had come to report to Zazie and the others that he had seen Celciutos several years before.

“Is that elf someone’s support character?”

“No, to put it in simple terms for you, he’s just an NPC. He used to work in Erculus

harbor and had the chance to see Celciutos several times, so he remembered its appearance.”

“It’s true that it stopped a few times in Erculus. The probability that he had just made a mistake is pretty low then.”

Erculus was a hometown that prospered as a port in the game era. Other than ships of all sizes, ship-shaped guildhouses could anchor there too.

Even without dropping anchor at a port, all Rokuten members could teleport directly from their guildhouses or homes. There also was a support character set exclusively to refill supplies, so no one else had to do that.

However, as it was a ship, they would occasionally use ports temporarily. One reason was to show off the grand, luxurious vessel that Celciutos was.

“Where exactly is this Kuwain area?”

“According to fishermen and sailors of trade ships, it’s the area above Hinomoto when departing from Barbatos. It’s not sealed, but it’s designated as a dangerous marine zone, so the guild forbids entering it.”

Zazie answered with a grimace, which Lapwing explained to be due to the guild’s refusal to allow them entry in the Kuwain area when they requested it.

“What exactly does “Dangerous Marine Zone” mean?”

“The Kuwain area is surrounded by three powerful currents, as if forming a triangle. Each corner of this triangle has also become the home of monsters which protect their respective territories. Until a few years back, the monsters just scared away those who tried to enter their zone, but now people say that they started attacking and destroying ships: even in areas that were previously peaceful. Now there are frequent storms violent enough to overthrow even large-size ships.”

Lapwing continued Zazie’s explanation, finishing by putting a hand to her cheek and sighing.

Storms alone would be enough of a problem, but with monsters involved too, it was not wrong for the guild to seal off the area to inspect it, or so Shin thought.

There were three monsters guarding the Kuwain area, called the Three Sea Beasts.

In the northwest, a giant squid with 20-mels limbs and magic-unleashing gems, “Mascurda”.

In the southeast, a shark with razor-sharp fins and poisonous needles growing all over its body, “Eolios”.

In the southwest, a sea snake with body hair and compound eyes as tough as steel and even crab-like pincers, “Keseldran”.

These three monsters, commanding their minions, constantly fought to expand their territories, so very few returned from the Kuwain area alive, added Lapwing.

The elf who had spotted Celciutos had nearly died there himself: his ship overthrown, he was carried by the currents and ended up inside the Kuwain area. He was prepared to meet his end, or so he said.

After spotting Celciutos, he exhausted his energy and sank beneath the waves, but when he woke up again he found himself floating near the Barbatos coast, hanging onto a wooden plank like a floating tube. A passing ship then rescued him, so he had barely survived.

“There’s definitely something strange going on there.”

“Yes. Based on the sea environment, it’s probably Beasts, maybe mermen or fishermen.”

Shin also agreed with Lapwing’s hypothesis.

In THE NEW GATE, human-like sea creatures were called “Mermen”, while the ones more similar to fish were called “Fishmen”. Both categories were variations of the Beast group, specialized in underwater combat: they could dive without limits and all their stats grew by 10% while underwater. In exchange, their stats decreased by 10% when on land.

Underwater, all obstacles to their movement disappeared, so they boasted peerless strength at sea.

Some players employed strategies such as using this unlimited diving ability to drown other players and win. Having unusual names and statuses, they had a unique position

within the Beast category.

“Based on what that elf said, even if entry is forbidden it’s not like there are walls or anything, right? Couldn’t we just sneak in?”

“I think it’s possible, but to inspect the area we’d need a ship of fairly large size, so it would be difficult to enter without the guild’s permission, I suppose.”

Lapwing and the others could not procure an inspection ship of sufficient size, so their request was refused.

In the game, Shin had experienced the sea during a storm. Waves large enough to knock over even large ships, unless they had magic enchantments to prevent it, were common in this world. Average ships wouldn’t stand a chance.

“I guess that means we should get permission first. Do you know what the conditions are?”

“To own a ship equal or superior to a certain size. The presence of an adventurer rank A or above. To have equipment suitable for fighting underwater. Those three should be all the conditions. Naturally, there isn’t any compensation in case of death or injury. Going to that area is seen as having a death wish, after all.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

Shin agreed to Lapwing’s words. Even excluding the three Sea Beasts, the Kuwain zone was rife with monsters. Just by hearing what Zazie and Lapwing said, Shin could tell how troublesome the area could be.

Originally, sea monsters appeared in the ocean much more frequently than monsters did on land. Footing was not stable and attacks could come from any direction. Additionally, if the enemy is underwater attacking then options become limited.

In the game era, there were plenty of tales of players who had made a name for themselves on land, but then died as soon as they challenged the seas.

The three Sea Beasts were powerful monsters around level 800, so their minions would obviously be quite threatening as well. Zazie and her comrades had been raised focusing more on creation skills such as cooking rather than fighting, so it would have been difficult for them to return alive.

“First of all, what we need is a ship.”

“Mr. Shin, do you have anything in mind?”

Zazie looked at Shin with an expression full of anticipation.

“Well actually, I have the parts. If I can have a place to put them together, I can make a ship.”

Celciutos was extremely large and powerful even among all other magic-powered warships: in THE NEW GATE, it was one of the best super dreadnoughts existing. Its maintenance parts were in absurd quantities, most of them being made by the blacksmith, Shin. A large quantity of prototype and spare parts for ships thus rested in Shin’s item box.

Shin kept the parts in separate folders, according to the size of the ship they were for. He could exchange parts and customize ships, as long as the sizes were the same.

“As expected of Lord Shin!! Let us make preparations right away!!”

The overjoyed Lapwing was ready to burst out of the room.

“Can you really have a place ready that easily? I can’t just build it anywhere, you know?”

In the game all one had to do was to go to the port’s management office and register to build a ship, but in reality things could not surely be that easy.

“We are having a ship built in an acquaintance’s shipyard. I feel bad for the carpenters, but we will borrow that space.”

“Is that alright? I mean, in terms of your relationship with them.”

If there was a place available, they wanted to start right away, but saying that they didn’t need the requested ship anymore could be a problem.

“I think it will be alright. That carpenter wouldn’t care about small things if it meant honing their techniques. Rather, I’m sure he will look at the ship you make and try to steal your techniques.”

Zazie added that the carpenter would probably want to watch as the ship was made in place of his.

“Can you take me there right away, then? I want to make preparations and go to Kuwain as soon as possible.”

The two girls nodded at Shin’s words and stood up. Having left the dishwashing to Bell and Shell, Zazie and Lapwing guided Shin’s group towards a large avenue. They had not changed before leaving, as their clothing had magic enchantments that kept them and their equipment clean at all times. It wasn’t something useful in battle, but Cook stated that it was absolutely necessary. Shin reminisced about making them with Cashmere and Hecate’s help.



“It’s here.”

“As expected of a shipyard, it’s really huge.”

Shin’s group visited a shipyard located at the edge of the port. Despite its location, it didn’t lose to other shipyards in size. The group followed Zazie to the docks and found two galleons hanging in midair, suspended by fixtures. Next to them was a ship in the process of being built, probably the one requested by Zazie and her comrades.

The workers noticed Zazie’s arrival and one of them called to a large man who was a bit farther away from them.

The man then came closer; he was of short stature, but about two times wider than the average person, with a stocky and muscular physique.

“Hey there, Zazie. The ship is still in the works, ya know?”

Judging from the man’s familiar tone, he must have been on good terms with Zazie. Shin imagined him to be one of the chief carpenters.

“I came to talk about that ship. This guy is an acquaintance of ours, an adventurer named Shin. This man is the boss and chief carpenter of this Gourd Shipyard, Zigma Gourd, but everyone just calls him chief.”

Zazie did the introductions; Shin had told her that he didn't want to attract attention where other people could see, so she had kept the introductions to a bare minimum. Lapwing fretted, looking at her.

"Calm down, Lapwing."

"Zazie, isn't that way of speaking a bit rude?"

"It's okay, Shin isn't the type of person to care about things like that."

Even while Schnee added a helpful comment, Zazie continued talking with Zigma. She told him to suspend making the ship and Zigma looked at Shin.

"This isn't something to talk about here I wager. Let's go to the back, follow me."

The group followed Zigma's pounding steps to a small room in the back of the office. After drinks were served, Zigma started talking.

"So, why don't you need the ship anymore? I know the reason why you needed it, why you're so bent on this. I don't think you can find a replacement so easily."

To have a normal ship, one just needed to pay the right amount of money. Kuwain was an extremely dangerous marine area with powerful storms though. A ship that had its large size as its only advantage was still doomed to sink.

"I know you girls, you can't have given up, right? The lad here is involved in it?"

"Yes, Mr. Shin is going to make the ship."

"Say what now?"

Zigma looked at Shin again, straight and deeply, as if to scan what kind of person he was.

"Yes, I would like to borrow the space where that ship is being built."

"Do you have the materials? In order to make a ship like the guild specified, the materials alone cost an arm and a leg, ya know that?"

"I have the parts already, yes. There was no other good place to put them together, so..."

Saying so, Shin put an item card on the table.

“An item card, huh. It’s true that it would make carrying materials easy. But just having the parts isn’t enough to build a ship, how about that?”

Building a ship required a certain amount of manpower. Even if parts and tools were turned into item cards, Shin’s group was just five people. With three of them being women, Zigma appeared skeptical that they could build a ship by themselves.

“I wouldn’t want this to be known, but... using skills, I’d make do somehow.”

“...I see, so you’re a skill inheritor.”

Zigma nodded, convinced.

Skills allowed the use of powers well beyond human understanding. The item box, which allowed children to carry items of massive weight, was similar also.

From the viewpoint of someone who did not understand skills, it was something impossible to comprehend. Shin’s way of speaking was due to him being an inheritor, and Zigma recognized that.

He was a creator, but also a businessman. The contract had been canceled unilaterally, but Zazie said that they would pay the full price, so he acknowledged their request.

“Well, business’s business, if ya pay I got nothing to say.”

“It sure doesn’t look like that, though?”

As Zazie pointed out, even if Zigma said to be content, his sour expression suggested otherwise.

“Can ya blame me? Building ships is my lifework. I haven’t spared anything, not materials nor technique, in the ship we’re making now. I can swear that it’d be my life’s masterpiece.”

He was surely confident; Zigma’s expression did not contain an inch of arrogance.

“That said, Zazie. Your expression tells me that the lad here can build something a hell of a lot better than I can. You know my skills, and here we have someone you trust that

much. You bet I'm interested."

"You never change, do you. Shin, I'm sure it'll be alright with him."

Zazie looked at Shin, as if to encourage him to show Zigma his skill usage.

Zigma's attitude and the halfway built ship clearly showed that he had pride in his expertise, so Shin decided that he could let Zigma see his skills.

"...don't tell anyone else about what you see or hear, and never mention that you saw me. If you can promise me these two things, then it's all right."

"Gotcha. Whatever I see or hear, I'll bring with me into the grave. If there's something I can steal, will ya let me?"

"Take anything you can. I won't stop you for using it as reference for other work."

"Now this is one cocky lad. I'm getting excited here!"

It wasn't possible to make a skill into your own just by looking at it. Looking at the completed ship and using it as reference for other projects was no problem for Shin.

In contrast, Zigma nodded, an evil-looking grin on his face. His pride as an artisan was burning, without a doubt.

As there were no separators or barriers within the shipyard, Shin would put together the ship after the other carpenters left. The group split with Zazie and Lapwing for the moment, who would return to Shigureya, and headed to the guild.

"Hopefully they give us permission without too much of a fuss."

Shin mumbled to himself, even if he knew that it would be difficult. Filma, who was looking around at Barbatos' town scenery, heard him and replied:

"Judging from what Zazie said, won't it be pretty impossible? I doubt they'd easily let anyone go in a place if they know it means having a death wish."

"They're the current owners of Shigureya, though. The guild or the government might not want to lose such talent like that."

“That is probably it. Shigureya would turn into a warehouse if they were to be gone.”

Shibaid said that even with the ship their chances of being authorized were low, and Schnee agreed.

Homes could usually be accessed by others only if the owner was inside or together with the visitor. This was the same for Shin’s Tsuki no Hokora too; now that it was inhabited, only Tiera, Yuzuha, and Kagerou — other than support characters like Schnee — could enter it.

Yuzuha because she had a contract with Shin, Tiera because Schnee registered her as Tsuki no Hokora member when she took her under her wing, and Kagerou for the same reason as Yuzuha.

If Zazie and her companions were to die, in this world only Shin would be allowed to enter Shigureya, as he had a special authorization due to being a member of Rokuten.

Shin didn’t know how Zazie and the others were treated in Barbatos, but imagined that they wouldn’t want them to go into such dangerous areas.

“Well, let’s just try. We better gather info about the monsters that appear in these parts too.”

Just knowing about what they could face would be very helpful, the authorization could also come later. Is what Shin thought, when Tiera—who had not spoken a word until then—called to him.

“Hey, Shin. Fighting at sea will be something like when we fought the Gale Serpents in the storm last time right?”

“Well... yeah, but we could also have to fight underwater. I don’t think Celciutos could sink, as it has a diving function too. If, for some malfunction, it sinks underwater, we’d have to dive to recover it.”

Shin could turn any equipment into equipment usable underwater.

He had already done it to all party members... he thought, and then remembered that Tiera’s equipment had been updated.

“Oh yeah, we have to do “that” one more time.”

“Don’t do anything weird this time, okay?”

“Stop saying things that could be misunderstood... the design is random, I tell you. I was surprised myself that you got that of all things.”

A small accident happened last time Shin attached the underwater function to Tiera’s equipment. It was a very rare case, but for a woman such a design was a bit... no, extremely revealing. It was doubly rare, as it rarely appeared and Shin had never seen anyone wear it.

“I was more surprised!! What in the world was that, anyway? Even if it was to swim underwater, t-to wear that outside... would make me some perverse woman!!”

Remembering the incident, Tiera blushed fiercely and protested.

“Calm down, please! You’re too loud!”

Fortunately, there were few people around them, but they had attracted the attention of all those few, so the group hurried away.

As they walked on, Shibaid casted an inquiry.

“Shin, what happened to Tiera? It could not have been something trivial, if she showed such strong emotions in public.”

“When I attached the underwater function to her equipment, well, there was a small accident. Clothes and armor become a swimsuit, right? She had a rather risque one.”

Shin thought that it was pretty easy on the eyes, but did not dare voice his thoughts.

“Hmm, I see. There are many more variations for women than men, after all. I remember that there are also quite a few bizarre ones too.”

“Some of them are more embarrassing than being naked. I had something pretty crazy too. Are you sure it’s really random, hmm?”

“I said it is! If I could choose, I’d pick the current one from the start.”

Shin replied firmly to Filma’s teasing. If he didn’t, Schnee’s eyes would throw even sharper daggers into his back.

“I heard that nothing like that happened in Schnee’s case though?”

“Just a coincidence, I tell you.”

Tiera and Filma had very revealing designs, but Schnee had her current one the first time, so it was decided right away.

Depending on the viewpoint, however, one could say that in Schnee’s case any design would have worked.

“It can’t be helped, can it? I think that’s the one that looks best on her.”

Shin wasn’t neglecting Schnee, or so he strongly stated. There were no lies there.

“You heard that?”

Filma grinned and turned towards Schnee, who was walking behind her.

“I haven’t said anything.”

Schnee looked the other way, but judging from her twitching ears, she surely didn’t look displeased.

“Heh, just as planned.”

“Tch, that was on purpose!?”

Shin groaned towards the chuckling Filma.

“Enough about the equipment, there’s the guild.”

Shin looked forward in response to Shibaid’s announcement and saw a building very similar to the ones he had seen in Bayreuth and Falnido. The signboard also showed that there was no mistake.

“By the way, Filma, were you registered in the Adventurers’ Guild?”

“Hmm? No, why? When I was active people were still recovering from the confusion caused by the Dusk of the Majesty, so there weren’t cross-continental organizations like the guild.”

“Guess we should do that then. You’d get an ID too.”

At present, for Shin’s group that was how much a Guild card was worth. Selling the materials they had meant that they were never out of funds. For gathering information too, as Shibaid was rank A, it wasn’t necessary for Shin and the others to raise their own ranks.

“It’s the same inside too, huh.”

The interior of the guild had reception counters to the right, a tavern to the left and a board with requests in the center, the usual composition.

The only differences were the species and equipment of the adventurers inside. Probably because of Barbatos being close to the sea, they could see mermen and fishermen here and there. Shin also noticed several Rare and Unique class items, probably picked from the seafloor.

“Welcome to the Barbatos branch of the Adventurers’ Guild. How may I assist you?”

A woman with light blonde hair was at the reception.



“I’d like to register her as an adventurer.”

Shin knew the guild’s regulations, so they skipped the various explanations and proceeded with the registration.

“—registration complete. Your card will be ready for pick up tomorrow.”

As before, it took one day to issue the card.

“Since we’re here, I’d like to ask you something. About the authorization to enter the Kuwain area, is it possible to receive it if we’re having a ship ready soon?”

“The authorization to enter... the Kuwain area...?”

Few people probably ever asked about it. The receptionist seemed to have no idea about what Shin was talking about.

“Yes, I heard that either the guild or the state’s authorization was needed in order to enter it. How does it work?”

“Please wait a moment... our staff needs to see the actual ship before granting authorization. There is a past case of people heading to sea with a ship of smaller size than the one reported in the request and disappearing, you see.”

The receptionist talked while looking at a document, probably listing the regulations. In the case she cited, some fishermen had witnessed the requester leaving port.

“Understood. I will come again once we have the ship then.”

“You can present your request first, if you wish to. The staff can fill in the ship’s information when they inspect it, so the procedures can be a bit quicker.”

“Is that so. Yes, I’ll do that.”

Thinking that saving time was always welcome, Shin filled in the required fields of the request form.

“Your name is... Shin, I see. Please present your guild card too.”

Shin handed in the filled request form and the receptionist checked it and compared

it with his guild card.

“You are rank D? I’m afraid that even if you have a ship, you would not be granted the authorization.”

“There’s a rank A in my party. That means there’s no problem, right?”

“Yes, that is correct, but... if you do not mind me confirming, you are the party leader, lord Shin?”

“Yes.”

“Could you please tell me the ranks of your party members?”

Despite the presence of a rank A, the party leader was rank D. The receptionist probably found it strange.

Some adventurers deliberately set lower-ranked members as leader, in order to let them accumulate experience. There was no reason to use an inexperienced leader when going to a place like Kuwain, however.

“We have one C and one F, then two partner monsters. Depending on the circumstances, other members could join us later too.”

Zazie and the others would probably come with them too, but as Shin didn’t know if they were registered as adventurers or not, he kept things vague on purpose.

“Thank you. Do you know what the conditions for the authorization are?”

“Yes. The presence of an A-rank adventurer, a ship equal to or superior to a certain size, equipment usable underwater, or so I’ve been told.”

Shin repeated the conditions he heard from Zazie.

“Yes, that is correct. Is your equipment ready?”

“Yes, for all party members. Do you need to check that too?”

“I apologize for the inconvenience, but it is policy to do so. I do not mean to doubt your abilities, lord Shin. We simply wish to keep the risk of losing valuable adventurers to

minimum levels.”

“No problem. I also wish to show you that we have no intention of going to die.”

With the ship and equipment Shin can provide, a stormy sea or two would be a piece of cake. Based on the members of his party too, unless something incredible happened, no one even risked being injured.

However, He couldn't let the guild know everything. Shin's techniques were far too advanced for this world; if he revealed them without thinking, he risked creating a commotion.

Shin was thus thinking of masking the ship when it was time to show it too.

“If possible, I would like to know about the monsters present in the Kuwain area though.”

Information about monsters heavily varied based on the area, but the guild recorded everything the adventurers reported. Knowing how to counter the monsters influenced the adventurers' survival rate greatly.

The adventurer's job always required their lives to be on the line, so it was absolutely necessary for them to pay attention to monster information.

“You may find such information in the reference room.”

The documents available varied by rank, but in general all documents except the ones concerning monsters in dangerous dungeons or sealed areas were available.

The monsters in the Kuwain area were also reported to dwell in other areas, so Shin's group could browse the information about them, excluding the three Sea Beasts.

“Thank you very much.”

“Once your ship is ready, please come to the reception again. If I am not present, please say that Arno Toole received your request, I'll make sure it can be processed.”

“Understood. I will come again th—”

“Oh, my apologies. There is something else I need to speak to you about, lord Shin.”

Shin was about to call on Schnee and the others to go to the reference room, when Arno stopped him.

“Something else?”

“There are about ten requests specifically for you.”

“Requests for me, huh. I’m truly sorry, but I have something urgent to do and cannot accept them.”

“Understood. As you cannot accept the requests, you will have to sign the request forms. Please wait in that booth, I will prepare the necessary documents.”

Arno pointed at a small booth next to the reception counter. Shin told Schnee and the others to wait, then sat on the sofa closest in the booth.

“I apologize for the wait. These are the request forms.”

Shin took the forms and signed the field stating that he could not accept the request.

He looked at the requesters while signing and found names and locations he remembered, such as Bayreuth kingdom or Balmel.

“Here, this should be all of them.”

“...yes, no problem.”

Arno checked the forms and nodded.

“Is this really alright with you, though? The connections you could obtain through these requests all seem very valuable.”

Arno explained that the adventurers who quit the guild to enter an exclusive contract with nobles or merchants, to ensure a stable lifestyle, were not few.

“I became an adventurer for a certain goal, so I’m not thinking of serving anyone until I have achieved that you see.”

“I see. A-rank adventurers are really different from the rest, after all.”

Arno gave a small chuckle after saying this, but Shin was a bit confused.

“Er, you’re talking about my party member?”

“No, I’m talking about you, lord Shin. I checked it before, when I processed your request. Because of your achievements in the Balmel defense battle, your promotion to rank A has been decided.”

The long discussion ended with the decision of promoting Shin to rank A.

With Shibaid present, they could check any documents, so it wasn’t really meaningful, but apparently communication had been sent throughout the continent.

“Stating you’re rank D when you’re actually rank A... that’s not nice, lord Shin. I was really surprised when I checked your guild card.”

It was very rare for adventurers to jump directly from rank D to rank A. To be sure it wasn’t a mistake, Arno had asked other staff members to confirm it too.

“I didn’t know that either until now though.”

“There are several adventurers named Shin, but who would have thought you were the one who acted in the Balmel defense battle. The name “Shin the Slashing Hammer” has reached even Barbatos, you know.”

“Ah..... that too.”

Shin would have loved for that nickname to spread as little as possible, so he wished to be able to disappear among the other Shins.

“After such great achievements, it is only right for you to be evaluated fairly. But I’m glad, now I can send you off with fewer concerns. It is always painful when someone I assisted doesn’t come back.”

“It will be alright, as you can see it turns out I’m rank A, so I’ll be back in a flash. I’m not going to Kuwain just to hunt monsters after all.”

The goal of Shin party was to secure Celciutos. In case it was within the territory of one of the Sea Beasts, they could have to fight them. There was no need to come in contact with them or fight them however.

The Sea Beasts' forces were at odds with each other, so they were likely to prioritize maintaining their territories and would not venture outside them. Defeating one could cause the others to attack ships or ports, thus it did not hold much meaning.

"If possible, could I know what your goal is?"

"Yes, of course. It's not something as fixed as to be called a goal, though. If I had to give it a name, I'd say it's adventure."

"Adventure, sir?"

It wouldn't be good to have them look in too deep into his motives, so Shin used the response he had previously thought up.

"Unknown seas where man fears to tread... will there be something there, or maybe nothing? Wishing to know that is also what makes an adventurer, isn't it? To seek the passion of adventure."

"Passion, is that so."

"Yes, well you could also say I'm a reckless idiot."

There really were areas, called untrodden domains, which people very rarely visited. Shin found about them by coincidence, when he was looking through documents in Falnido.

Some adventurers made a living by entering such areas and finding rare items or exploring ruins. Shin decided to present his party as belonging to such a category.

"Not at all, there are many locations that have been discovered by such people. No one would call them idiots."

"If you said that, I feel more confident."

"As I am sure you know, fighting at sea is completely different than fighting on land. The monsters are peculiar too, but fighting in a field like the sea means that if you simply fall in, your movements will be limited. We die if we cannot breathe, and if the current sweeps us away and we lose our sense of direction, only death awaits. Please, do not let your guard down."

“...I will not.”

Working in a guild in a port town, she surely knew well how terrifying the sea could be. Arno’s words and expression clearly showed that she was genuinely worried about Shin and his party.

“Please forgive me if I sounded patronizing.”

“No, I understand you said that out of concern for our safety. I am aware of how dangerous the sea can be, but I will be even more careful.”

Shin then went to join Schnee and the others to go to the reference room. There they looked up information about the monsters dwelling in the Kuwain area and compared them to what they knew. Being a forbidden area, there was not a lot of information, but there were not great differences with what they knew from the game era.

“The problem is the three Sea Beasts turning so violent. It’ll be easier if they don’t come to attack us, that’s for sure.”

On the way back from the guild to the shipyard, Shin sighed.

In the game, the monsters called Sea Beasts did not attack unless provoked. According to Zazie’s information, however, now they indiscriminately attacked anyone they saw.

“What shall we do if we damage them and they do not withdraw?”

Shin held his chin, thinking about how to answer Schnee’s question.

“We could escape if we stop their movements, but they’re faster than us in the water...”

It would be difficult to make the monsters lose sight of the party, even with status effects such as **【Paralyze】** or **【Confusion】** .

“We either stop them with binding skills, or through brute force.”

One method would be repeatedly striking them with lightning-element attacks to forcefully disrupt the control of their bodies. Doing so would prevent them from following the party.

If binding, like status effects, turned out to be ineffective, the only way was to inflict

enough damage to slow down their movements.

“Could we distract them with some lure?”

“They’re all really huge, though...”

Shin considered Filma’s decoy strategy too. The 3 Sea Beasts, however, were all much larger than Shin’s party. They had no idea about the size of lure large enough to distract them.

Turning it into an item card would mean the weight was not a problem, but procuring such a lure would be very difficult. Even if they used Tsuki no Hokora’s creation device, using precious ingredients filled with unique magic as a lure sounded like a waste.

“Wouldn’t they just swallow us whole while the lure’s materializing anyway?”

That was the greatest concern. If the monsters ate them up while the item was still appearing, it would be all for nothing.

“...you’d be okay, Shin.”

“My HP would, sure! But mentally I wouldn’t!!”

Shin wouldn’t enjoy having to cut his way out from the monster’s belly. Filma’s idea was obviously out.

“Anyway, we have to build the ship first...”

Shin emitted a tired sigh and put off the conclusion to the problem for later.

C h a p t e r 2

白銀の魔導戦艦

THE NEW  
GATE

## Chapter 2

Shin's group arrived again at the shipyard just as the usual workday was coming to an end. Peeking inside, they saw the workers starting to clean up before leaving for the day.

"Oh, you're back, huh."

Zigma spotted the group right away and approached them.

"Yes. What about Zazie and the others?"

"They're already in the back. Want me to go call them?"

"No, we'll head over there ourselves. I guess it'll take some more time until the workers leave anyway."

"You got a point there."

In the room where they had spoken with Zigma earlier that day, Shin found Shigureya's members, as the chief carpenter had said.

They killed time chatting, then headed to the work area after they made sure the workers had all gone home.

"What did you do with the ship you were working on?"

"Zazie turned it into a card. After all, it would be a waste to just dispose of it."

The chief had no intention of throwing away the materials.

"I'll get to work right away, then."

Shin nodded to Zigma's words and started choosing the parts he needed from the item box. From Zigma's viewpoint, it probably looked like Shin was drawing something in the air with his index finger.

“It’ll only take an instant, so please make sure you don’t blink.”

“All right.”

Shin activated the skill and the ship’s completed plans appeared in his head. In the game, they would have appeared in a separate menu window.

Where there were missing or excess parts, the plans would flash red. In the map in Shin’s head, however, there were no red spots.

“ 【Creation】 !”

Shin activated a key command and the item cards swirled in midair, shining brightly. The lights, as if they had a will of their own, changed shape and formed a ship.

“Wh-what in blazes...!?”

Zigma’s utterly surprised voice escaped his lips. He had probably expected a skill that combined all of the ship’s parts in an instant. Seeing the lights change shape in front of his eyes would have surely been shocking had he not known about the skill.

A few moments after the lights started changing shape, a ship not unlike a large cruiser, was formed.

“Our main objective is exploration, so I focused on movement and defense.”

The ships created by players had different performance based on the parts used. Shin had chosen parts that would allow the ship to move with agility even during storms, and resist surprise attacks from monsters. It looked like a ship that would travel by floating on the sea, but it was actually a magic vessel that could also submerge if necessary.

“Well I’ll be... what is even going on here!?”

“This skill lets you instantly combine the parts you have into the finished product. Well, even I can’t explain why it looks like lights changing shape though.”

Shin couldn’t say that it was a video game’s visual effect.

“Can I touch it?”

“Yes, I’m going... to inspect it too.”

As soon as Shin had consented, Zigma rushed towards the ship with the eyes of a carnivore pouncing on newly spotted prey. It looked like he had only listened to the first word Shin said.

“Nghwaaahh!! What’s this smooth coating!?! Not a single wrinkle. The dense magic power contained in each part. But it’s all harmonised together, forming an even stronger bond!!!”

Shin’s group was rendered speechless for a while by Zigma’s sudden change.

The chief jumped on board of the docked ship and analyzed the materials and techniques used in its creation, his eyes blood-red. He hugged the ship tight, as if licking its surface, in order to analyze it: he almost looked like he had used some dangerous substance.

“Chief, you really should calm down a little.”

“Hah!?! What was I doing!?!”

Zigma regained lucidity thanks to a chop from Zazie. His enthusiasm had not simmered though, and he started bombarding Shin with questions about which processing techniques he had used.

“I said calm down.”

“Gwah!”

A chop slightly stronger than the one before collided with Zigma’s head. Zazie was showing less and less restraint.

“You only need to look at it to know how it was made, don’t you chief?”

“Kh, this is frustrating, frustrating I tell ya... if only I was 20 years younger, I’d plead him to make me his disciple, even if I had to throw away everything I had!”

Zigma's passionate words convinced everyone that he was speaking from the heart.

"That's just impossible. Mr. Shin's techniques are just out of this world... and that's an understatement."

"Gah, hearing that makes it all the more frustrating."

The chief's artisan spirit was definitely burning. His eyes sparkled like a child with a new toy, but also burned with the flame of a warrior eager to do battle.

"Anyway, I trust you have no objections about the ship now?"

"No shipyard in Barbatos would have objections about this. If Zazie and the girls hadn't explained to me in detail, I wouldn't have believed this was made with spare parts, that's for sure."

Zigma answered while looking all over the ship.

"Okay, I'm going to check the inside of the ship, so look at the exterior as much as you want. Please don't come inside though. The anti-intruder magic enchantments would pulverize you."

"Ngh, that's a darn shame."

A function of all vehicles was that only after the creator registered other people's names could they board said vehicle safely. In case the creation of the vehicle had been commissioned, it was possible to change ownership by registering the commissioner's name first.

"Now we can go look for lord Cook's guildhouse."

"Yes... I'll find it no matter what."

"It took a long time."

"Finally..."

In contrast with Zigma's excitement, Lapwing, Zazie, Bell, and Shell were quietly rejoicing. After hearing the elf's story, they had gathered materials for the ship, looked for able carpenters, negotiated, then finally the ship's construction had started. The

materials, however, were difficult to work without skills, so they had been told that it would take at least 10 years before completion. They were obviously overwhelmed now.

“Looks like there are no problems about the ship’s capabilities either. I already registered everyone. We’ll test it tomorrow, and if all goes well we can leave the day after tomorrow.”

Shin informed the group of his plans after checking the ship’s functionality.

“We’ll make preparations. If it’s a ship lord Shin made, I’m sure there won’t be any problems.”

“Fantastic.”

“Perfect.”

After Lapwing’s words, Bell and Shell also expressed their approval, both giving thumbs up.

It was Shin’s first time using the skill after coming to this world however, so he wanted to test the ship and check it thoroughly.

“If you’re not going to move it until tomorrow, can I look over it until then?”

“Yes, go ahead.”

“Hmm, feel free to take your time tomorrow too.”

Zigma definitely wanted to examine the ship as much as he could before Shin’s group arrived. It was also very clear that he had no intention of sleeping that night.

“I was thinking of doing the test tomorrow at nine, is that all right?”

“No problem. We’ll prepare everything necessary today”

“Today!”

Bell and Shell echoed Lapwing’s answer, while Zazie silently bowed her head.

After one last greeting to Zigma, who was jotting down notes while looking at the ship, Shin and the others left the shipyard.



Shin's group had not secured a place to stay yet, but thanks to Lapwing's introduction they could check into one of the best luxury lodgings in Barbatos. The owner was a fan of Shigureya they had said. The party could pay the lodging fee without problems, so they decided to take two rooms and split based on gender.

"Okay then, let's get that over with."

After dinner, Shin's party gathered in the room the females were assigned. As expected of a luxury class hotel, the room could easily accommodate at least five people and two animals.

"Tiera, you have two new pieces of equipment, huh. Hmm, this is pretty plain, but this is a bit too flashy to wear on the regular..."

"I picked one for close range and one for long range combat, just in case. The appearance... is kind of concerning, I have to agree."

One was a dark-colored shirt and mantle. The other was a sparkly armor, which reminded of a "warrior maiden" style. As Filma said, their appearance swung wildly between the plain and flashy ends of the spectrum.

"Leaving the Bow Princess set aside, we could make the Heat Haze series a bit cuter. She's a girl after all, she has to dress nicely too."

"Is it possible to make it cuter though?"

"If Shin helps, sure."

Filma looked at Shin and he nodded.

Tiera's Bow Princess and Heat Haze equipment sets were in their default design, in other words their initial settings. Using them like that was not a problem, but the design could be modified too.

In the game, creation-type jobs tried all sorts of modifications and colorings in order

to express their originality, creating many different designs.

“Let’s hear some ideas then. About the accessories, how would red look instead of gold, for the hairpin? So it matches her eyes’ color better...”

“An all-black mantle is a bit too simple too. We might as well—-”

Schnee joined Filma in helping to make the designs cuter. The three looked at the changed designs Shin created with his skills and debated on which was best.

“E-er... is it only me, or is the equipment getting gradually smaller? Were the pants always this short? Was there so much skin exposed?”

Tiera raised objections while looking at the changing designs, but couldn’t stop the three’s momentum.

“You can only hope that the result is something proper to wear.”

Shibaid shook his head, well aware that it wasn’t possible to stop them anymore.

“Kuh, the atmosphere is so tense!”

“Guruu.”

Yuzuha and Kagerou seemed excited to see the results of the debate.

After about 30 minutes, which felt excruciatingly longer to Tiera, Shin’s “this should be enough” signaled the end of the process.

“Try them on now.”

Shin handed Tiera the cards, a satisfied look on his face. She looked at the cards’ illustrations, wondering if it really was the same equipment as before.

The shirt’s sleeves had been largely cut off, turning it into a sleeveless one. The color had been changed to white, with a light green line drawing a flower-looking pattern on the chest area.

The pants were now around the same length as hotpants, the boots became short boots and the mantle into a hooded long coat with a faded silver crescent moon mark

on its back.

The former plainness was nowhere to be found.

“Wow! Doesn’t it look good on you?”

“Not bad.”

“That’s about it.”

Looking at Tiera wearing the gear set, Shin and the other creators expressed their satisfaction.

“T-that’s nice, I guess.”

Tiera looked at herself with the help of a mirror and seemed to enjoy the result too.

“While it’s good that it became cuter, won’t white and gold stand out too much?”

Tiera had not forgotten that the attire was meant to be for combat, so she wondered if the original design wouldn’t have been better for stealth purposes. Shin then explained that as battle started, the equipment’s effect would make it look the same color as the surroundings to the enemies’ eyes.

Even if the color was faded, the hairpin was now gold, to match Tiera’s eyes, so it looked like it would stand out, but it too, would be concealed like the shirt. The hairpin was also not just a decoration, but could notify the wearer when they had been spotted by enemies.

“The Bow Princess set is fine as is?”

Filma asked, her arms crossed, while looking at Tiera wearing the Bow Princess gear set.

This set’s default design was pretty popular.

“We can change that too if we want to.”

Filma, however, shook her head.

“I’m not really familiar with armor designs, so I say it’s fine as is for now.”

The Bow Princess set not only had outstanding stats, but its design was gorgeous too, so they decided to leave it alone.

“Let’s move on to swimsuit designs, then.”

“Agh, there was that too...”

Shin had informed Tiera that since there were two new sets of equipment, they would have to make them usable underwater.

“Why can’t you enchant them without me wearing them, anyway?”

Tiera, standing before Shin in her Bow Princess attire, voiced her complaints.

“Don’t ask me.”

The underwater enchantment could be cast to other players or NPCs, as long as they were wearing the equipment in question. Sometimes the resulting costume was very risqué, so even if it was just an avatar wearing it, it could be pretty embarrassing.

Because of this, in the game era most players asked an enchanting artisan of the same gender to do it.

“Don’t give me something weird again, okay?”

“It all depends on your luck.”

Shin then activated the magic enchantment. Tiera’s Bow Princess set started glowing, then changed shape. When the light faded away, it revealed a one piece with vivid blue and green gradations.

“This will do.”

“Is that okay? We can stock a design after it appears once, so you can check others too if you want?”

Tiera decided instantly, so Shin asked if she was sure, but she said that she’d rather not risk having weird costumes appear.

“Let’s get to the next, then? What will come out this time?”

Tiera changed to the Heat Haze set and Shin cast the enchantment again.

This time Tiera's swimwear was a black pareo, same-colored bottoms and a white tube top, something very similar to when she had tried the Amazoness set previously.

"Not bad, isn't it? It looks like the equipment became the swimwear, pretty much."

The swimsuit's coloring and design was similar to the Heat Haze set's new design. This also was a result of having changed the default design.

"It's not bad, yes, but it feels like there's less cloth?"

Tiera too, like Shin, did not find the swimsuit's design bad. It was also true, however, that the tube top cloth covering her breasts was a bit lacking in size.

"No need to worry yourself over it, should we try the next one?"

Tiera's words had directed Shin's attention to her chest; the sharp chill from the stare he then felt on his back prompted him to encourage Tiera to try another design.

"Yes, I guess that's better."

Tiera agreed and Shin cast the enchantment again. The next swimsuit was composed of black hotpants-like bottoms and a white bikini.

Maybe because of an unknown rule, the bikini was rather small as well.

"Shin, you aren't doing this on purpose, are you?"

"Well, Shin's a boy after all, it's not weird for him to prefer the sexy type."

"Shin..."

Shin shook his head as fiercely as he could in response to Tiera, Filma, and Schnee's words and looks.

"Wait just a second!! You're saying it like it's my fault, but the size of the cloth can't be adjusted, okay!?"



Shin cast the enchantment several other times, but each design had very limited cloth extension.

“Is this because we changed the original design?”

“Well, we did make it a lot more “open” than the default one. I never heard that it would influence the swimsuit though.”

If the same thing happened frequently, information about it would have spread.

“Will reverting the design solve the problem?”

“That’s no good Schnee, we made it cuter, it’d be a waste to discard it now. There might be a bit more exposure, but defensive power doesn’t change, so isn’t that fine?”

Filma opposed Schnee’s idea of changing the Heat Haze set’s design to the default one.

Despite its appearance, the equipment retained its stats even in underwater mode.

Using an extreme example, even the skimpiest swimsuit, covering only the important parts, would have had the same defense underwater; even if the wearer appeared completely naked.

Filma was of the opinion that as long as performance was the same, some more skin exposure shouldn’t be a problem.

“What do you think, Tiera? We can try.”

“Hmm, well... it’s a bit embarrassing, but... I’ll keep it like this.”

“That’s my Tiera, I knew you’d say that!”

Filma nodded happily, while Tiera gave a wry laugh.

“Since we’re doing this and all, why don’t we change our swimsuits’ design too?”

“Filma, we’re not going to play tomorrow, you know? Besides it takes work to do that.”

“It wouldn’t be much work for Shin though.”

“Well, yeah, this much is nothing...”

Casting enchantments didn't require a lot of MP, so Shin's burden was next to zero. There was no need for preparations and it was still early to go to sleep, so if they wanted to do it Shin had no reason to refuse.

“What do you say, Shibaid?”

“No, I'll pass. I don't see the necessity of changing it.”

“...but yours is a loincloth, right?”

“Yes.”

Filma meant to ask if Shibaid was really okay with it, but the latter nodded all too naturally.

Shibaid's swimwear was a red and silver loincloth.

Shin had decided on it half as a joke during the game era, so he was okay with changing it now, but judging from Shibaid's powerful nod, he must have liked it a lot.

“If he says that works, no need to force him then. It doesn't look like Schnee would be on board either, so let's leave the swimsuit fashion show for after we recover Celciutos.”

“What are you talking about...”

Schnee held her head with her hands, as if physically troubled by Filma's announcement.

“I'm talking about knocking Shin out with our super sexy costumes, of course! I've been thinking about it ever since I heard that we're going to the pool.”

“Filma, be a little more serious, please.”

“I am completely serious. If we want to keep Shin here, we have to use every chance we can.”

“I suppose so, but...”

“Shin was the one to set your physique, Schnee, so if we use that, we might have a chance.”

No matter how large the room was, with five people inside there couldn't be a lot of distance between them.

Were they talking hoping that Shin heard, or did they think that no one could hear them? In any case, Shin could hear everything the two said. Tiera did too: blushing fiercely, she mumbled the words, "knock out... swimwear..."

Shibaid heard everything too, as evidenced by his tired expression.

"Let us go rest for today. Or this will never end."

"That's right."

Deciding to leave the girls alone, Shin decided to turn in early.



The next day, Shin woke up earlier than usual and went to practice behind the lodging.

Thanks to his continued practice, which he started in order to gauge his physical abilities, he had recently learned to adjust his strength even with **【Limit】** removed.

Swinging his weapon at full strength would cause a catastrophe, so he had focused on controlling and limiting his power.

"You're working hard early this morning."

"I woke up pretty early too, maybe because we turned in early yesterday."

Having also awoken early, Shibaid approached Shin, who was swinging [Kakura].

"There's still some time, why don't we spar a little?"

"As long as we make sure we don't destroy the surroundings."

Both cast **【Limit】**, equipped sponge blades and lances for training, then faced each other.

Shin moved first. Sliding along the ground without a sound, he stepped closer to Shibaid. In response, Shibaid thrust his weapon at Shin. As he used a halberd, which

had the properties of both lances and axes, Shibaid's thrusts were fast and sharp. Even a mere wooden spear could have caused considerable damage.

Sponge-series weapons were characterized by their inability to cause damage, but Shin would have gone forward anyway. If he could dodge the thrust, he would be inside Shibaid's guard.

"...if our stats are the same, I can't get into range, huh."

Shin had stepped in diagonally, and Shibaid's sponge lance passed right by him. Faster than Shin could step in, however, came the second thrust from Shibaid's weapon.

Knowing that it would be dodged, he thrust his lance in such a way to be able to quickly pull it back.

"I haven't continued fighting for 500 years for nothing, after all. I have never neglected my training."

Shibaid, as the party's shield, was a warrior with rich battle experience. Even if defense was his strongest asset, it didn't mean that his attacks could be underestimated.

He specialized in facing multiple enemies while drawing their attacks away from his allies.

Shin too had fought in such battles, but mainly against monsters. In regards to taking the right distance and strategies against human opponents, Shibaid was still relatively ahead of him.

"My attacks do not seem to hit squarely either, though!"

With renewed vigor, Shibaid attacked again. The repeated strikes were thoroughly blocked by Shin's blade; if he focused on defense, Shin could avoid clean hits from Shibaid.

Shin, too, had fought many battles to the death. In a one-on-one frontal bout, even if he couldn't read Shibaid as well as he should, there would not be a large gap between them.

After a while, Shin sensed presences moving about in the lodge and made a proposal.

“...I guess we should go eat.”

“...indeed. We risk standing out too much.”

People had begun walking around in the premises. Shibaid looked a bit dissatisfied by the early conclusion, but rested his weapon. Their weapons put away, the two returned to the room, only to find Yuzuha, in human form, standing with arms crossed.

“Shin ditched Yuzuha!!”

“You were sleeping so soundly, that’s why. It felt bad to wake you up.”

“Mph—”

Yuzuha pursed her lips and pouted, but her dangling tail showed that she was aware of Shin’s kindness and that she slept like a log.

Shin didn’t know what else to do, and Yuzuha looked down sad.

“...don’t leave me.”

Yuzuha then grabbed Shin’s sleeve. Maybe she remembered her days in the shrine. Even if her powers were returning, being alone was still one of her fears.

“Got it, I’ll wake you up next time.”

Shin patted Yuzuha’s head while saying so, and she raised her head as to rub it more against his hand. In fox mode as well as human mode, Yuzuha seemed to love having her head rubbed.

Shin knew it too, so he often rubbed her head without restraint.

“Hmm, to think that a divine beast would look like a mere child like this.”

Shibaid laughed wryly.

“A lot of things must have happened to Yuzuha too. If she hadn’t been weakened at the time, she wouldn’t have bound a contract with me either, I guess.”

Element Tails in their complete forms were creatures that not even Shin could have

handled by himself. Now that his stats had increased, he could surely fight them much better than before, but there still was no guarantee that he would win.

“Mph! Yuzuha stays with Shin!”

Yuzuha didn't seem to appreciate Shin's words, and hugged him tightly.

“Shin, I cannot say I appreciate such words either.”

“Ah... you're right. I'm sorry, Yuzuha. You're my partner.”

“Kuu!!”

A happy yelp and Yuzuha's tail started swinging left and right. Shin thought that it was sometimes too easy to make her happy.

Shin and the others then had their breakfast and, after killing some time, joined Zazie and the others heading back to the shipyard.

“...is he okay?”

Shin inquired to Zazie as soon as they stepped inside.

The reason was Zigma, who was fervently writing down notes on his papers, a ghoulis look on his face.

“Chief!! You need to take a rest!!”

“Look, the clients are here!”

“Nnnngghh!! A little more, just a little more tiiimmeee!!!”

The other workers tried to stop him, but Zigma, eyes bloodshot, did not show any sign of stopping.

“Looks like you tickled chief's fancy more than expected.”

Bell and Shell's shoulders dropped to Zazie's comment.

“Desperate.”

“Perverted.”

“Well, that’s a pure artisan all right...”

Skilled artisans with particular ideals were sometimes regarded as bizarre: the way they expressed their passion was stronger than normal people, being focused on their craft and works.

No matter how much others would say enough, they wouldn’t be satisfied, and continue until they would themselves felt it was enough. Zigma, too, was one of such artisans.

“First of all, let’s tell him that there will be more time to study the ship after the test until we leave tomorrow. Or he might end up collapsing.”

He must have focused as if life depended on it: deep black bags had formed under his eyes, a level of exhaustion difficult to imagine after only one full night.

“Thank you very much. If he keeps this up, I’m afraid that even the president would go K.O”

The workers brought Zigma to the nap room to let him rest, and the female vice-president thanked Shin’s group. Her name was Milea Torseau, a mermaid with blue hair and eyes.

She had been away on other business when Shin’s group visited the day before.

“We’re going to test sail that ship now, did Zigma tell you about it?”

“Yes, you may leave whenever you want. What time will you be back?”

“Probably around noon, but it depends on the situation. We will definitely be back before dusk, though.”

“Understood. Take care, then.”

Under Milea and the other workers’ gaze, Shin and the group boarded the ship. Shin poured in his magic and the magic-powered engine activated. The propulsion device, attached in the back of the ship, pushed away the seawater and the ship slowly moved forward.

“It’s moving forward without natural or magical wind.”

“It doesn’t even have sails... how does that work?”

“I can see why the president would get so riled up.”

The ship left towards the seas, among the whispers of the head carpenters.

“Ok then, let’s check the speed first. Everyone, make sure you’re holding onto something! We’re going to seriously accelerate soon!”

Shin made sure that there were no monsters or other ships in the immediate area and then grabbed the magic vessel’s control lever.

No old-fashioned rudders could be found on this ship. The pilot seat Shin was sitting on had a control lever, pedals, and some buttons but nothing else.

Players used to say that it looked like a fighter jet pilot seat.

Shin stepped on the pedal with his right foot and the magic-powered engine roared. If the vessel wasn’t pushed down on the water surface by Shin’s magic, the acceleration would probably have flipped it over.

Like a pebble bouncing on the waves, the ship carrying Shin’s group shot forward on the sea.

“H-hey, we’re, shaking too—”

The initial vibrations were extremely powerful, so Tiera — who wasn’t used to the magic-powered engine — desperately clutched onto the closest arm rail.

“Turn!”

Connecting his map to the ship’s sonar underwater radar, Shin maneuvered the ship while gathering information on the surroundings.

The following sharp turn, worthy of a race motorboat, was followed by an even louder shriek by Tiera.

An average ship would not only have been knocked over, but also broken into pieces

beneath the water.

“Shin, Tiera will be at her limits soon.”

“Whoops, guess I overdid it a bit.”

Shin slowed down the ship and stopped it.

“.....”

Tiera, still grabbing the arm rail, had turned completely pale and was holding her mouth with her hands.

Kagerou was licking her face, worried.

“Drink this, you’ll feel better.”

“I-I’m sorry...”

Schnee and the rest were already used to it; Shibaid had not even grabbed onto any support as he leisurely gazed at the seas.

“Hmm, this is indeed more refined than riding on a wyvern.”

“My head’s spinning~~”

“This so much fun~~”

Next to Shibaid, in strangely good spirits, Bell and Shell had hit peak excitement.

They probably felt like they had ridden an amusement park’s roller coaster. They were unsteady on their feet, but did not feel sick at all.

Zazie and Keritori did not create a fuss or lose their composure; nothing about their demeanor had changed.

Incidentally, Yuzuha was on top of Shin’s head, her eyes sparkling.

“We’re going underwater now.”

Shin pressed on the control lever, and the ship gradually sank underwater.

The exterior of bridge was covered by the seawater, as the light from the surface became a single column extending to the seafloor.

“Wow.....”

Still supported by Schnee, Tiera looked around and let out an exclamation of wonder. Thanks in part to the clear weather, the light shone from above and illuminated the depths of the sea, creating a magical scenery.

“Diving capabilities perfectly functional too, good.”

Shin made sure that the instruments did not report anything abnormal, then looked outside too.

The glass on the bridge and the rest of the vessel was magically reinforced, so it could withstand the pressure even if they kept diving. There was nothing to fear even if a monster rammed the ship from outside.

“We’re going to an area of stormy seas, right? Is it possible to leave the ship even in a condition like this?”

“Yeah, anything could happen after all. I added the option to exit the ship even if it’s underwater.”

“Can I try to go out a while, then? I haven’t tried the underwater mode yet, I want to see if anything’s changed.”

“Gotcha.”

Shin operated the screen tied to his menu and teleported Filma in front of the underwater propulsion hatch. Part of the menu changed and now showed Filma’s silhouette.

“(I’m flooding the room, are you ready?)”

“(Go for it.)”

Shin called to Filma, who had changed to her underwater gear, and activated the flooding.

When the process ended Shin opened the hatch and Filma swam out.

Like Shin and the rest of the party, she too had the 【Dive】 skill, so she did not need to breathe even if she was immersed in water for a while. Filma swam around the ship, checking if it felt any different from the past. After a while she waved to the ship from beyond the glass, signaling that she was finished.

Filma's swimsuit was a red bikini, which covered relatively little of her body; skin exposure so high that Schnee and Tiera would definitely refuse to wear it. The bikini had black lines drawing flame patterns on it.

Despite being deep beneath the surface, the light from above dimly lit the sea, which made Filma's red bikini clearly visible.

Filma swam leisurely between the brightly shining pillars of light, forming the fascinating illusion that she was freely floating, unbound from the shackles of gravity.

Looking at such scenery, which gave an almost sacred impression, Tiera sighed in awe.

“So beautiful...”

“Looking at her like this, she does look graceful, doesn't she.”

Shibaid exhaled a hopeless sigh.

Among his support characters, Shin spent the most time and effort in shaping Schnee. This did not mean, however, that he had created the other characters carelessly.

Putting her words and behavior aside, Filma's looks were more than beautiful enough.

“(Get back inside now. After I check the diving function a bit more, we'll go back to port for a while.)”

“(Got it... but rather than that, how does my swimsuit look? I think it's sexier than Schnee's at least, pretty stimulating, no?)”

Filma then struck a pose and winked, instantly destroying the poetic beauty she had expressed until then.

“(Truly-beautiful. I-was- charmed.)”

Shin replied as emotionlessly as possible, to let her know how he felt about her antics. Not satisfied at all, Filma's eyes narrowed.

“(Wow, that was SO heartfelt.)”

“(Stop joking around and get back in)”

“(Ye-s sir.)”

Filma had always been the joking type, so Shin rebuked her casually. She was well aware of it too, as she replied even more casually.

“OK, let's dive a little more and wrap things up.”

After confirming that Filma was back inside the vessel, Shin headed towards the seafloor.

The light from the sea's surface turned gradually fainter, ultimately surrounding the ship with darkness. A darkness that, different from its aboveground counterpart, instill terror into people.

Utter, pitch-black darkness which did not let one breathe without proper equipment. An unstable space where sky and ground disappeared. If one wasn't used to it, they would be subject to a stress infinitely higher than the darkness above the sea.

“Kuh, it's all black.”

“It's a little scary...”

Since it was their first time deep underwater, Yuzuha and Tiera, felt shades of this fear, even if they were inside the ship.

Yuzuha was looking forward, nestled on Shin's head, her tail wrapped around his neck.

Tiera too held Kagerou — in puppy mode — with her left arm, while her right arm touched Shin's left. Her hand was lightly grabbing his arm. Being next to Shin and knowing that the ship was safe let her feel just this degree of nervousness.

“It's all right, not even the Sea Beasts could easily destroy a ship like this. I agree that it's pretty scary, though. Honestly speaking, even with underwater equipment I'd

rather avoid deep sea stages.”

Deep sea stages include marine creatures other than monsters as well, which would appear suddenly from the darkness, leaving players in a state of shock.

The skill 【Night Vision】 allowed to see a little better, but even so some players would run as soon as they heard about facing deep sea stages.

Such stages, however, were treasure troves for cooks.

“I think I just saw a shark!”

“We could get some really good shark fins from something that big. I wonder about the taste, though.”

As Bell and Lapwing were talking about the shark that just passed in front of them...

“C’mon, I want to see a giant squid! Come out already!”

“Forget it! Even if we knock it out, it’s not food fit for people!”

Zazie expressed her disappointment with Shell’s comment.

Even marine creatures bizarre enough to make Tiera shriek, for the Shigureya folks, were simply separated into two categories: delicious or not.

“As expected of lord Cook’s support characters.”

“That’s right, they’re just like her in that respect.”

Shin agreed to Schnee’s comment about Zazie and the others. Even the first time they adventured in a deep sea stage, Cook was the only one not to feel any fear. Shin remembered that she even happily approached sea beasts that Shin would hesitate getting close to.

“Ok then, let’s go back to port.”

“You don’t need to test the automatic defense systems?”

“We’ll probably find some monsters on our way back, so I’ll do that then. I saw a lot of

them on the way here.”

Shin answered to Schnee and changed the ship’s course to the surface. They moved at high speed not above but underwater this time, crashing into the monster groups they happened upon.

Not wanting to kill monsters without a purpose for the test, Shin only aimed at the ones that would create trouble for fishermen or kill people.

“I’m not sure what a ship really is anymore...”

“In the past, there were areas of the sea where ships would get damaged just by traveling through them. In order to successfully navigate such locations, magic-powered vessels like this were invented. For the people of this era, it probably is an unbelievable technology, though.”

Shibaid heard Tiera’s mumble and recalled the past with a certain nostalgia.

“Honestly, I didn’t really want to experience it...”

Because of the shaking caused by the ship’s high speed, Tiera had become violently seasick. She was getting better thanks to Schnee’s medicine, but at the same time probably starting to dislike sea travel.

The ship could also navigate at normal speed, but at times they would need to escape at speeds even higher than what Tiera experienced; So Shin decided to let her experience the speed and shaking while feeling sorry for her.

“It’s not good to rely on medicine to stop seasickness, isn’t it?”

“Filma is right, but we have no time to train this time, so it can’t be helped, I think.”

“I’m sorry...”

“When we’re done, we’ll do some special training.”

“We will!?”

Schnee’s style was not to let weaknesses remain as such.

“As expected of someone so diligent.”

“And all despite the fact that in this world it’s harder to raise skills, too.”

Zazie and Lapwing, who knew that Schnee had raised her cooking skill to 9, nodded in understanding to her response.

“I still don’t know well about that, does it take more time to raise skills now?”

“We haven’t gathered enough data to make statistics, but it looks like that the growth of a skill’s expertise isn’t fixed anymore. Personally, I feel that it’s slower than before.”

“I agree with Lapwing. Even if I try doing the same thing as before the Dusk of Majesty, I feel that the expertise ratio accrued to the skill is smaller than before.”

Bell and Shell too nodded in agreement to Lapwing and Zazie’s words.

Apparently, in some cases expertise raised faster than usual, but the pace was generally slower than before.

Skills couldn’t be trained all the time, so their growth speed required much more time than during the game era.

For an acquaintance of Zazie and the others, who was a Lord, it took 70 years to raise a skill from five to six, or so they said. If this was true, Schnee’s effort to raise a skill to nine was something incredible.

In the game era, at the time Shin headed to the final dungeon, Schnee’s Cooking skill was just level three. Even if 500 years had passed, it could not have been easy.

“It’s impressive that you even thought of raising it so much.”

“...I just cooked to keep myself occupied.”

Schnee replied humbly to Shin’s praise. Behind her, Filma grinned.

“She obviously did her best to let you taste her handmade food when you came back, Shin!”

“Filma! What are you saying!?”

“No blushing, no blushing. You wanted him to say “that was delish—gwah?”

“Don’t speak another word.”

Schnee covered Filma’s mouth to prevent her from saying anything more about the reason she had raised her Cooking skill. She didn’t like to show openly how she had worked hard.

“Ah... well. Thank you.”

“N-no! No, well, I didn’t want to reject your thanks, I..... yes.”

Hearing that it was for his sake, Shin was of course happy. Hearing Shin’s thanks, Schnee panicked a little, then nodded ever so slightly.

Her slightly blushing cheeks, reminiscent of a young maiden, were lovely.

“Shin, if we don’t let ship emerge soon, it’ll stand out too much.”

“Oh, yeah.”

Warned by Shibaid, Shin changed his focus on the ship and quickly changed the route.

When the group returned to the shipyard docks, they found Zigma waiting, arms crossed. In order to start his inspection again whenever, he had prepared pen and paper and a meal that he could eat with one hand.

“We’re leaving early morning tomorrow, so you can inspect the ship only until then.”

“Got it. Can I start right away?”

“Just don’t push yourself too hard, please.”

“Don’t you worry. I can’t inspect anything if I collapse, I know that.”

Shin wondered if Zigma was really aware of that, but, as Milea was standing behind him, he didn’t say anything. She would probably stop Zigma if anything happened.



“Mr. Zigma, my apologies, but you’ll have to stop.”

The next morning, Shin’s group made the necessary preparations and headed to the shipyard. Shin found Zigma glued to the ship and had to give him the bad news.

Knowing that his inspection had to end, Zigma looked disappointed, but when Milea put her hand on his shoulder, smiling, he shuddered and quietly backed away. Apparently, Milea overruled Zigma in their company — a relationship that was opposite to what their ranks would suggest.

“The guild representative arrived!”

The inspector in charge of checking the ship’s dimensions had arrived shortly after Shin’s team. The group had visited the guild the previous day, informing Arno that they had procured a ship.

“Oh? Ms. Arno?”

The guild representative, led by the shipyard workers, turned out to be the receptionist, Arno.

“Good morning. I have come to inspect your ship.”

“Good morning. So you are in charge of inspecting ships too? This is the ship we will use for our search.”

“I am not the only one, but..... by the way, I don’t think I see any sails?”

Arno voiced her doubts after looking at the ship’s shape. In this world, ships with sails were still the norm.

“This is a rather unique ship that we found in a certain ruin. The Kuwain area is very different from the usual seas, after all. It looks ragged, but I assure you that it sails without problems. We tested it yesterday in the bay too.”

Thanks to Shin’s illusion skills, the ship looked battered enough to make anyone believe that it had been found in some ruin.

“I can vouch for that too, miss. It does look bizarre, but let me say that it’s tough.”

Zigma, who had inspected the ship, gave his full approval.

“I see. If sir Zigma says so as well, there shouldn’t be any problems. I have verified that the ship’s dimensions are more than enough fit the guild’s regulations, so I don’t think there are problems. Here is your permit. If one of the ships patrolling Kuwain’s premises stops you, show it and they will let you through. If you do not meet any patrol ships, just go on further.”

“Thank you very much. We’re going to leave soon, so... until next time.”

“Please take care.”

Zigma and Arno looked on as the party boarded the ship. Zazie and the others were hiding inside, since things would be troublesome if they were found and stopped.

Shin activated the magic-powered engine and the ship departed.

Leaving behind Arno’s surprised expression, the ship proceeded in the direction of the Kuwain area.



“This is... not a place you could get lost in by accident, huh. A stormy sea stage if I’ve ever seen one.”

Shin’s party accelerated after leaving Barbatos and had now arrived close to their destination, which reminded Shin of the game era. Before them were battering rain, massive waves, and violent winds.

As if separated by an invisible wall, just outside the area the breeze was gentle and the waves small. A situation completely outside the realm of natural phenomena.

“Looks like this sea trip is going to turn rough. Are you ready everybody?”

Shin made sure Tiera had drunk the anti-seasickness medicine Schnee gave her and called to the group.

After everyone nodded in agreement, he stepped on the pedal.

There were no patrol ships in the surroundings. As Arno had instructed, Shin proceeded forward. The ship, lulled by gentle waves, sped towards the storm.

“Waah!?”

The next instant, the vessel shook violently vertically, a shock big enough to make Tiera shout, despite her preparation. When the ship pointed upwards, the sky could be seen from the bridge. When it pointed down, the sea surface was directly in front.

The gap was so large that, for an instant, it felt like the ship was floating in midair.

“Shin! Look! In front!”

Tiera pointed to a large wave, taller than the ship itself.

“This is even worse than stormy sea stages, huh.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to travel underwater?”

Despite the powerful rumbling and rocking of the ship, Schnee made her suggestion without a single change in her expression.

“That would be better to go forward, for sure. But the elf saw Celciutos above water, so we’ll travel above the surface for now, at least until we reach the center of the area. I wanted to save energy, but it looks like there’s no other way. Activate the vessel balance system!”

As Shin said these words, part of the tall wave in front of the ship split, just enough to let the ship pass. At the same time, the violent waves around them became relatively calm.

“Wha, what’s going on?”

“I calmed the surrounding sea with water, wind, and ground spells, to secure us a route. It’s a function that most magic-powered vessels have. That’s why these ships can travel on routes impossible for normal ships.”

“If you have something that convenient, you could have used it since the start...”

Tiera, tightly latched onto an arm rail, let out a heavy sigh, feeling powerless. Facing

such a large wave during her second time at sea was a bit too much for her. Even so, she was now standing on the ship, without losing balance or rolling around, so she must have acquired some resistance.

“Sorry, sorry. In the past, I faced a stormy sea stage similar to this. I just wanted to see how this one actually was first.”

After apologizing to the slightly glaring Tiera, Shin looked forward again.

“Let’s head northeast first. I’m checking the surroundings via the sonar and the map, but just in case let me know if you see anything weird outside everybody!”

The party sailed on, defeating monsters every now and then, when a tune started playing, making the air vibrate eerily.

“What’s this?”

“This feeling... it’s a cursed song.”

Shin couldn’t hear the tune well and looked towards the storm, then Schnee answered his question.

Unlike the barrier set up in the woods north of Bayreuth, this song did not manipulate the intruder’s mind to make them turn back, but enticed them in a certain direction.

“My head’s starting to hurt...”

“How does it feel? To me it looks like it’s trying to make us go in a certain direction.”

Shin asked Tiera, who was frowning, her hands pressing against her temples.

He thought she could be affected, but maybe thanks to her particular position as priestess, or maybe because she had powered up, she did not seem to be influenced by the cursed song.

“It makes its victims change directions without them realizing it. If we didn’t resist it, we’d probably exit the area before we knew it.”

“I see, sorry for making you do that. Put these on. If you can resist it now, they should lighten the burden.”

Shin apologized and gave Tiera a pair of faded silver earrings. They had the effect of increasing mind manipulation resistance and did not conflict with the effects of the Heat Haze gear set, even if equipped together.

Tiera put on the earrings and breathed a sigh of relief. Her expression was more peaceful too.

“Since we didn’t hear it before, it’s safe to assume that we’re getting closer to our destination. There must be mermaids in this part of the sea, and a lot of them too.”

Shin’s assumption was based on the area of effect of the cursed song.

If some species with lore related to singing sang cursed songs, they would obtain bonuses. Mermaids were one of those species.

Cursed songs did not have a very large area of effect, only around 20 mels, but that was in the case where there was only one singer.

Some skills could be powered up or have their area of effect increased if players and/or support characters used the skill together at the same time.

Cursed songs were such skills: their area of effect increased proportionally with the number of singers. Even if each caster’s skill level was low, if many sang it as in a chorus, the song could become powerful enough to affect a great number of monsters or even boss monsters.

“Where is the singing coming from?”

“That way.”

Zazie answered Shin’s question immediately. She had closed her eyes, probably to detect the direction the song came from.

“I think so too.”

Lapwing, who was next to her, agreed with Zazie, who was pointing west.

“...yeah, there’s something there.”

Shin used long-range sight skills and peered into the distance: beyond the storm’s veil,

he found a light. Because of the distance, he could not see beyond it yet. Compared to the waters the ship was sailing now, where dark clouds stopped most sunlight, however, it was clearly different.

“Let’s go forward like this. Let me know if the direction of the singing changes.”

Continuing to use skills would interfere with piloting the ship, so Shin deactivated the long-range sight skills and adjusted the ship’s route to the west, where Zazie was pointing.

Eventually, Shin’s ears clearly picked up the song.

“They must be nervous because we’re not turning back.”

“That’s right, the song is disturbed too. You’ll be able to see what’s beyond the storm soon, no?”

“Right, let me give it a shot.”

Prompted by Filma, Shin put his long-range sight skills to full use, while paying attention to the ship’s controls at the same time.

He looked beyond the light and found a very nostalgic sight.

“Rejoice, ladies and gentlemen. We’ve hit the jackpot.”

A vessel many times larger than the ship Shin built, armed with cannons long enough to pierce the sky, its front ram glinting in the sunlight.

Excluding the fact that it was stranded on a massive crag, it looked exactly as Shin remembered. Colored white, following its owner’s nickname, Celciutos’ imposing silhouette was there.

“If we go forward like this, we’ll see Celciutos soon.”

Shin’s words caused a wave of excitement in the party. Bell and Shell jumped up in joy.

“If Celciutos is in this direction, does it mean that the cursed song aimed to prevent anyone from finding it?”

“If that’s the case, it’s strange for the song to come from inside Celciutos’ barrier though.”

Shibaid voiced his opinion, following a question from Zazie.

Shin very much doubted that normal mermaids could have penetrated Celciutos’ barrier. The support character in charge of Celciutos’ equipment was a dwarf, so it was very unlikely for him to still be alive. The only possibility was that the mermaids were protecting it.

“Maybe he negotiated with the mermaids?”

Knowing that his life was coming to an end, the dwarf could have thought of a plan to preserve Celciutos, or so hypothesized Lapwing.

“We’ll know all about that once we get closer.”

“That’s right. I’m sorry for them since they’re working so hard, but we’re going straight on.”

Shin nodded to Filma’s words and the ship carried on. The cursed song was gaining in volume and strength, but neither the number of casters nor their skill level was high enough to manipulate Shin’s group.

Probably growing more nervous due to the ship not changing directions or speed, on the course of Shin’s group, pillars of water clearly different from the usual waves started appearing.

Shin, wary, lowered the ship’s speed, and the responses he had registered on the map moved to surround the ship. They were 30 in all: ten on each of the ship’s sides and ten behind it.

“They came out of the barrier?”

As they were singing the cursed song, Shin could tell that they had come out of the barrier.

The reason was that, to prevent players from attacking safely from behind a barrier, if offensive skills were used from inside, aiming outside the barrier, its endurance would decrease significantly.

Celciutos' barrier was no exception. Its endurance was very high and recovered automatically, so they had probably been singing from inside until now.

As the cursed song did not seem to have an effect, it would have been safer to not attempt to fight and take shelter inside the barrier: average intruders would simply be repelled, after all.

The responses, however, all moved outside the barrier to surround the ship. Shin thought that they did not go to the front of the ship, where the barrier was, in order to cut off all escape routes.

"I guess they think they got us surrounded, but they don't know that it's pretty meaningless for us."

The front was still clear, so the ship could go forward without trouble. The speed was slower than before, so even if the barrier stopped them the ship would not suffer considerable damage.

Despite the ship continuing to proceed, the responses did not move. They were examining the situation, maybe, and did not emerge.

"Looks like it'll be okay."

The ship crossed the barrier of storm and winds: without particular resistance, Shin's ship entered Celciutos' barrier.

The responses — possibly mermaids — probably thought that the barrier would have stopped the ship's advance: they scattered irregularly around the map, likely out of confusion.

"Looks like they're coming after us."

"Let's see how they react — this is bad."

Shin was ready to gauge their reactions, but then his face tensed.

The cause behind this sudden change was that his map registered a new response, something larger than even the ship. Its speed was very high, meaning that it would come in contact with the party in a matter of minutes.

As it was still relatively far, the mermaids seemed not to have noticed, and they appeared to be still undecided about how to react to Shin's arrival.

"You people underwater! A huge monster's heading here! Get back inside the barrier, now!"

Shin wasn't sure that they could hear him, but he used the megaphone function to try to call to the mermaids.

Shin didn't know about the extent of their abilities, but if they were attacked by surprise, there was the chance they would suffer damage. No matter what relationship they would have in the future, if they were annihilated in a situation caused by Shin's group, it wouldn't sit well with them.

Shin's warning appeared to have reached the merpeople, as they all started swimming towards the barrier, managing to enter it before the large response could get closer. About one minute after the merpeople had safely taken shelter inside the barrier, the response showed itself.

"It's huge..."

"I had the feeling it was too big... I see, it came out right away, huh."

Looking at the source of the response, Tiera became speechless, while Shin laughed.

A body that emerged from the sea and towered high in the sky, black and red compound eyes glaring at Shin's party: the "visitor" was none other than Keseldran, one of the Three Sea Beasts.

Even just the body, visible above water, was easily above 15 mels. Its size and the red aura the monster's whole body emanated clearly expressed its status as a boss monster.

"■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■——!! [*T/N: black squares, I think it's supposed to be a roar*]"

After less than one minute, Keseldran made its first move.

With a roar, better described as an explosion of sound, the monster looked towards the merpeople.

Unlike before, when it was just glaring, Keseldran now exuded a very powerful pressure in their direction.

The stormy waters, affected by the shockwave, formed radiation-like waves with the boss monster at the center.

“Shibaid, get ready to defend, just in case.”

“Understood.”

Shin examined the situation, then ordered Shibaid to activate a defensive barrier. Celciutos’ barrier was probably enough to repel the monster, but there was the possibility of it malfunctioning, like what happened in Palmirack.

As Shin’s group started moving, something changed with Keseldran.

“Er, it’s, shining?”

“Watch well. That’s Keseldran’s most powerful attack.”

Tiera perceived the danger and began to fret, but Schnee replied to her with a completely calm tone.

What Tiera had referred to was a bloating bluish-white globe of light that had formed in Keseldran’s maw. The thunderbolts running along its surface and the almost audible way the light blinked clearly suggested what element the attack was.

“It’s coming.”

Almost at the same time as Shin spoke, Keseldran fired a massive beam of lightning. Fitting the monster’s massive size, the bolt was around one mel in diameter.

Keseldran’s attack, which looked like lightning from the sky had been gathered together and given a direction, crashed against Celciutos’ barrier, then broke in four bolts running along the barrier’s surface. Part of the repelled bolts hit the water’s surface, releasing the electricity and causing an explosion.



“Aah!?”

Behind Shin and Shibaid, who had raised their shields to be safe, Tiera let out a small shriek.

The thunderbolt versus barrier bout saw the barrier emerge as the victor. Despite the continuing lightning strikes, the barrier’s surface did not show any cracks or signs of damage.

“Looks like the barrier’s still sturdy enough.”

The barrage of thunderbolts ended after about 5 seconds. Seeing that the barrier was unscathed, Keseldran growled ominously, then quickly retreated outside Shin’s detection range.

“My eyes still sting... what in the world was that?”

“Keseldran’s sure-kill breath. When its mouth starts lighting up like that, if you don’t dodge it or block it will turn you into ashes.”

Keseldran used lighting-based attacks despite being a sea monster, but its attacks were not limited to above water: its breath could also strike below the surface, its power not diminishing in the slightest. Furthermore, it even boasted the very troublesome effect of ignoring the protection granted by lightning-nullifying accessories.

During the game era, it allowed players to live the rare experience of being burned alive underwater.

The capabilities of its breath might suggest that Keseldran was superior to the other Sea Beasts, but Mascurda could avoid the breath with magic and Eolios possessed the rare skill to diffuse the breath to weaken it.

Precisely because such a lethal attack could not easily prove fatal, the Three Beasts maintained a balance.

“Okay then, let’s try talking with the merpeople first. Now that they’re surprised, they’ll probably at least listen to what we have to say.”

Shin wasn’t sure that the approach would be successful, but planned to do his part so

that both parties will understand each other.

“If they attack us one-sidedly, can we knock them out?”

Probably because they had finally found Celciutos, Zazie was feeling belligerent.

“Let’s wipe the floor with them!!”

Lapwing calmed Bell and Shell’s shouting enthusiasm, but if they were attacked she would strike back too without reserve.

“Considering the place, if it turns out that they’re occupying Celciutos without permission, no need to have mercy. But if there are some special circumstances, we have to hear them out, right? They can enter the barrier after all, so there has to be a reason.”

Shin turned the ship towards the merpeople who fled from Keseldran. He then switched the controls to remote mode and exited on to the deck.

“I know you’re there! We have no intention of fighting you! If possible, I want to talk with your representative! Will you accept?”

Shin used wind magic to spread his voice underwater.

He then waited, looking at the trembling water surface. Soon enough, a mermaid with light blue hair emerged.

“.....Arno?”

Recognizing the mermaid’s face, Shin was surprised. He checked with **【Analyze】** too, but there was no mistake: the name Arno Toole was clearly displayed.

“I have come to talk with you as the merpeople’s representative. Will you allow me to board your ship?”

“I’m afraid that would instigate your comrades, so I will come down. That would make you feel safer, am I right?”

“Thank you for your concern.”

Differently from when they met in the guild, Arno's expression was now stiff. She was clearly very nervous.

Shin told Arno the number of people that would come, then went down into the sea with Schnee, Zazie, and Lapwing. Their equipment changed to underwater mode, they swam to Arno's position.

"As we barged in first, let us explain our circumstances first."

As Arno belonged to the guild, Shin kept his identity as High Human hidden and explained that he was helping Zazie and the others in retrieving their master's guild house.

Shigureya's owner was well known throughout Barbatos. No one had more reason than them to enter the Kuwain area to find Celciutos.

"Is that so. I'm afraid this is the end, then."

"What do you mean?"

Shin inquired to Arno, who looked defeated.

If they were using Celciutos as a safe dwelling, losing it must be painful.

In Barbatos, however, merpeople and fishpeople were not persecuted in any way. Rather, one could say they were very welcome.

Shin had no idea why Arno looked so hopeless.

"I'll tell you everything over there."

Arno pointed at Celciutos. Having no objections, Shin's group returned to the ship, then, following the merpeople, sailed closer to Celciutos.

When they arrived less than 100 mels from the ship, however, trouble surfaced.

"Stop right there!!"

A large pillar of water appeared in front of the merpeople, probably meant to stop them or act as a warning. There was no damage to the ship or the merpeople.

The merpeople were surprised and some panicked, but Arno calmed them down.

Shin didn't know what was going on, so he stopped the ship for the moment.

“Why do you let the intruders into our sanctuary? Depending on the circumstances, I will show no mercy, even if you are our mediator with the city!!”

The water pillar settled down and revealed a giant over 2 mels tall standing on the water. Behind him, all sorts of fishmen showed their faces from underwater.

The only fishman standing on the water was a Type Orca.

Strictly speaking, orcas were not fish, so calling Type Orcas fishmen would be wrong, but in THE NEW GATE they were categorized as such.

The appearance was simply an orca with legs. Like a mascot that could be found in an aquarium, it was also deformed and relatively cute. The fishman was pointing his trident to the group, probably trying to appear menacing, but other than his size there was nothing particularly frightening about him.

To Shin, it was more of a mystery how the Type Orca could hold the trident with arms that looked just like elongated fins.

——- 【Marshall Killer Level 209 Pirate】

(A rare job, huh. He's probably a Chosen One)

Shin thought so after looking at the information displayed by 【Analyze】 .

The Pirate job was a rare one that gained boosts when fighting in water. To obtain it the player needed to defeat certain bosses: despite what the name suggested, there was no need to perform evil acts such as pillaging or plundering.

Some players enjoyed acting as bad guys, but mainly defeated Pirate NPCs who appeared as enemies.

“Let us through, Marshall. These people are the legitimate successors of Celciutos' owner. Standing in their way means to violate the agreement.”

Arno's words seemed to strike a nerve with the fishman called Marshall. As if triggered

by his emotions, the trident's prongs started crackling with electricity.

Shin was wondering what to do, when Zazie's group, who had come out on deck too, stepped in front of him.

"We have come to retrieve our master's possession, nothing more. What right do you people have to be here? What happened to Celciutos' caretaker, Jesta? Why can you enter the barrier?"

"Successors? You couldn't even cross the seas and abandoned our sanctuary for years! What do you want to do after all this time!?"

Jesta was a High Dwarf, one of Cook's support characters. As long as something similar to what happened to Girard had not happened to him too, he was probably not alive anymore.

"We have kept all intruders from approaching Celciutos for generations, protecting this sanctuary. I don't know why you appeared now, but this place is ours now. Leave at once!"

"Answer our questions. "This place is ours now?" Celciutos is Lord Cook's, and no one else's!! Keep spouting crap and I'll turn you into sashimi, fish bastard!!"

Zazie roared back to Marshall's claims of owning Celciutos.

Like Todo Kankuro had told Shin in Hinomoto, Rokuten's support members still felt a deep loyalty to their masters, even after so much time had passed.

Zazie's group too was highly loyal to Cook, thus witnessing other people using their master's possession without permission and even claiming it was theirs, what would happen?

To know the answer, it was enough to hear Zazie's shout and see the sashimi knife she held with both hands.

Lapwing, Bell, and Shell did not say anything, but all of them were wielding their weapons already.

Maybe because the opponents were fishermen, Lapwing was holding a sashimi knife as well. Bell had a huge sledgehammer, Shell two large chef's knives, one in each hand.

Except Bell, all Shigureya members looked more like they were going to start cooking instead of fighting, but all weapons were actually Mythology grade: they could easily slice in two anything from cooking ingredients to dragon scales.

While not as powerful as Schnee and the others, Zazie's group was far superior to the average Chosen One.

Marshall probably realized it too: from his forehead, or maybe his cheeks (it wasn't clear where) sweat had started trailing down his face.

"...if you refuse to leave, we'll just force you—"

"Ehm, sorry to bother when you're all heating up, but why don't we talk before we fight?"

Just as battle was about to break out before the two parties, Shin interrupted them. His teleportation-like instantaneous movement caused Marshall to instinctively try to retreat, but Shin had grabbed his trident, thus preventing him from doing so.

"Nnnnggh! L-Let go!!"

"I will, if you listen to what we have to say. We have our own reasons. We can't just turn back and leave."

Marshall pulled on the trident with both hands, as hard as he could, but it didn't budge an inch, as if it was fixed in midair.

"Let go!! Or else my light... ning...?"

Lightning ran down Marshall's trident, but disappeared after a sparkle. It couldn't exceed Shin's magic resistance.

"Kh, what the hell... are you...?"

Shin calmly observed Marshall's belligerent bunch. Despite the difference in strength, it seemed to him that they ran out of energy too quickly. The fishmen behind him were panting too, like the air around them was extremely thin.

The difference in fighting power was clear. Shin had used his pressure in order to make them desist from fighting. As he did, Marshall -who had tightly gripped the trident until

now- and the fishermen behind him shuddered.

“...I understand. Let us talk.”

“That’s helpful of you. Zazie, you guys calm down too. I understand your anger, but blasting your killing intent like that is a bit much, no?”

“...understood.”

Zazie’s group made sure that Marshill didn’t make strange moves even after Shin let go of the trident and put down their weapons. Their complexion seemed a bit worse than before however.

“Ehm, may I... lead you somewhere... we can talk?”

“Please do.”

Shin nodded to Arno’s proposal, spoken in a tone sort of lacking confidence, and returned to the ship. He piloted the ship forward following Arno’s lead; Marshill’s group also followed quietly.

“Anyway, that was pretty surprising.”

“Yeah, a pillar of water out of the blue like that.”

“No, what happened after that! Things were tense enough when you grabbed that guy’s spear, but then you went and put pressure on the fishermen like you wanted to kill them all...”

“Uh... that much?”

Shin meant to just intimidate them a little, thus Filma’s words surprised him. He had intimidated others in this world before, so it felt strange to him to fail in adjusting the pressure he released.

“Seeing your comrade’s guildhouse being used by others without permission might have made you add more power unconsciously, it wouldn’t be too strange.”

“Hmm, I agree with Schnee.”

Shibaid nodded too.

“Well, I admit that when I heard “this place is ours now” I got pretty ticked off.”

After about 10 minutes of following the merpeople, Shin’s group arrived at Celciutos’ side. Both merpeople and fishermen climbed on land; Arno, as their representative, acted as guide for Shin’s party.

Merpeople’s lower body was fish-like, but when they were on land it turned into human-like legs. Arno was no exception: she was now wearing just a tube top and a pareo barely reaching her knees. Other mermaids had a similar look, while most mermen wore simple pants on their lower bodies and t-shirts or nothing at all on their upper bodies. They wore such clothing as to be ready to dive anytime.

Among the merpeople and fishermen, some also wore armor. They were the ones who would cover the others’ retreat in case of necessity, apparently.

“This way, please.”

As they were talking of such topics, the group arrived at their destination. Shin and his party walked on the crag Celciutos lied on, until they reached the ship’s mast.

Arno signaled something upwards and a sort of basket, made for several people to fit in, descended from above.

“Please ride on this, it’ll take you aboard Celciutos.”

Shin’s group now was near Celciutos’ bottom part. Without skills that made walking on walls possible, such as what Shin and Schnee had, contraptions like the basket were necessary.

Together with Shin’s group there were also the merpeople and fishermen, so the basket made several laps to take all present on board. Shin’s party, Arno, and Marshall went first.

“...ehm.”

When they arrived on the deck, they spotted an elderly man and four women, all wearing what looked like traditional clothing, kneeling down.

“We humbly thank you for coming all the way here. My name is Lierno Toole, I act as the leader of the merpeople and fishpeople living in this area.”

“Er, my name’s Shin. I’m Cook’s... comrade, someone the same as her, you could say. Something like that.”

Shin wasn’t sure how to react, and opted to introduce himself first of all.

He could have said he belonged to same guild as Cook, but in this world the word “guild” referred to associations of merchants or adventurers, so in order to keep things separate he used the word “comrade”.

“Lord Shin. I beg for your forgiveness for Marshill’s disrespect towards High Humans.”

Lierno bowed his head even deeper, almost touching the floor of the deck.

“High Human!? Weren’t they all extinct!?”

“You felt that aura and still say things like that!? On your knees, fool!!”

“Gwah!”

Marshill was shocked to learn that Shin was a High Human and was promptly scolded by Lierno. The latter probably used magic to push Marshill down from above with an unseen force.

“How did you know that I am a High Human?”

“That device displayed that lord Shin had entered the premises.”

“Ah, I see.”

Shin looked at the panel set on the wall and remembered about the existence of the device.

As Lierno had said, in the login column only Shin’s name was lit up.

“First of all, would you mind explaining the current situation?”

“Naturally. It would not do to talk here, however. Please, come this way.”

Shin's group was led to a room previously used for meetings. Lierno waited for Shin's group to sit down, then started talking in a calm tone.

"We can enter Celciutos' barrier because of the agreement bound between Master Jesta and our ancestors."

"An agreement?"

"In the past, when disaster struck this area, our ancestors were in danger of being annihilated. For some unknown reason, not only monsters but also some humans were set on hunting us down. I was told that Master Jesta, Celciutos' caretaker, saved our ancestors in such a time of peril. At that time monsters were growing violent, miasma eruptions broke out, continents moved... disasters happened one after the other. It is told that if we did not take shelter within Celciutos' barrier, our species would have surely gone extinct."

Even after the natural calamities, monsters continued to grow violent: in their search for a safe haven, they had found the Kuwain area, or so Lierno said. Kuwain was originally the dominion of Ishkar, dragon king of the seas, and the three sea beasts were its guardians.

"Ishkar was a highly intelligent monster. It allowed our people to live here, so we finally could find safety."

That did not last long, however. The Seafloor Sanctuary, Ishkar's dwelling, was tainted by miasma. In order to contain the spread of miasma, Ishkar locked itself in the sanctuary: thus returning the peace once again.

Such peace, however, was disrupted a few years ago. The guardian beasts serving Ishkar, the three sea beasts, turned violent.

"I heard that Celciutos too was affected by the miasma and some of its functions stopped working as intended. Master Jesta used the stored items and Celciutos' barrier to seal the miasma in the sanctuary, then told our ancestors to preserve it, or so it is said. In exchange, they were allowed to live on Celciutos. Most of its functions were locked, though. Master Jesta had probably foreseen that even a small mistake in operating Celciutos could cause disasters."

Celciutos wasn't just a ship Shin put together in a rush, but a magic-powered battleship that all Rokuten members collaborated to build, based on precise and

intricate blueprints.

The fishermen would not have been able to make it move, but it was still equipped with anti-air, anti-ground, and anti-submarine weapons and ammunition, so just taking these out could have caused a lot of trouble.

“Apparently, Master Jesta said that if just one of the Rokuten members returned, they would have been able to find a solution to this predicament. I am fully aware of how shameless such a request may sound, but please, could you grant us your invaluable assistance in purifying the Seafloor Sanctuary?”

Lierno then bowed his head, as did the women around him and Arno. Ishkar, dragon king of the seas, was a monster on par with Yuzuha’s complete form, however. Not even Shin could easily accept to face it.

As Shin was reflecting upon this and thinking about what to do, Yuzuha contacted him via Mind Chat.

“(Shin, can’t we save Ishkar?)”

“(Yuzuha?)”

“(Ishkar, like Yuzuha. Blocking miasma. Ishkar is sea guardian. If Ishkar gone, big trouble in all seas.)”

“(He’s like Yuzuha, hmm.)”

Shin was reminded of the suffering Yuzuha in the shrine.

Ishkar, like the Element Tails, was a monster close to humanity. As Yuzuha said, it was probably in the sanctuary, doing everything possible to keep the miasma in check.

Considering this, Shin thought that just retrieving Celciutos and saying goodbye would not be a good idea. According to Lierno, if Ishkar had completely sealed in the miasma the seal would then unlock automatically: the fact that this hadn’t happened meant that it was still fighting against the miasma within the sanctuary.

Even Yuzuha had weakened because of the miasma’s effect: there was no guarantee that Ishkar was safe and sound. If they wanted to save him, the sooner the better.

In the end, they couldn't leave miasma-related trouble alone.

"...guess there's no other way. We'll do it."

"Kuu!"

"I knew you would say that, Shin."

"Yep, sure enough."

"Indeed, we cannot ignore this."

"Not miasma, that's for sure."

Yuzuha, Schnee, Filma, Shibaid, and Tiera agreed to Shin's decision. They all knew that this would be the conclusion as they listened to Lierno's story.

"The first thing to do then, is to check Celciutos' current state. Zazie, you guys help me with this too. You know the ship's internal structure, right?"

"Yes. We should check on the engines first."

Zazie's group could also perform maintenance on Celciutos. They wouldn't equal Jesta, who was exclusively in charge of the ship, but they knew its structure and functions perfectly.

Shin decided to make sure that Celciutos could move when necessary and then head to the supposedly sealed Seafloor Sanctuary.



Shin's group temporarily left Zazie's and went to Celciutos' bridge. The basic controls were not much different from a regular ship's, it just had more equipment and functions.

According to Lierno, Jesta had sealed off the bridge, so no one had been able to enter it. Shin simply knocked on the Chimeradite door and operated the control panel.

"It was locked from the inside, so that only Rokuten members could access it, huh."

The panel confirmed Shin's magic power and changed the color of its light from red to blue. The door slid open, sounding like a steam vent.

"At least it doesn't look like anything is damaged."

The room's self-cleaning function seemed to be still active, since there was no dust piled up. And the various panels did not look cracked or broken either.

As Shin gave a quick look around the bridge, he felt something tugging at his sleeve. Tiera had grabbed Shin's sleeve and weakly pulled on it.

"Are those... human bones?"

"Bones?"

Shin looked in the direction Tiera pointed at and, sure enough, spotted what looked like a person's bones sprawled on the ground. The hands were clasped on the chest, so it didn't look like he had been killed.

"Jesta, I guess."

Shin looked at the equipment on the skeleton and quickly noticed that some of it were his own creation. It was possible to instantly notice equipment one had forged, even if it was equipped by others. Shin also remembered seeing the equipment somewhere before. He didn't use **【Analyze】**, but there was no mistaking it.

"...before we go to the sanctuary, can we give Jesta a proper send off?"

Shin contacted Zazie and the others, who rushed to the room. Zazie then asked Shin this question while looking at Jesta's remains.

"Yes, of course."

Shin nodded. There was no way they would leave him like that.

"Are these letters?"

"Yes, one is addressed to us, one to any Rokuten member, one to lord Cook."

Three letters were found next to Jesta's remains. Based on the situation, they were

probably his will. Shin took the letter addressed to Rokuten members and unsealed it. The letter contained a detailed report of what had happened after Jesta had met the merpeople.

He had chosen to spend the last moments of his life alone in the bridge, accounting for the possibility that some merpeople or fishpeople plotted to misuse Celciutos.

After reading the letter, Shin had a newfound respect for Jesta.

Other than the ship and the miasma, the letter also recounted the cause of his death. In his older years, he had caught a disease that potions could not cure. Potions mainly focused on healing wounds, so they were often ineffective against diseases.

The letter stated that the disease itself was not extremely rare, but maybe because he had become weaker due to his age, Jesta's condition just kept worsening.

"Amazing..."

Despite knowing that his death was approaching, Jesta spent his days thinking about the people living on Celciutos and how to deal with the miasma, showing impressive mental fortitude.

"We are proud to be his comrades."

Zazie, reading the letter addressed to them, whispered with a quavering voice. Next to her, Lapwing hugged the weeping Bell and Shell.

"...how do you bury people here?"

"Barbatos' style is to cremate the body and scatter the ashes in the sea. The soul returns to the heavens, the body to mother sea... this is the creed in this region."

Shin waited for Zazie the others to settle down before asking, and Zazie replied. They turned Jesta's remains into a card, which Zazie held.

"Could you please allow us to participate in the send off? We are deeply indebted to him as well."

Shin told Lierno that they wanted to give Jesta a proper send off before heading to the Seafloor Sanctuary, and the chief made his plea, his head bowed.

The whole tribe wished to participate in the funeral. Arno and the mermaids, who had waited for the High Human's return, shared this sentiment too and nodded.

"...chief, I understand you want to pay your respects to the person we are indebted to, but we can't do something like that now, can we? If we go on like this, some of us will end up starving."

Despite the general atmosphere which indicated that everyone wanted to proceed with the funeral, only Marshill expressed a contrary opinion. Lierno's scolding had probably cooled him off, since his tone was now perfectly calm.

"Even so, we must. That is the greatness of the debt we owe him. If we shirk this responsibility, how can we face the spirits of our ancestors?"

"But chief...!"

"What is happening, exactly? He said that your people will starve?"

Shin was thankful that they would participate in the funeral, but after hearing that people would die, he couldn't just ignore it.

"Actually, just like the three sea beasts, all monsters in the Kuwain area started growing feral... sir. Because of this, the resources we need are getting scarce... m'lord."

"You don't need to force yourself to speak politely."

According to Marshill, the monsters had turned feral and attacked without regard to their own safety, so many of the fishpeople and merpeople who had exited the barrier to procure supplies had fallen victim to their attacks.

Some of the Celciutos dwellers could deal with the monsters, but it was nevertheless becoming increasingly difficult to ensure that all of them had enough to eat. Because of this, the settlement's food reserves were now very low. The fishpeople and merpeople working outside helped however they could, but the limit was apparently near.

"Why don't you take refuge in Barbatos? Arno said that she can teleport there, so if the merpeople and fishpeople here can manage to leave the Kuwain area you can make do somehow, no?"

Arno, who watched Shin's party leave for Kuwain, had somehow arrived before them. She had used a teleport crystal. It was a secret method that not even the guild knew about.

Arno had also said that she worked in the guild to know who wanted to go to the Kuwain area as early as possible. The teleport spot she used was just outside Barbatos, on the seafloor. The teleport crystals she used were not single use items, but high grade items which could teleport the user an unlimited number of times to a registered location.

"The teleport crystal I use only works with members of the Toole bloodline. Even if someone of my bloodline used it, they couldn't bring anyone from outside the bloodline with them. We thought of moving to another location, but the Kuwain area, as of now, is too dangerous even for our warriors. Even if we moved in small, escorted groups, it would be very risky."

While they were ready to flee, leaving their sanctuary behind, they could not reach an agreement about when and how to do it. Thus time passed and the situation continued to worsen. Transferring not only one or two people, but the whole clan, was something above Arno's capabilities too.

Even if they moved to Barbatos in small groups, in the current situation, some warriors would surely die, so there was no way to know how many would safely reach Barbatos' shores.

They had also made a plea to Barbatos' lord, but the answer had not been favorable.

"Most of the people living here have never set foot in a town. It seems they are worried that a mass immigration would later create troubles."

Barbatos, thanks to the pools built inside the city and its temperate climate, was a popular tourist destination. The famous restaurant Shigureya, too, was one of its attractions. Because of this, its governors were sensitive to situations that could create problems. Events that could damage the city's reputation were dealt with swiftly.

For Barbatos, a mass immigration of individuals not used to living in towns was nothing but a recipe for trouble.

Fishpeople and merpeople were humanlike creatures, not wild beasts. They had the intellect to learn the rules and the rationality to respect them. Even so, most of

Barbatos' dwellers were humans. They were races with different cultures and lifestyles. Fishpeople and merpeople already lived there, so it was not likely for large conflicts to break out, but it would still be difficult to imagine that both sides could fully accept each other without any trouble, even for Shin.

"Most of all, saving us would mean entering the Kuwain area. Thinking about the casualties that such an operation would mean, they surely couldn't send a rescue team."

Not even a marine city's sea warriors would be safe when traveling to Kuwain. It was a route dangerous even for veterans, with a very low survival rate. Any leader would hesitate to send their forces there.

"Many of us refuse to leave their hometown, too. They would want to stay even if the barrier were to disappear."

The elderly especially displayed such a tendency. If they had to die, it would be where they were born, or so they said.

"Even if the barrier was gone, we could somehow manage if the monsters returned to normal. If we could get rid of the cause, we wouldn't need to hide in Celciutos."

Marshall, standing calmly next to Lierno, spoke again.

"I think we could do something about the need for the barrier. If we could get rid of the problem with Ishkar, then we could solve the situation somehow... or so I would like to think."

Shin heard that Kuwain had originally been a safe area to live in. If the miasma was purified and Ishkar regained its strength, the seas would hopefully return to how they were.

Shin paused for a moment, then continued.

"Well, I understand the situation now. This is a problem to be solved after the funeral, but let's all eat for now. You have to hold on for a little longer, until we do something about Ishkar, at least."

"Indeed. An empty stomach robs people of their willpower."

“It’s almost lunch time for us too.”

Shibaid and Filma, who had kept silent until then, nodded in agreement.

Shin’s item box contained great quantities of food supplies. While the funeral was important, he decided to give the priority to those who were living now.

“I’m sorry, guys.”

“No, Jesta too would say that if we had time to hold a funeral for him, we should fill up people’s bellies first.”

“That’s right, that’s exactly what he would say.”

“Grandpa Jesta wouldn’t get angry!”

“He’d get angry and say ‘leave the funeral for later!’ instead!”

Shin apologized for deciding on his own, but Zazie, Lapwing, Bell and Shell shook their heads. Being support characters for the same master, they knew very well how Jesta would have reacted in that situation.

Schnee, who had a high Cooking skill, and Tiera – who had been trained by her – offered to help. Shin told the apologetic Lierno to gather the other tribe members and, with the rest of the party, went to Celciutos’ kitchen. Shibaid and Filma, who were not especially skilled in cooking, went with Lierno to call the other tribe members.

Arno was the only mermaid with the cooking skill, so she went with Shin’s group.

“Who knew that there was a place like this...”

Arno was wide-eyed; Celciutos’ kitchen was equipped with cooking utensils of the highest quality. Basic tools like knives and pots, modern machines like stoves and ovens, bizarre tools that made it difficult to guess what they could be used for... It looked like a small exhibition.

“Let’s start cooking. Prioritize quantity and speed.”

“I’ll handle the preparations.”

Shin took ingredients out of the item box, which Zazie and Lapwing started cooking. Thanks to their boosted stats, vegetables and fish were instantly cut, cleaned, then put into large pots.

There was a great quantity of food to prepare, so they decided to make soup dishes. After skillfully preparing the ingredients, they prepared to cook a bouillabaisse.

Bell and Shell left the room for the moment and went to set the tables.

“Master, you look like you’re keeping up with them, but I couldn’t at all...”

“I couldn’t either...”

Tiera looked at Schnee working alongside Zazie and Lapwing and commented, with a slightly troubled expression on her face. Arno, who was standing next to her, agreed.

“They go above and beyond simply being good cooks, after all.”

Shin too couldn’t help but laugh wryly while looking at the cooking team’s movements.

High physical abilities and cooking skills complemented each other to form a scenery quite different from what one would expect to see in a normal kitchen. The sound of cutting vegetables was quick and sharp, but when it was heard the vegetable had already been completely cut.

Rather than cooking, it was like seeing a magic trick where vegetables were sliced instantly. Shin and Tiera could not intrude the realm of such experts.

“...we might as well go help Bell and Shell.”

“Yes, let’s. We’d just be in the way here.”

The two gave up on helping in the kitchen and decided to go help prepare the tables.

All cooking tools in the kitchen had time reduction bonuses attached, so soon after putting them in the pot to boil they already gave a delicious smell. Seconds later the ingredients looked tasty and a kuu-like sound could be heard.

“...Yuzuha didn’t say anything, you know?”

Shin too knew that the sound was different from Yuzuha's usual voice. He looked towards the source and found Tiera and Arno.

"H-Hey! That wasn't me!"

Tiera realized what Shin's look meant and motioned her denial with her hands. The only other option was thus Arno.

"...uh..."

She must have been embarrassed to be asked if she was hungry. Arno's face was growing redder and redder.

"...aah, I'm sorry, that was me just now. I'm getting pretty hungry."

"Shin, that was way too slow."

If he had to say something, he should have done so right after the rumbling stomach. Shin's "helpful" comment was mercilessly struck down by Tiera. It had not been helpful at all, but there was nothing to do about it.

"Ehm, I'm sorry, about everything..."

"No, I'm ashamed to have—"

Just as Arno was apologizing, another "kuu" sound resounded in the surroundings.

It was more than clear that Arno's stomach was the source.

"...!!"

Arno, still blushing violently, hit her stomach to try to prevent it from rumbling again.

It was painful to see how she was trying to fake a smile. Maybe her will had won, though, because the rumbling stopped.

"Ehm... you don't need to go so far."

"...that's not it."

“Er...”

“We didn’t have enough for everyone... so I just skipped breakfast...”

Arno crouched down and hid her face with her hands, while explaining herself in a quiet voice. Her still visible ears were as red as apples.

“Shin, you and Yuzuha go ahead.”

“Ah, yeah, gotcha.”

Shin followed Tiera’s advice and headed out of the room with Yuzuha. Tiera’s expression seemed to tell him, “don’t look at her”.

“With a smell like this in the air, of course your stomach starts rumbling...”

“Yuzuha’s hungry too!”

Yuzuha agreed to Shin’s mumbling, her tails swaying left and right.

The scent wafting from the kitchen was getting more and more powerful and now strongly stimulated the appetite of anyone who smelled it. If one had skipped breakfast, it was no wonder for the stomach to start craving nutrition.

“We’ve come to help, but have you already finished here?”

“All finished!”

“All done!”

Bell and Shell worked at Shigureya, after all, so their preparation was flawless.

They explained the menu, asked if anyone had allergies, and promptly completed all other necessary preparations. The merpeople and fishpeople who came inside all received a bowl and a spoon, then stared at the kitchen: the source of the smell deliciously filling the air, of course.

“(The food is ready, can you help us bring it out?)”

“(Okay, I’m coming.)”

Shin received Schnee's Mind Chat and went back to the kitchen.

"Shin? What's wrong?"

"They told me the food's ready. I'm going to help serve it."

Shin told Tiera, who was with the still slightly blushing Arno, and walked away. As he neared the kitchen, the smell grew stronger and stronger.

With Yuhuza perched on his head, both her and Shin's stomachs gave healthy rumbles.

"These are the first 80 servings. We will bring the rest as soon as it's ready."

"Got it. I'll give these to Bell and Shell, then come back."

Shin turned the bubbling pot into a card and quickly left the kitchen.

He then materialized the pot on a table prepared by Bell and Shell, raising loud cheers from the fishpeople and merpeople. Shin's group split their roles and served them food, prioritizing children, women and the elderly. Shibaid and Filma kept the queue in order.

"So tasty!!"

"Yes, this is really delicious..."

"I feel so warm..."

"Mgh! Gulp! So good!! Amazing!!"

Mothers smacked their lips while looking at their rejoicing children. Grandmothers let out sighs of relief after slowly bringing the bowl to their lips. Young men wolfed down on their portions as if in a trance. Everyone had content smiles on their faces.

"So this is Shigureya's true power. It really is delicious."

"Kuu, so tasty!"

Realizing that if they properly lined up, they could all have something to eat, no one disrupted the queue. Taking turns, Shin's party ate their fill too. Yuzuha took the

chance to change into human form and enjoyed her soup.

“Everyone’s asking for seconds. Well, it was to be expected... hmm?”

Shin finished his soup, then his eyes caught the sight of Marshill, bowl in hand, looking at the other fishpeople. There was still steam coming from his bowl: he clearly hadn’t finished his soup yet.

“You’re not going to eat?”

“What do you—oh, it’s you, sir.”

The surprised Marshill stood perfectly straight and bowed to Shin.

“What’s gotten into you, all of a sudden?”

“I am deeply sorry for my deplorable behavior until now.”

“Hey now...”

Shin was confused by the fishman’s sudden change. He told him to raise his head and explain first of all. They went to sit on a ledge and Shin told Marshill to drink his soup before it turned cold.

Marshill still tried to speak as politely as possible, so Shin requested that he speak normally.

“I am the leader of the warrior tribe protecting this sanctuary. But all I could do for everyone’s sake was to gather a meager amount of food.”

Having fighting skills, he could have become an adventurer and earned through that, but there was the chance that some among the dwellers may go on a rampage out of frustration and despair, so – thinking about such a possibility – he could not bring himself to leave the settlement.

Marshill had witnessed personally how ferocious the attacks of the three sea beasts were: he was also concerned that the barrier might break down.

“Little by little, day by day, everyone was growing thinner. But I couldn’t do anything to change the situation.”

As they were tasked with procuring food supplies, warriors received relatively complete meals: the portions to the children, the elderly and young people without anything to do, however, were unbearably small.

Some warriors shared their food with them too. If they did, however, they wouldn't be able to muster their power when needed; many of them were killed by monsters this way.

"We couldn't move to Barbatos now, not even if we wanted. Even if we knew we had no future, staying here is all we could do."

Even when he stood against Shin, Marshill didn't have enough strength to fight properly. The difficult situation is the reason why he looked so irritable.

"...Kids can laugh like that, huh."

Marshill looked at the children running around near them, a mellower expression on his face.

His peaceful atmosphere now made him look like a completely different person compared to when Shin first met him.

"I don't care what happens to me. But please, let my subordinates go. They just followed my orders."

"Hey, don't you dare do that here."

Shin felt that Marshill was going to kneel to apologize and stopped him.

"I have no intention of doing anything anyway. We didn't fight and no one was hurt on either side. You better apologize to Zazie and the others, though. You said that something belonging to their master was yours, after all. It's not something they can just let go either."

"Understood."

Marshill nodded firmly to Shin's words.

"Whoops, looks like the last pot is almost empty. I'll go take it."

“I’ll help too if I can.”

Marshall went to Bell and Shell, while Shin headed to the kitchen.

He went back and forth three times.

After about 400 servings of soup were cleared, the cooking came to an end.

“We finished cleaning up, so can you tell us where the Seafloor Sanctuary is?”

“Yes, I was told to be your guide. Please follow me.”

Shin’s group boarded their magic-powered vessel and, following Arno’s lead, went underwater.

Joining Shin in this expedition were the usual members: his support characters and Tiera. As there was the possibility of fighting in an unfamiliar underwater environment, Shin gave Tiera a ring that would absorb damage to a certain degree.

The Shigureya crew remained on Celciutos, in charge of checking whether all its functions were working properly. Shin didn’t think anything would happen so soon, but he told them to focus on the barrier first, just in case.

“The barrier extends underwater... no, up and down? So it’s less affected by outside sources, huh.”

Shin considered how Celciutos’ barrier had been erected as the ship proceeded underwater. Even inside the storm, the waves around Celciutos were calm. The underwater surroundings did not seem unusual either.

Learning that the Seafloor Sanctuary was directly below Celciutos, Shin pictured the barrier’s extension in his head.

C h a p t e r 3

侵された深海

THE NEW  
GATE

# Chapter 3

“Are we there yet?”

Tiera asked after about 30 minutes of continuous diving.

“Looks like it’s deeper than expected.”

Shin also felt that they had already been descending for a long time, but not knowing how deep the sea was in that area, he could not give Tiera a clear answer.

The depth of their current position was 6000 mels.

Thanks to the enchantments attached to it and the unique materials it was made with, the hybrid magic-powered vessel could dive at high speed, but nothing resembling the “Seafloor Sanctuary” could be seen yet.

Arno still lead the way without any signs of indecision however, so they kept following behind her.

Thirty more minutes passed.

Finally, something began to shine in the distance. It was the building Shin’s group was looking for. There were no light sources visible, but its surroundings were strangely bright.

“So that’s the Seafloor Sanctuary. The official name is ‘Castle of the Depths’? Wait, ‘Seafloor Sanctuary’ is there too. They’re mixed together?”

Shin thought that ‘Seafloor Sanctuary’ was the building’s official name, but when he looked at it, another name was displayed. If he moved his gaze just a little, however, the “Seafloor Sanctuary” name also appeared.

“I see, so that’s why Ishkar is here.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Ishkar I knew used to dwell in the royal chambers deep inside an underground dungeon masquerading as a castle. So when Arno said the word “Sanctuary”, I thought it had changed locations, but now I see how it is. The building probably moved when the crust did.”

Shin answered Tiera’s question with a hypothesis.

Upon closer inspection, the group noticed the broken down remains of a building scattered around the Sanctuary. It had probably been destroyed by the natural disasters. The main building was the “Castle of the Depths”, with the “Seafloor Sanctuary” around it.

When Shin mentioned this to Arno, she was very surprised. Apparently she did not know about this bizarre occurrence.

“In that case, the interior of the dungeon could have changed too. Hopefully the path isn’t blocked.”

Schnee commented while looking at the Castle of the Depths. That possibility wasn’t far-fetched at all.

In the game area, such a phenomenon was impossible. In any dungeon there was a path leading to the boss. Now, however, even such an obvious reality could have changed.

“We can only go and check.”

Shin guided the ship until it was close to the Castle of the Depths, then anchored it to the seafloor. As the whole group had left the ship, their equipment changed to its underwater mode, and Shin turned the ship into a card.

Tiera, who did not have the **【Dive】** skill, equipped an earring with the same effects.

Arno was surprised to see the massive ship instantly turn into a card, but then nodded to herself. She now knew that Shin was a High Human, which was enough of an explanation.

“The entrance is over here”

Led by Arno, the group reached the Castle of the Depths’ gate. Even though it was

called a castle, the exterior looked like a cardboard cutout. The dungeon itself extended underground, so it wasn't possible to use shortcuts to the lower floors or similar tricks.

There were treasure chests and such in the above ground part of the castle, but the group had no time to go look for them, so Shin went straight towards the gate.

“This is as far as I can guide you.”

Arno stopped about 10 mels from the gate: a semi-transparent barrier had appeared before her. It apparently stopped all intruders with stats lower than a certain amount.

In the game era, the Castle of the Depths was a high difficulty dungeon, fitting as Ishkar's abode, a boss monster of level 1000.

All monsters that appeared within it had high levels too, so players used it to train low level players: it was a so-called power leveling area.

The game's management did not appreciate such a usage however, and entry into dungeons with a certain number of high-level monsters became restricted.

The restriction placed that time was apparently still active, even in this world. Shin tried to get closer and was able to pass through without problems. Schnee and the rest of the party followed him, until only Tiera remained outside the barrier.

“.....”

She extended a hand towards the barrier, a nervous look on her face. Just as she was about to touch it, Tiera's hand passed through.

“Wheew... I was so nervous...”

There seemed to be a good chance that Tiera would be repelled, so she was really relieved to have been able to pass through the barrier.

(If she's able to enter here, it means that her average stats are over 450. Even factoring in equipment bonuses, that's not a number you can reach without resurrection bonuses...)

So thought Shin while looking at Tiera coming towards them.

Tiera was a Priestess of the World Tree, a special existence, but it was confirmed that she was not a Chosen One.

In the game, no matter what bonuses were granted by equipment, she couldn't have entered in the Castle of the Depths or the Seafloor Sanctuary.

Just now, before Shin's eyes, Tiera had overcome the barrier though.

In this world, players without resurrection bonuses could raise their base stats only by leveling up or using rare items.

Just like Schnee and the others, Tiera had received a stat bonus from the Ley Lines; as a denizen of this world, however, she was starting to become an impossible existence.

"...? Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing."

Thinking wouldn't solve the problem. Tiera was a bit puzzled by Shin's silence, but he waved at her not to mind and looked at Arno.

"Do be careful."

Shin didn't know how long it would take, so he had Arno go back first. Being a mermaid, she could go back to Celciutos even without boarding a ship.

Shin's group watched Arno go, then looked up at the Castle of the Depths' gate.

The gate had three depressions, the same size as item cards.

"Just like how it was set up in the game, I guess?"

"Set up?"

"Yeah, you need to offer the Three Sea Beasts' materials to enter Ishkar's Castle of the Depths."

Shin answered Schnee's question while taking items out of his Item Box.

A fragment of Mascurda's pearls, Keseldran's fang, and Eolios' needle. To enter, they

had to be turned into cards and placed in the gate's depressions.

In this world they had just briefly met Keseldran, but the materials gathered in the game era were still in Shin's item box.

Shin took the three cards and placed each in the depression where the corresponding Sea Beast was depicted.

The response was immediate as two of the three cards were rejected. Only Keseldran's card stayed in place, glowing faintly.

"...whatever could this mean?"

"This happens when the wrong card is put in. The gate's functions are still active I see."

Shin answered Schnee's confused question while touching the gate. There was no response, it didn't look like it would open anytime soon.

Normally, the cards would stay in and the gate would open.

"The materials are the right ones, though. Why did only Keseldran's stay in, anyway?"

In the game era too, item cards received by others would be rejected. The cards in Shin's item box were originally from the game era, they could be seen as having been received from someone else.

"Keseldran was that snake monster with the pincers, right? Maybe we have to come in contact... or at least be seen by them?"

"Looks like that's the only possibility."

Shin could only agree with Tiera's opinion.

"Kuu kuu"

Shin was thinking about the reason behind the rejection of the materials, when Yuzuha poked his forehead.

"Hm? What's up, Yuzuha?"

“When we met Kesel, its magic power went into you, Shin. That’s it, maybe.”

“Its magic power came into me?”

According to Yuzuha, when Keseldran attacked the barrier a small part of its magic power flowed into Shin. It was such a minimal amount that Shin didn’t realize it, but the magic power emanated from the cards was similar to that, apparently.

“Meaning, as long as we get close to them, we don’t need to fight.”

Shin wasn’t sure if the same thing would happen with the other two Beasts too, but there was nothing else they could do.

“Okay, let’s start from Mascurda then.”

Since they just needed to get close to the monster, Shin decided to try from the one easier to escape from: among the Three Sea Beasts, Mascurda had the lowest movement speed.

Shin materialized the magic-powered vessel from the Item Box, deactivated underwater mode, and boarded it with the rest of the party. The direction they set for was north-west.

“Let’s hope we can find it quickly though.”

“Keseldran had come right next to Celciutos, I guess it had perceived our presence?”

Shin had also considered the possibility that Shibaid mentioned.

Despite being in the heart of Kuwain, Keseldran had attacked when the group had neared Celciutos’ barrier. They didn’t know if it came for Shin’s party or the merpeople, but the timing was too good.

Based on what they knew and what Arno had told them, Keseldran had roamed very far from its territory. It wouldn’t have made it in time if it didn’t start chasing Shin’s ship as soon as it entered the Kuwain area.

“If it will come to us, then it’s even better. First we’ll go somewhat closer, set a marker and go back. If getting closer is enough, then great. If not, we’ll think of something else.”

Among all magic skills, there was one that allowed someone to place a marker to know where a particular target was, for a limited period of time. If just getting closer wasn't enough, Shin planned to use it to locate Mascurda.

Moving at high speed underwater was dangerous, so Shin brought the ship near the surface. If they emerged completely they would be subject to the stormy sea and tall waves, so he stopped the ship's ascension to a depth that didn't hinder the ship's sailing.

After a while, a large number of jellyfish-type monsters appeared in front of Shin's ship. Their levels ranged wildly from low to high and they floated really close to each other, leaving almost no space in between.

"Let's take a detour."

There was no need to force their way through the monsters. Jellyfish monsters rarely attacked first, so they would probably let the ship go as long as they weren't attacked.

Shin had heard that the monsters had turned violent, but this type didn't seem to be affected.

The group of jellyfish monsters floated at a depth where light just barely penetrated into the sea, so Shin decided to pass below them.

"Hm?"

The ship was proceeding slowly, when Shin noticed a half transparent red marker on the map. It symbolized the presence of a monster that was using **【Hiding】**.

The jellyfish swarm also slowly moved, as to block the ship's path.

"It came out earlier than expected, huh."

"So it looks like."

Schnee had also perceived the monster's presence and looked under the ship.

Shibaid and Filma realized it too.

"What's coming?"

Tiera understood that a monster was approaching, but she couldn't detect concealed enemies, apparently.

"There's a concealed monster below us. If we go a bit lower, it'll probably attack."

Shin's group was trying to go through what could be called the entrance to the sea depths, a place where light couldn't reach.

Below that, without light sources or night vision skills, it was impossible to see anything.

The jellyfish monsters were just decoys. The ship would be attacked while it tried to dodge them, or so Shin thought the monster's plan was.

"Shouldn't we change course, then?"

"If we do that it might not attack though. We'll dodge and escape."

"Escape? Wait, you mean that the monster trying to ambush us is—"

"It's coming! Grab hold of something, everyone!"

Before Tiera could finish her sentence, Shin sharply turned the control lever and stepped on the pedal. The ship's course changed diagonally and accelerated.

"Bingo! I knew it!"

"Waah..."

Shin turned the ship around, shining its lights on the spot it had recently vacated. There they found six squid-like tentacles with suckers, squirming around in search for the ship.

Tiera backed away at such a sight, holding her own body with her arms and shaking. It was her first time seeing a squid's tentacles that were this large: more than being surprised, she was hit by a wave of disgust.

"Those are Mascurda's tentacles. If they grab you, you'll be dragged straight into its mouth."

The monster's main body was somewhere deeper, so the group could only see its huge tentacles sprouting from the darkness. Because of this, it looked even more creepy.

"What will you do now?"

"I'm afraid it won't work with just the tentacles, so I'll get closer to the main body. Sorry guys, but the ship is going to shake some more!"

Realizing that it couldn't catch anything by trying to grasp with those tentacles, Mascurda's body emerged from the darkness.

Its main body, larger than Shin's magic-powered vessel, was armed with shells and gems, fitting for one of the monsters called a Sea Beast. Large, sharp claws adorned the tips of its tentacles: in spite of its similarity to normal squids, its appearance clearly indicated the creature was a monster.

Additional tentacles it had not used before stretched out towards the ship, but Shin avoided them by moving the ship horizontally. The tentacles, missing their target, crashed into the jellyfish swarm, wrapping themselves around several of them.

"Shin... I don't think I'll be able to eat squid anymore..."

"Yeah, if you're not used to it this can be a pretty shocking sight."

Tiera and Shin were watching Mascurda as it feasted on the jellyfish monsters it had caught. The monster's round mouth on the lower part of its body ripped apart the jellyfish and swallowed them.

Rows of saw-like teeth could be seen within the monster's mouth. The fate of the jellyfish demonstrated clearly what would happen to anything that ended up in the monster's maw.

"So those jellyfish weren't Mascurda's servants, then."

"If we're getting closer to the main body, I'll put up a barrier."

"Please do."

The ship was enchanted with protective magic, but for added safety, Shibaid took out his

[Great Shell Shield of Collision].

Shin directed the ship towards Mascurda's body, keeping the monster in his field of vision.

"We might be attacked, so make sure you don't lose your balance!"

Shin shouted while stepping harder on the pedal. The magic engine roared, attracting Mascurda's attention, its eyes glaring at the ship.

"Well, now it found us for sure."

"Underwater, detection via sound is the basic method. Of course it would."

During Filma and Schnee's exchange, Mascurda's tentacles were already shooting for the ship. The ship accelerated away faster than they could reach, however.

"Shin!! Shin!!! We're tilting!! The ship's tilting!!"

The ship sped through the tentacles at a speed unthinkable for underwater travel. The ship, tilted at 90 degrees, barely managed to dodge the tentacles, so the surprised Tiera called Shin's name.

"We're going to go straight like this and pass next to Mascurda! It's going to shoot magic at us, brace for impact!"

Just as Shin said, the two mels wide gemstone on Mascurda's forehead started glowing. Also due to its status as an underwater monster, the magic it used was mainly water-based.

As the gemstone's light grew stronger, the seawater in front of Mascurda's eyes started whirling.

The newly formed whirlpool quickly became larger and larger, big enough to swallow Shin's ship whole.

Water-type Magic skill 【Maelstrom】 .

Using it underwater gave bonuses such as a boost in offensive power and a larger area of effect. With Mascurda as its caster, the resulting whirlpool reached a size that few

players could create.

“Not so fast!”

In the ship, facing the whirlpool, Shin shouted and hit the control panel. He chose an armament and pulled the trigger without hesitation.

The side of the ship opened with a psssht-like sound and two torpedoes shot towards the whirlpool, leaving a trail of bubbles behind them.

The torpedoes shot straight into the heart of the whirlpool: once they reached it, the spell inside them was activated. After an explosion, a 【Maelstrom】 spinning in the opposite direction as Mascurda’s was generated, and the two whirlpools canceled each other.

“Now!!”

One instant before the whirlpools disappeared, Shin moved the ship forward.

Maybe because the clashing whirlpools obstructed its sight, Mascurda could not react quickly to the ship that forced its way through the two half vanished 【Maelstrom】 .

Shin’s magic-powered vessel passed right next to Mascurda’s body. At that moment, Shin shot a marker, which simply acted as a beacon of magical power, so Mascurda did not even notice being hit with it.

After passing, the ship accelerated and sped away from the monster.

Mascurda tried to chase after it, but right then Shin’s parting gift was activated.

——!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!

What had been released from the back of the ship was a load of barrels. Their objective was to create a smokescreen underwater: rather than actual smoke, they released an ink-like liquid all around. Touching the liquid also made it impossible to detect the player and inflicted negative statuses. It was the underwater version of the item used to escape after encountering monsters too different from one’s level.

Leaving behind Mascurda, who emitted shrill screams out of anger, or pain, Shin’s group returned to the Castle of the Depths.

There they again tried to place the item card of Mascurda's parts in the matching depression of the gate. This time, the card started glowing properly.

"Good! Now we know that we don't need to fight."

It would be a problem to weaken one of the Sea Beasts, for one of the other two to ultimately defeat them. If they just had to go near them, it was much easier than fighting them. Yuzuha confirmed that, just like what had happened with Keseldran, Mascurda's magic power had flowed into Shin.

"Our next destination is the southeast, then?"

"Yes, Eolios is the only one left, let's make sure we can get this done today."

Shin nodded to Schnee and returned to the ship.

The current time was a little past three in the afternoon. Considering how long it would take to come back, it would probably be dusk when they did.

If they started exploring the dungeon then, it could take until late at night to clear it.

The dungeon the group was going to enter was an unknown one, where they would find sources of miasma. It surely wasn't a place to spend the night in.

In the depths of the sea, the presence or absence of sunlight did not make a difference, but because of the lack of sunlight it was easy to lose track of time and be active for long hours, thus impacting one's own performance.

Knowing this, Shin had decided to take sufficient rest before facing the dungeon.

"What? We're not going to leave right away?"

"I have to stock up on items first. Eolios is a fast swimmer too, so I wanted to pick up some items to take care of that."

Eolios was the sea monster that boasted the highest swimming speed. It could even dodge the item the group had used against Mascurda.

Shin was changing the ship's equipment, looking at a diagram of the vessel displayed on a screen. Next to him, Tiera looked impressed.

“Pictures and text floating in midair... it’s really strange, no matter how many times I see them. Besides, just moving them around changes things in reality too...”

The screen that Shin was manipulating was a function loaded onto the ship and visible to anyone, unlike each person’s status screen.

“Once you get used to it, it’s really convenient.”

After answering Tiera, Shin chose an item to equip on the bottom of the hull: as he did the image on the screen changed, now showing a sort of nozzle.

Shin went outside the ship to make sure that it had changed as the diagram had shown. Part of the changes had been executed on the bottom of the ship, so he had to change to underwater mode and dive to check.

“It’s really changed. I wonder how this works...”

Tiera was interested and joined Shin in the inspection: when they returned, she expressed her amazement while deactivating underwater mode. She had looked very closely at the changed parts, but couldn’t understand how it had happened.

“Magically, I guess.”

Shin couldn’t say that it was a game mechanic, so he decided to rely on the always convenient answer that magic did it.

“That’s the most convincing answer, I guess. That... magic-powered engine, was it? The magic flow when it activates is really something else too.”

What Yuzuha called magic flow was visible to Tiera too; like in this case, though, it was apparently possible to see the magic flow coming from items too.

“What do you see, Tiera?”

“I see a thin, sparkling purple light coming out of the engine and spreading throughout the ship. It’s really beautiful, so it’s a bit of a shame that I’m the only one that can see it.”

After completely spreading, the flow vanishes away. Hearing Tiera talk about it, Shin thought that he wanted to see it too, but there were no skills to make magic flow

visible, so he gave up.

With their preparations done, Shin's group departed again, this time for Eolios' territory.

The area ruled by Eolios looked extremely different from Mascurda's.

"This is bad!"

Shin cursed under his breath while carefully handling the ship's controls.

Soon after entering Eolios' territory, the ship was attacked by monsters. Their quantity and species also increased minute by minute.

"Why is it so different from the other areas here?"

"Indeed, this is incomprehensible."

Filma and Shibaid voiced their perplexion too, looking at the monsters that attacked them like an avalanche.

Shibaid erected a barrier to repel the attack of a swarm of mackerel pike-like monsters, while Shin made the ship spin to shake off a group of octopus-type monsters that had attached to it.

For a ship, the action was getting a bit too exciting.

"I might end up knocked-out even before we find the boss..."

The ship's sudden accelerations, decelerations, and rotations were proving to be too much for Tiera, even though she had drunk the anti-seasickness medicine.

Just as Shin began to realize that they couldn't go on like that, he noticed a response far larger than the surrounding monsters heading in their direction at extremely high speed.

The real identity of the response blasting towards the ship, bulldozing through the monsters, was, of course, Eolios.

A massive shark-like monster, with its head and part of its fins hardened as protection.

Its whole body was also covered by one-mel long stake-like needles, which could diffuse magic and were also used as powerful weapons. Even if the monsters that could not dodge Eolios' passing got stuck on them, the Sea Beast did not seem to notice or care.

During the game era, Eolios had pierced many players to death. For the surrounding monsters, being pierced meant instant death. Due to Eolios' tremendous swimming speed, they would be cruelly ripped apart.

"Just as expected from the fastest among the Three Sea Beasts. That speed is on a whole other level."

Shin got rid of the surrounding monsters with the ship's anti-attacker magic and forcefully steered the vessel out of Eolios' path.

Even if they had turned feral, the monsters could probably still realize danger to a degree. The ones surrounding the ship seemed to be shaken by Eolios' arrival.

"It'd be easy if we could just pass by, like we did with Mascurda, huh."

Shin said so to Schnee, but did not attempt this maneuver. Eolios' mobility was at its apex when it attacked, but it could also change direction vertically or horizontally very easily.

Because of this, to avoid its charge they would need to gain a large distance very quickly. Just moving to the side would not suffice.

Even if, by chance, they managed to avoid the collision, Eolios could shoot its needles, thus piercing the ship just after it was thought to be safe.

With the ship's protective plating and Shibaid's barriers, the ship would probably be able to withstand one attack, but if it didn't work they would be unable to recover, so Shin decided not to test it.

"Yuzuha! Is the magic here yet?"

"Not yet!"

The distance between the ship and Eolios was around 300 mels. In Mascurda's case, they had passed less than 10 mels from the monster's body, while with Keseldran the

distance was about 100 mels: considering this, Eolios was still too far.

“How do you like this then!”

Shin moved the ship right in front of Eolios’ path and slowed down.

Maybe thinking that its prey had weakened, Eolios came closer slowly, its jaws wide open.

“My chest... hurts...”

From the bridge it wasn’t possible to see behind the ship. Tiera, however, had felt Eolios’ pressure and was holding her chest with a frown.

“I’m sorry, please bear with it a little longer!”

—Distance to Eolios, 280 mels.

Shin looked at the map and measured the distance. The monster could accelerate suddenly, so his finger was ready on the emergency acceleration switch.

—220 mels.

Yuzuha’s signal wasn’t coming yet. She was gazing intently at something, towards the back of the ship.

—180 mels.

Shin felt something creeping up his shoulders. Probably the pressure that Eolios emanated.

—130 mels.

“It’s here!”

Yuzuha’s voice echoed through the bridge.

“Alright, we’re off!!”

As soon as he heard that the magic power had arrived, Shin activated the ship’s emergency acceleration. At the same time, he released an item to facilitate their escape

from the stern – a different one than what he used against Mascurda.

—!?!?!?!?!?

A few seconds after the release, an inhuman shriek could be heard from behind them.

What Shin had thrown to Eolios was a barrel filled to the brim with crystals, each one imbued with the Wind-type magic skill 【Shock Pulse】. The skill was used to release an extremely loud noise, to disperse pursuing monsters. What would happen if 10, 20, or more were activated underwater, where sound propagated at a faster rate?

“Seems like we managed to escape, somehow.”

Shin breathed a sigh of relief while looking at the responses disappearing outside the map’s detection range.

The crystals emitted a physical shockwave as well, so Eolios had more important things to deal with than chasing Shin’s group. Looking at the marker moving left and right, Shin guessed that it was probably fairly confused now.

Being a shark-based monster, it would have been a problem if it followed them via smell, so Shin had launched a barrel producing a foul smell too.

The monsters that had attacked the ship seemed even more confused than Eolios. Some were bumping into each other or wandered off randomly. The situation was utter chaos. Others, possibly having lost consciousness, did not move at all.

“Looks like the area of effect was pretty wide.”

“We even managed to surprise a boss monster, after all. Though, it must have been because it was activated underwater.”

Shin replied to Schnee’s comment while operating the ship’s controls. Unlike before, when they had just arrived in the area, they managed to proceed without serious obstacles.

They were attacked again by monsters on their way back, but probably because of 【Shock Pulse】’s effects, the monsters were much less fierce than before, so the group could return to the Castle of the Depths relatively smoothly.



Shin's party spent the night in the ship. After making the necessary preparations, they stood before the dungeon's gate.

Shin placed the last remaining card in the gate's depression and all the cards started glowing brightly. With creaking, scratching sounds, the gate to the Castle of the Depths finally opened.

"Shin... there's the possibility that we might be too late."

"Yeah, even I can tell. This time it's really bad."

Shin could only agree with what Tiera said after the gate opened.

The Castle of the Depths had been swallowed by terribly thick miasma.

"Just to be safe, let's all use these."

Shin spoke while looking at the miasma oozing from beyond the gate. The situation was worse than expected, so he decided that it was too risky to just charge in without preparing proper countermeasures. He then handed some [Miracle Drug of Holy Skies], which they had used when exploring Fuji's dungeon, to all the party members. To prepare for anything unexpected, he gave a stack of the item's cards to everyone.

"Tiera, take this."

"This is... er, goggles?"

Together with the item cards, Shin gave Tiera a pair of underwater goggles enchanted with bonus effects such as 【Night Sight】 and 【Far Sight】. The goggles were large, similar to the ones used when diving.

In dungeons where visibility was poor due to miasma, visual assistance skills - 【Night Sight】 above all- were a necessity. Tiera had learned 【Far Sight】, but did not know 【Night Sight】 yet.

"When I equipped them, the water inside the goggles disappeared... is this okay?"

“It’s okay... I guess?”

The goggles did not change form even if the wearer’s equipment turned to underwater mode.

If the goggles were equipped underwater, seawater would normally seep inside, but there was supposed to be no effect on the skills attached to them. For some reason, however, the water inside had disappeared. It could have been a difference between the game and reality.

“No use thinking about it, I guess. The goggles’ effects are still there, so I’ll make good use of them.”

Tiera knew that it wasn’t something they needed to talk about then and there, so she wrapped up the topic. Shin nodded and turned again towards the gate.

“First, I should make sure the miasma doesn’t spread any more than it has already... okay, let’s go.”

Shin stopped the miasma from spreading beyond the gate, then entered into the Castle of the Depths, with Schnee and the others in tow.

“I wouldn’t have expected the castle to be corrupted this much, though. Was the outer appearance just an illusion?”

“If I remember well, its appearance didn’t change even if players destroyed it. Maybe it’s to prevent seeing the interior of the dungeon from outside.”

While advancing through the water, Shin answered Schnee’s question, recalling his memories of the game era.

The Castle of the Depths’ castle part was just a facade, like a cardboard cutout placed in front of the actual dungeon. If one wanted to, it was possible to turn it into a pile of rubble.

Doing so would not have achieved anything, though, so most players did not bother to destroy it.

Shin was looking for the path leading underground, when he picked up several responses within his detection range.

“The castle is supposed to be deserted, but it turns out there’s something here.”

“With this much miasma around, that wouldn’t be strange.”

Shin replied to Shibaid’s warning while drawing his sword, [Moonless].

“They’re ghost types! They’re going to come from the front, left, and right, through the walls!”

Shin looked at the map and noticed hostile markers moving towards them passing through rooms and corridors, so he notified the rest of the party.

A few seconds later ethereal, eerie monsters appeared in front of Shin’s group, from the ceiling and the walls on their right and left sides.

“Shibaid, Filma, the Skullfaces in front are yours. Schnee and I will take the Phantoms on the left and right. Tiera, deal with the Baby Hollow on the ceiling!”

Shin gave orders to the party, then activated the skill **【Pure Holy】** with Schnee.

The half-invisible human-like monsters who had passed through the walls, draped in capes that concealed their features, were High Phantoms: Ghost-type monsters with levels around 400.

Being capable of using magic of every element, they were rather nasty opponents.

Knowing that it was coming, however, Shin and Schnee could prepare to attack as soon as the Phantoms phased through the walls. The light they emitted from their palms caused the High Phantoms to simply vanish before they could do anything.

“I’m done here too.”

At about the same time of Shin and Schnee’s defeat of the High Phantoms, Tiera had dealt with the infant-shaped fireball monsters called Baby Hollow.

There were only a few of them, so they didn’t stand a chance against a shot from Tiera’s bow, armed with the arrows Shin had given her, which had both anti-miasma Light element and **【Purification】** bonuses attached.

As the battlefield was now underwater, Tiera had changed her equipped bow to the

[Emerald Whirltide Bow], a lower Legend-grade bow that increased in offensive power and accuracy underwater.

Shin didn't think that she could use it, but Tiera proved to be able to handle it without penalties.

"Looks like they're about done too."

Shin watched Shibaid and Filma sweeping through the Skullfaces. The corridor they were in was fairly wide, but still not enough for many Skullfaces to stand side by side. No matter how many there were, the only ones who could swing their weapons were the three, maybe four in front.

In terms of stats and equipment, there was no way they could match Shibaid and Filma. Even the King class Skullfaces were felled in a single blow. It was just a matter of time until the entire pack, composed of Skullfaces of various classes, was annihilated.

"They've got numbers, but their levels are nothing to worry about."

"That's right. Anyway, High Phantoms were a monster that appeared in the Seafloor Sanctuary, right?"

The Castle of the Depths was a den of high-level monsters. Thinking about the game's standards, High Phantoms were too low-leveled to appear there.

"Meaning that the Seafloor Sanctuary monsters are dwelling in the castle too? That can be a bit of a pain."

"Judging from the current situation, that appears to be the only explanation. Surely they couldn't be the vengeful spirits of people who died at sea."

Filma looked annoyed, her shoulders dropping, but Shibaid answered her seriously.

Defeating the monsters wouldn't be difficult at all, but speed was of the essence this time, so having their progress slowed down wasn't a good prospect.

Shin's group decided to focus more on enemy detection and proceed while avoiding encounters as much as possible.

“If the structure is the same as before, the path leading to the dungeon should be in the throne room.”

The interior of the castle looked very similar to what Shin remembered. He decided to head for the throne room, as he had in the game. Located in the center of the castle, it would have taken about 15 minutes of walking to reach it.

The most ideal path would be to head straight towards it, destroying the walls blocking the way, but it would have, without a doubt, attracted monsters towards them, so they discarded the idea.

“.....”

Knowing that there were monsters around, the group proceeded in silence thanks to Shin and Schnee’s 【Silent Domain】. Unlike sound on land, at sea, even the smallest whisper could attract a monster’s attention.

“Isn’t it... really cold?”

The throne room was still a few minutes away when Tiera mumbled to herself. Even in underwater mode the effects of the original equipment were still active, so there were environmental changes that only she could notice.

“I don’t feel anything in particular, how about everyone else?”

Filma, Shibaid, and Schnee answered Shin’s question in the same way, they had not picked up anything either.

Yuzuha and Kagerou had different opinions, however.

“My tail feels chilly!”

“Guru!!”

Kagerou growled in agreement to Yuzuha’s words.

“There’s something up ahead.”

“Considering who detected this, I have a bad feeling about what awaits...”

A cold chill that could not be detected by any usual means. The cause was apparently in the throne room.

“It’s not just miasma. It’s probably also dragging the souls of the people who died at sea here. There are so many too...”

Tiera, blessed with spiritual detection abilities, spoke while trembling, her face pale.

“Are you alright? If it’s too tough, we can deal with whatever’s inside ourselves.”

“I won’t be able to join in the fighting if I do, but there is something I’d like to try. Yuzuha, could you help me?”

“Kuu?”

Tiera restrained her body from shaking and looked at Shin. Her eyes shone with the light of a very strong resolve.

“...got it. Yuzuha, take care of Tiera.”

“Kuu!”

Yuzuha cried as to say “leave it to me!” and paddled to Tiera’s shoulder. Being underwater, it felt like she did not weigh anything at all. At Tiera’s feet, Kagerou stood proud, as if saying “I’m by your side too!”.

“Good, let’s go.”

Shin proceeded forward, ever focused on detecting any threats. Walls and such were meaningless to Ghost-type monsters, so whenever they came close, Shin and Schnee blew them away with magic.

“This must be it.”

Shin’s group quickly reached the throne room, successfully avoiding as many encounters as possible.

Beyond the door Shin detected three presences, all larger than the monsters wandering the castle corridors.

“Looks like there are bosses stationed here.”

“Originally there wasn’t supposed to be anything here, so... I suppose they are monsters from Seafloor Sanctuary?”

“I wonder... that place mainly had fish-type monsters, after all. I think the situation now is different.”

The monsters appearing in Seafloor Sanctuary were mainly based on sea creatures, such as fish or crustaceans. Based on the fact that Undead-type monsters like Skullfaces and Phantoms now prowled in the castle, Shin doubted that marine monsters would appear as bosses.

“We can only be alert and proceed.”

Shin nodded to Shibaid. Passing through the throne room was the only way to go underground, so they could not avoid this boss confrontation.

Even though they resolved themselves to confront the bosses, they still wondered whether the dungeon entrance was still in the throne room. However, there was no way to clear their doubt at this moment.

“Are you ready, everyone? I’m opening the door.”

Shin had Schnee and the rest of the group take one step back, then pushed the door open. The doors did not offer much resistance and slowly opened.

The very instant the inside of the room became visible, a black spurt of miasma shot through the opening of the doors directly towards Shin’s party.

“!!”

The miasma had been shot violently, with an explosive power similar to backdraft. The level of danger was much higher than that of the miasma that had been oozing from the castle.

As soon as he saw it, Shin put up a miasma barrier and stepped back. Stopped by the barrier, the miasma’s momentum grew temporarily weaker. Tainted, the barrier vanished quickly, but it was enough to gain some distance.

Shin's group was at peak alertness when they opened the door, so their response had been immediate.

The new miasma barrier put up by Shibaid opened a gap between Shin's group and the miasma.

“【Purification】 !!”

Shin then unleashed his skill towards the miasma that was swallowing Shibaid's barrier.

Struck by the light emitted by Shin's palms, the erupting miasma vanished like smoke.

“Well well. That was quite the welcome.”

“I don't suppose we can expect courtesy from a host made of miasma.”

Exchanging banter with Shibaid, Shin enlarged the range of 【Purification】. Ignoring his decreasing MP, he got rid of all miasma in the throne room at once.

The room had originally appeared dimly lit even through 【Night Vision】, because of the miasma, but now 【Purification】's light showed its original appearance.

If intruders entered it, the throne room became lit with flames that did not go out even underwater, ensuring visibility.

“So that's the source of the response. The miasma wave was just the beginning, I guess.”

Shin's group had torn apart the veil of miasma and could clearly see what the room looked like. What appeared before them were giant skeletons, made of countless small and large bones. The massive creatures were covered by a pale blue skin-like substance.

The skeletons' insides were faintly visible, making the eye cavities of the many skulls embedded in them stand out even more: it was as if countless holes had been opened on the creatures' bodies.

The appearance of the bosses was enough to inspire disgust to whoever laid eyes on

them.

In addition, the robe that shrouded the skeletons was a problem as well. At first glance it looked like a dirty blue robe, but looking at it closely, one would realize that the robes were made of transparent human-like figures.

The “robe” had actually been made by stitching together the souls of the dead: even such a wild theory sounded plausible.

The faces of those souls, that Shin could see, were wailing and filled with desperation, or overtaken by other negative emotions.

——- Try%op&ob\$a - Le#el 8?9

“【Analyze】 isn’t working right?”

“Based on its looks and the readable part, I’d say it’s Trypophobia. This size and ominous aura though... they turned way too violent, seriously.”

Schnee became alert because of the bizarre way the monster’s name and level were displayed, then Shin replied while putting a hand on her shoulder.

The Trypophobia that Shin knew was a monster about three meters tall with strong magic resistance. Its physical defense was not high, so as long the player could get within striking distance, it wasn’t a fearsome opponent. The only thing to pay attention to was its sweeping attack, performed by its four clawed arms.

The Trypophobias now standing before Shin’s party, however, had six arms and bluish flames resembling will-o’-wisps burning on the ends of each of their claws.

Fighting them while assuming that they were the same as the game era’s Trypophobia would definitely give birth to painful regret.

In their originally hollow eye cavities now burned golden flames.

——■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■——!! (T/N: Black squares, unintelligible roar)

As if synchronized with the rekindled flames, the twisted, inhuman roar rising from the Trypophobias' mouths echoed through the throne room. It was 【Deadman's Howl】 , a skill used by many advanced Undead-type monsters.

The monsters' screams were incomprehensible gibberish. They were supposed to inflict negative statuses to whoever heard it, but to Shin's party it sounded like a desperate request for help.

Help us, end our suffering... the wails of the souls, shackled even beyond death, caressed the ears of Shin's party and vanished behind them.

The 【Deadman's Howl】 had the power of three monsters behind it, but even so it failed to affect Shin's party with any negative status.

Tiera however, because of her spiritual detection abilities, grimaced. Thanks to the equipment Shin had given her, she avoided any negative statuses, but her mental burden grew heavier.

The party was still a fair distance from the Trypophobias.

No matter how they fought, she knew she had to bear with it a little longer, but as to dispel such concerns on Shin's part, Tiera shook her head lightly, breathed deeply and looked straight ahead.

"Can you make it?"

"Yes, this isn't enough to take me down. Besides, I want to free those people."

Tiera spoke while looking at the Trypophobias. In her expression, the fear of facing a powerful monster was nowhere to be found.

"Should we just weaken them and not defeat them yet?"

"No, take them down without holding anything back. It probably doesn't matter how many times we defeat them, if we don't do something about the trapped souls first though."

Tiera said that the monsters would probably revive even if they were defeated.

"Okay, then leave the normal fighting to us. Yuzuha, Kagerou, I leave Tiera with you."

“Kuu!”

“Gurua!!”

Their cries behind him, Shin and the party wielded their weapons. Only Tiera clasped her hands on her chest, as if praying.

“Looks like they noticed that their skill had no effect.”

Shin looked at the Trypophobias, which had raised their arms high. They had some time to talk because the monsters hadn't been moving.

The Trypophobias did not seem to have any particular intelligence, but being high-level monsters, they could probably at least realize if the skills they used were effective or not.

Seeing that Shin's party was not affected, they probably decided to go with physical attacks next.

“I shall take the first attack.”

At the same time as the Trypophobias started moving, Shibaid leapt. Despite the water resistance, he charged in even faster than usual with his shield at the ready.

Because of how its body was structured, Trypophobia could not move by itself. Because of this, it possessed skills to force enemies to come towards itself. Shibaid was moving faster than usual because of the effects of the skill that one of the Trypophobia used to lure him closer, **【Darkness Beckons】** .

The Trypophobia raised its flaming arms, ready to strike the approaching Shibaid. The monster swung down when Shibaid was within range, its arms drawing a bluish arc in midair before clashing with Shibaid's shield. A loud sound of clashing metal resounded, then Shibaid stopped moving.

The boss had swung its three right arms. Shibaid couldn't stop them with only his shield, so he also erected a defensive barrier, ultimately blocking 15 claws.

As a testimony to the monster's offensive power, Shibaid's greaves dug into the floor, cracking the stone tiles.

“I thought it would be fire, but I feel no heat. Is this cold air?”

What Shibaid felt through the barrier was not searing heat, but freezing cold air.

The flames probably looked like fire because of the way the seawater continually froze and shattered. It was likely due to an effect of the monster’s magic or an unique skill it possessed.

“If it really is cold air, then have a taste of this!”

Filma cut down another one of the Trypophobias. Flames blazed from her [Red Moon]: the instant they touched the monster’s swinging claws, they shattered them from the wrists down, with the sound of breaking glass.

“It’s weak to fire, no doubt about it!”

Filma twisted her body while shouting, then shattered the monster’s other arm.

At the same time, Schnee stepped to the side of the last remaining Trypophobia. After moving behind the monster, she spun around, ready to counterattack. The monster, however, had just received a blow that had cut into half of its body, so its arms could not reach Schnee.

“Shibaid!”

“Understood!”

It was like they were communicating telepathically. Without the need for more precise orders, Shibaid activated the Shield-type Martial skill **【Knock Move】** and shook off Trypophobia’s right arm. This skill allowed the user to erect a barrier with the same defensive power as the shield they had equipped and use it as a decoy as they retreated, often fast enough to leave behind after-images. It was usually used by the party’s shield to gain distance from the enemies or when they needed an emergency exit.



Taking the place of the retreating Shibaid, Schnee released a magic spell.

Ten centimeters long rays of light extended to each of the monster's arms: three seconds later, fire erupted from the arms and exploded.

Fire-type Magic skill **【Materia Bomber】** .

This skill, quite unusual among all Flame-type spells, instantly changed the targeted body part to a bomb. Only non-living matter could be turned into an explosive however.

“For a monster over level 800, it's a bit too frail...”

The monster's arms were powerful enough to force Shibaid's greaves to carve the ground, but after finding its weak point it was going down too easily, so Schnee was growing suspicious.

Before the wary Schnee, Shin gripped his [Moonless] at his waist, preparing to strike.

The now armless Trypophobia roared again, probably to attempt a last resort attack. That very instant, as if triggered by the roar, tentacles made of bones extended from the bones supporting the monster's upper body and the foundation-like base part of the monster, mixed with the souls. At the same time, the blue flames burning on the monster's claws appeared in midair.

“Time for the trump card, is it?”

Attacks never seen in the game era were coming up one after another. Even so, Shin did not falter.

From a videogame perspective, it was completely normal for bosses to perform unexpected attacks. That was far from enough to stop Shin's attacks though.

The tentacles, as fast and sharp as arrows, were parried by Shibaid, while the flames were swept away by Filma and Schnee.

All three then jumped out of the attack range, at the same timing.

“Shah!!”

In the space they previously occupied Shin unleashed his attack.

Tentacles and flames had appeared again, but could not offer meaningful resistance as they were torn apart. Trypophobia tried to use its arms and claws as a shield at first, to little or no effect: along with the monster's torso, they were cleaved in two.

The following sharp slash severed the skull, formed by countless bones, in two clean halves.

Katana and Divine Combination Skill 【Scourge Divide】 .

A slash that caused additional damage to Undead types and miasma, this skill could not be resisted by Trypophobia.

It was not the end of Shin's party's offensive, though: Schnee, Filma, and Shibaid each followed up by attacking with their own weapons.

Schnee's [Blue Moon], Filma's [Red Moon], and Shibaid's [Placid Moon] struck the skeleton's skull and torso, already cut in horizontal halves, and cut it vertically this time.

Several seconds after Shin's attack, the Trypophobia — to be precise, the four parts it had been severed into — slowly collapsed.

The golden flames in its eye cavities flickered out and the masses of bones forming it came apart. It was almost like the Trypobias had turned into sand.

“Tiera, how's the situation?”

“The binding is coming loose. I'm going to start now, but just in case, please defend me.”

Tiera's hands, held over her chest in prayer until then, were now released and she spread her arms wide. Her lips then moved and started intoning a melody.

It was a requiem, meant to free the trapped souls and send them to a place where light shines.

It was a song with no words, a melody formed only by sounds higher and lower, stronger and weaker.

Tiera's chant resounded through the miasma-tainted waters.

"This is..."

Changes started manifesting seconds after Tiera had started singing. A bright, pure light started to fill the throne room. It was brighter and warmer than the automatic fires that had lit up the room until then.

Shin's party swallowed their breath at the scenery. It was almost like Tiera herself was shining and illuminating the room.

"Kuu"

"Guru..."

The two beasts next to Tiera also cried in unison with her singing.

Yuzuha spread her tails in a fan-like shape, Kagerou's horn lit up intermittently. Both of them also emitted a pale light from their bodies.

There was someone else, however, who could not simply stay quiet while they watched.

"—this is no time to be noisy."

Shin turned around and saw the defeated Trypophobia start reforming, much like video footage played backwards. The bones were forming a skull, which the robe of the wailing ones covered. Only one of the three Trypophobias had started reforming.

If it was left alone like this, the monster would have completely reformed after only 10 seconds or so. Shin wouldn't just watch and not do anything.

" **【Ignition Red】** !"

Shin pointed at the Trypophobia, and the gradually recovering body suddenly burst into flames.

The Trypophobia had been burned up by a magic skill of the Ignition series, which struck the area the player pointed in with the element of the player's choosing.

Red meant flame magic, Blue water magic, etcetera. The name changed according to the element.

Underwater, fire — the element Undead types were weak to — was not as effective, but with Shin's stats, it was possible to keep the same amount of firepower as if the skill was used above ground.

The recovering skull turned into ashes, the arms it was trying to raise scorched and fell.

The flames did not lose momentum and spread to the foundation of bones supporting Trypophobia, then the mass of souls.

The monster's alleged source of energy was being burnt by Shin's flames. What remained was just a small mound of ashes.

Every time it was annihilated, Trypophobia's bones started to form again from nothingness. No matter how high its recovery power was, if it was defeated before reforming, it was all meaningless.

Shin was forced to shoot 【Ignition Red】 over and over again, but his automatic MP recovery ratio exceeded the quantity he used for the spell, so there was no risk of running out.

After several instances of burning bones down, Shin noticed that the monster's recovery speed was slowing down.

“It's started acting differently.”

The quantity of rising bones was decreasing and the spiritual veil covering them was getting thinner, as Schnee noticed too.

“Yes, besides, something's leaking out of its body.”

Upon closer inspection, a small light was leaking out and disappearing like steam from Trypophobia's body and the foundation part.

Thanks to Tiera's power, two-thirds of the throne room were now illuminated. Maybe because of the light's effects, the monster's recovery had considerably slowed down.



Trypophobia, slashed again in four parts by the attack, fell to the ground, immobile. It was like time had stopped for the monster.

It was difficult to notice because of Trypophobia's originally white color, but its whole body was now frozen. A few seconds after it touched the ground, golden flames erupted from its body. Divine flames with miasma purification properties enveloped the frozen Trypophobia.

Different from 【Ignitor Red】 , which only burned its target, 【Divine Flame – Royal Frost Blade】 's flames did not leave even a speck of ash.

When the fire had vanished, leaving nothing in its wake, Tiera's chant became louder.

In response, light started appearing from the spots where the Trypophobias were. They were larger than the ones that had leaked from the monsters' bodies during the fighting.

The globes of light were initially very few, but quickly increased in quantity. They formed a sort of river of light in the air, which started flowing upwards, towards the surface of the water.

“Hah... now... it should be... okay...”

“Those were the freed souls?”

“Yes. There's no one left here anymore.”

Shin waited for Tiera to recover her breath, looking at the lights floating away.

The lights passed through the ceiling of the Castle of the Depths and were not visible anymore.

“So that is... how souls shine?”

“Yes, exactly. But their true glow is much stronger.”

Tiera said that after being imprisoned for so long, they had probably grown weaker.

The brilliance of the ancestors' souls, which Tiera had felt during her service as Priestess of the World Tree, was much warmer and brighter than what Shin's party

had just witnessed.

“Okay, we’ve taken care of the bosses and all, but is the entrance to the dungeon still there?”

While they waited for Tiera to recover, Shin inspected the location that the Trypophobias were guarding.

【Analyze】 had displayed the monsters’ names in an unusual way, so he thought that there might be something left.

“Is that a gem?”

The first thing he noticed was a gem the same size as the one of the non-standard monster he had fought in Bayreuth, the Skullface Lord.

The gem’s color, a very deep blue, showed that it belonged to the water element. Even after appraising it, he could only learn that it belonged to the highest Unique grade, and nothing else.

“Did you learn anything?”

“No, it doesn’t seem to be unusual in any way. This gem too, as material it’s something that I’ve seen before.”

Shin couldn’t find any drops besides the gem where the Trypophobias were. Different from the game era, they did not drop any weapons or materials. Just in case, he inspected the floor too, but could not find anything of note.

Shin decided to inspect the throne with Schnee. If it was still as he remembered, the entrance to the dungeon should have been there.

“There should be a switch behind the throne... here it is.”

Shin found a small gap in a part of the throne. He checked if there were any traps, then pushed the gap deeper inside.

With the sound of stones grinding against each other, the throne and a part of the floor began moving to the side, revealing stairs going downwards. The passage was so narrow that Shibaid could barely fit in it.

“We found the path leading underground. Are you ready?”

“Yes, I didn’t use that much energy anyway, I’m okay.”

Tiera’s HP and MP had both completely recovered. Her complexion wasn’t bad either, so Shin concluded that she wasn’t faking it.

“OK then, let’s go.”

The party finally set foot in the Castle of the Depths’ dungeon.

Schnee led the formation, followed by Shibaid, Filma, Tiera, and Shin. Yuzuha and Kagerou walked alongside Tiera.

After 5 minutes of descending the narrow stairs, the group arrived in what resembled a natural cave. The width of the corridor increased enough to make it possible for 3 members to fight side by side.

“Without 【Night Vision】 , we wouldn’t be able to see even one mel ahead here.”

Tiera spoke while looking at the corridor. She had removed her goggles to see how much would be normally visible.

The miasma underground was thicker than above. To be safe, the group took another dose of the miracle drug.

“There are less monsters than expected, but is that normal when the miasma infection progresses?”

Filma wondered out loud after the group had repelled several monster attacks.

“Dungeon monsters can’t exactly reproduce, after all. Either new ones aren’t born, or they turned into Chimeras, I guess?”

Shin answered while searching the surroundings for any presence. It was just a theory, as there was the possibility for the monsters to be gathered in the lower floors, but Shin felt that it wasn’t too different from normal dungeons.

“In any case, let’s not lower our guards.”

Shibaid spoke as he raised his shield and halberd to repel monsters that had charged towards the group.

The path had reached a crossroads and the monsters had attempted a pincer attack on the party.

The monsters that Shibaid knocked away were mackerel pike-like monsters with heads morphed into iron lumps, called Magnum Fish. Its level ranged from 600 to 650 and its greatest characteristic was its high speed. Many players had experienced receiving large damage by their charge attacks the first time they fought this monster.

Magnum Fish had low defenses on all body parts other than their heads, so if the first strike was dodged or blocked, they became easy to neutralize. If the charge attack struck, however, rear guard Jobs with low defenses, such as Mages or Hunters, risked being knocked out in one blow.

“I-I didn’t even see them...”

“That’s what they call a trap for first timers.”

Shin had also been hit and sent spinning in mid-water his first time.

“With the skill **【Insight】**, you can get a hunch that it’s coming though.”

“I barely have any skills that reinforce the senses...”

Tiera had learned several skills, but they still counted up to less than a dozen. In order to avoid Magnum Fish attacks, she would have to somehow guess their trajectory or take cover in a place with many objects to use as protection. If such methods didn’t work, she could only rely on her intuition.

“Do not fret. As long as we stand, no monster will ever touch you.”

“That’s right, you know you’re in good hands with us around.”

In a narrow corridor like the one the group was exploring, attacks could only come from determined directions. Shibaid and Filma, the front guard, would not let anything pass them in such a situation.

“I will take the lead then.”

Schnee, using her trap detection skills, examined the surroundings as she led the party forward.

They were still in the upper floors, but Castle of the Depths was still a high-level dungeon. Because it was located underwater as well, the group had to proceed with caution.

The biggest difference between dungeons above ground and underwater ones was the type of traps present.

The whole passageway was filled with water, so it was difficult to dodge if the ceiling opened, sucking the players in, or poisonous liquids were scattered all around. Sometimes it was also necessary to use the traps to go forward, so underwater dungeons had generally higher levels of difficulty than their above ground counterparts.

“No problem, it seems. Let’s go.”

Shin talked to Schnee via Mind Chat. On the way, they found a trap that would freeze the water in the passageway for a set time, and Tiera groaned “How are you supposed to dodge that...?”

Any attacking monsters were crushed by Shibaid and Filma, as they had said they would. Usually Shibaid would attract the monsters’ attention, luring them in one location, where Filma would cut them down all together.

[Red Moon]’s flames did not lose any power even underwater, thanks to 【Enchant – Mana Fire】 .

What appeared to be roaring flames actually functioned just as a visual scare. They became effective only when they hit the opponent, slashing and scorching them.

Its effectiveness did not disappear after a set time, but after a certain number of uses, a condition perfect for Filma, who could K.O. any monster in a single stroke.

“Looks like it’s a dead end ahead.”

Schnee had returned from her inspection and mapping, shaking her head.

Most high level or high profile dungeons had already been considerably mapped in the

game era, but here, Castle of the Depths' map was -as expected- completely blank.

Because of that, the group was forced to re-do the mapping all over again.

The Castle of the Depths was a wide dungeon, so even 【Magic Sonar】 could only scan half of one floor.

When the path split, Shin and Schnee parted ways to explore both ways but, even then, it took time.

“Looks like it'll be impossible to clear this in one sitting.”

“Yeah... well, normally it takes a few days to map a dungeon, so doing it as quickly as we did in Hinomoto is actually unusual.”

Shin remembered how tough things were in the game era and reassured Filma, mentioning that things had gone almost too smoothly until now.

In the last dungeons cleared by the party, Depths of Hellfire and Cadaver Realm, they had achieved their goals in one day, but those dungeons usually required several days to clear them.

“Should we set up a proper camp somewhere? In a place like this, I wouldn't want to just sleep in a tent, honestly.”

“I understand all too well not wanting to rest in a place filled with miasma like this. If we could teleport and leave it'd be very different, but...”

Shin had attempted before, but both mid-level teleport crystals used to escape dungeons and high-level ones used to leave from special areas, such as event fields, did not work at all.

Shin had always tried in dungeons tainted by miasma, but was not sure if miasma was the reason or there was something else.

“Guess it wouldn't hurt to try. Gather here, everybody.”

Teleport crystals transported all players and monsters in a five mels radius from the user. In order to prevent the player from fleeing via teleport when they were in a pinch, monsters were transported too.

Even if a player was registered in the party but was outside the range when the teleport crystal was used, they would be left behind.

Shin made sure that everyone was within range and activated the teleport. The destination was the entrance to the Castle of the Depths, before the gate where he had placed the Three Sea Beasts' cards.

"...It worked."

"So it seems."

An instant later after activating the teleport magic sealed within the crystals, Schnee and Shin looked around and commented, a bit dumbfounded.

They both thought that it wouldn't work. However, contrary to their expectations, the entrance gate of the castle now stood before them. They also checked the map, but there was no mistake.

"What's going on? Teleporting never worked before, right?"

"Maybe it's related to the fact that the dungeons are mixed together?"

Filma and Shibaid wondered why teleporting worked in this instance. They had too little information to reach a conclusion though.

"What do we do now? Even if we reenter, I don't think we can get much farther. It should be getting pretty late too, right?"

"Yeah, I don't know why we were able to teleport, but just knowing that we can is an accomplishment in itself. We have the map, so we can reach our previous location with the shortest route possible. Let's call it a day."

Tiera had also performed the great feat of freeing the imprisoned souls, so it was preferable not to push her too much harder today.

Shin materialized the magic-powered vessel from the item box and the whole party boarded it.

They deactivated the equipment's underwater mode and decided to eat.

The ship wasn't originally equipped with a kitchen, so Shin changed part of the structure and added a kitchen. He also created rooms for all members and a bath.

"This dungeon feels somewhat different than the ones we faced until now."

Schnee wondered aloud while watching the bubbling pots in the newly created kitchen.

Tiera and Filma had gone to the bath with Yuzuha and Kagerou. Shibaid had left the kitchen, saying he was going to take a look at his room.

Without anything else to do, Shin was just looking at Schnee cook. Her words intrigued him.

"Different how?"

"I feel... uneasy. I can't express it in words... I don't know what else I could say about it."

Schnee put a hand on her chest, a somber look on her face.

"It feels similar to... that time."

"That time? What do you mean?"

Schnee turned around and looked at him with a sad smile.

"Like when... I thought that you might not come back anymore. It feels similar to the time when I thought about that."

"I...?"

Before Shin could ask anything else, Schnee came closer to him. She took his hand in hers and put it against her cheek.



“...this helps me calm down.”

With silver hair, red eyes, and pale, evanescent skin, Schnee’s appearance suggested a certain coldness, but the hand on her cheek was surely warm.

“Schnee...”

“While I was waiting for you, I thought that you might not come back anymore... so many times. The thought that time will just go on like this, that I... that my feelings too will just die one day. On such days, I sometimes couldn’t sleep until dawn.”

“.....”

Shin didn’t know how to reply. Schnee’s words, in a way, had become reality.

“Yes, I’m sure of it.”

After a brief silence, Schnee talked again.

“Now that we’ve talked like this, I feel certain. That time, I felt like I was missing something... in the Castle of the Depths, I felt something similar.”

“Is that... so.”

A feeling of loss.

A feeling of powerlessness.

Probably something like that.

Why would Schnee feel something like that in the Castle of the Depths though?

“I... did?”

Shin could be somehow connected to what Schnee felt.

“But I have no idea what it could be...?”

“I do not know either. Yet...”

Schnee was probably thinking of something: she started talking, but stopped.

“Yet... what?”

“It’s just a possibility, but... in the Castle of the Depths, there might be something..... something that leads to you going back.”

Schnee hesitated in the middle of the sentence, and continued while looking down.

“...I see, that’s what you meant.”

Shin could now understand. There was no need to think about what could be the cause behind her feeling of loss.

“Please, don’t worry.”

“!!”

Shin stood up and grabbed Schnee’s hand. Because it was him, she did not put up any resistance.

“Ehm, Shin?”

“Even if we find something related to how I can go back, I’m not going to disappear right away. Besides... I know it might sound unfair to say it now, but I am thinking that it might be nice to stay here too.”

“!? Do you... really mean it!?”

Schnee’s expression was almost blank, but now changed completely. She grabbed Shin’s shoulders and stared at him straight in his eyes.

“Yes, I do. Anyway, people like me usually can’t go back.”

If he had been summoned on the basis of a solid theory and technology, there might be the possibility to go back.

Shin had been transported to the new world in incomprehensible circumstances, however: believing that he could somehow go back was kind of too convenient.

The last thing that Shin saw was a gate opening. It was a situation that was impossible in a game, something he couldn't understand at all.

"By this, I don't mean that... h-hey, Schnee!?"

Shin was scratching his cheek, meaning to say that it wasn't just an excuse, but he couldn't finish his sentence. Clear tears were streaming down Schnee's cheeks.

"Sch-Schnee!? Are you okay!?"

Shin, not expecting her to cry, was a bit shaken.

"I'm sorry. Hearing you say that made me even happier than I thought..."

Schnee smiled while wiping her tears. Shin's chest hurt at such a sight.

It was true that he thought that he could stay. It was not something he decided he would do no matter what, however.

Putting aside the fact if he could actually go back or not, his desire to go back to his former world and his feelings towards Schnee were clashing within his heart, making sparks fly.

"Please do not make such a face. Just knowing that there is a chance is good news for me. It will make such feelings even stronger."

Schnee probably felt what Shin was thinking about and smiled at him, traces of tears on her face. It was a smile brighter than Shin had ever seen.

"Schnee... you're tough."

"Of course. I am the maiden that fell in love with you, after all!"

"O-oh. Of course."

After being impressed for an instant, Shin was disoriented by Schnee's very direct declaration.

"W-well, I think the pot has boiled enough. Could you please go call Filma and the others? I'm sure they must have come out of the bath."

Embarrassed because of her maiden in love statement, Schnee blushed.

Shin nodded to her and headed towards the corridor. It was then that he finally noticed the two pair of eyes looking at them.

“...hey. Since when have you been there?”

The eyes belonged to Filma and Shibaid. Both were peeking inside the dining room from the corridor.

It was normal for Filma, but seeing Shibaid poke just his face in the dining room, while hiding the rest of his body in the corridor, was kind of surreal.

“Enough to catch all the good parts!”

“Indeed. More precisely, if I were to re-enact it...”Please, don’t worry.””

Shibaid then embraced Filma. Filma then answered with a dramatic motion.

“Ehm, Shin?”

“Even if we find somet——”

“Stop the playyyyyyy!!!!!!”

Shin screamed.

They had seen everything since that!

“You two were SO much in your little world that you didn’t even notice us... I’m almost jealous.”

“Just say if you’re there!!”

“In that situation? It would have been quite inconsiderate.”

“Watching is even more inconsiderate!!”

Shin turned towards Schnee, seeking help, but she was staring intently at the pot, pretending not to hear anything.

She had heard everything, though. Her glowing red ears were proof enough.

“Ehm... did something happen?”

The dining room was very chaotic until Tiera arrived, with Yuzuha and Kagerou in tow, and asked what was going on.

C h a p t e r 4

境 界 の 守 護 者

THE NEW  
GATE

## Chapter 4

The following day, Shin's party was once again standing before the gate to the Castle of the Depths.

"I'd sure love to be done with this place today."

"That's right. Let's proceed while keeping time loss to a minimum."

Probably because of what happened the day before, Schnee looked less concerned and more eager.

All party members agreed with her; Filma and Shibaid looked in better shape than usual too.

"...hey, Shin. Are you really sure that nothing happened yesterday, before I arrived?"

"I explained already, didn't I? That we might find something related to me."

"But despite that, aren't master and Filma acting kind of weird?"

"No, I don't think so. Really."

"...very suspicious..."

Under Tiera's inquisitive stare, Shin was in a cold sweat, trying his best to control his facial expressions.

He had already told Tiera about what Schnee had felt. He couldn't tell her, however, that he had also hugged Schnee and made her cry. Shin also wanted to forget about the fact that Filma and Shibaid had been watching.

"Well, I'm not going to ask anymore... but don't hide really important things from me, okay? I told you about my biggest secret after all."

"I know, and I told you about the most important part. There's something that Schnee seems to feel, but the others don't. I don't either. Can you feel something peculiar other

than the miasma, Tiera?”

“With all the miasma, I feel that my other senses are dulled, but... well, now that you mention it, other than feeling worried, I feel like... there’s something pulling me? Something like that, but just vaguely...”

Tiera spoke while looking at the miasma lightly swaying beyond the gate.

Shin trusted Tiera’s sharp senses, so he found her mention of feeling something pulling at her a bit strange.

“Schnee feels like I might disappear, but you feel something pulling at you. Hmm...”

If Shin was the one being pulled, Schnee’s sensation would become more realistic, but Tiera said that she felt like she was the one being pulled.

Shin couldn’t make anything of it yet.

“It’s pointless to simply worry about it here. We’ll know if we go.”

“Indeed, that is the only way.”

Shin was deep in thought, his head cocked to one side, but Filma and Shibaid prodded him. Thinking about it wouldn’t lead to any answers.

“Right, we’ll just go and see what happens.”

Just like the day before, the group used the[Miracle Drug of Holy Skies]and entered the castle.

Using the map, they proceeded quickly up to a certain point: then Shin and Schnee split up to explore and fill the remaining blank portions of the map, all the while maintaining communication via Mind Chat.

During the exploration of the dungeon, Schnee was the first one to notice something unusual.

“There aren’t any Chimeras.”

“Right... we’re already pretty far into the dungeon, this doesn’t feel right.”

“I can’t find any miasma-infected monsters either. With this much miasma filling the dungeon, it’s strange that the monsters are unaffected.”

The group was already past the midpoint of the dungeon, but had not yet encountered any monsters possessed or infected by miasma: Shin couldn’t rule it out as just their imagination anymore.

Except for the miasma hanging heavily throughout, the dungeon seemed absolutely normal.

“I guess this is different than all the dungeons we’ve explored before. Could that also be the reason why Schnee and Tiera feel something out of the ordinary?”

“It could be. Trypophobia’s bizarre display too could have been the product of something other than miasma.”

Even if affected by miasma, the **【Analyse】** display had never looked bugged before.

Shin thought that the transformation from a game into reality might be a reason for the strange behavior.

Judging from the condition of the dungeon’s monsters however, there was a considerable chance that something other than miasma lay in wait.

“Did something like this happen before?”

“No, I cannot recall anything of the sort.”

Shibaid shook his head in response to Filma’s question.

Schnee, Tiera, and of course, Shin shook their heads as well.

“I thought something had happened while I was sleeping, but it looks like that’s not the case. Anyway, we can just go on and see, huh. It’s starting to feel like going to face a boss we’ve never fought before.”

“Yeah, now that you mention it, that’s it.”

Filma shrugged and Shin agreed with her assessment. The current situation wasn’t completely the same, but prior to facing a boss for the first time he would also think

about how it would act or what type of enemy it would be. The only way to know was to fight.

Filma's conclusion was not far from the truth.

“Let's go, we have to find the route to the boss chamber today.”

The party advanced deeper in the dungeon. Now well past the middle point, they descended to what they supposed was the lower area of the dungeon — if Shin's memory was correct. They could not detect any changes in the monsters they encountered though.

Just like the upper and middle areas, miasma leaked from the walls and floor.

Shin and Schnee led, followed by the rest of the party. Progress was time consuming, but they were not hindered by obstacles like the Trypophobia.

After descending the stairs to yet another floor, Shin's group faced a large, 5 mels tall, 4 mels wide door, intricately adorned with gorgeous, pompous decorations.

“This is... ice?”

The door, probably leading to Ishkar's throne room, was covered by transparent crystal. Shin touched it warily and felt a cool sensation.

“Should we try to melt it?”

“No, it already took plenty of time to arrive here. Let's go inside tomorrow.”

Considering who they were going to face, Shin prioritized keeping everyone's condition in top form.

The group teleported to the dungeon's entrance with a crystal and rested in the magic-powered vessel. The next day, after making sure that no one was feeling unwell, they quickly navigated to the majestic door they had stopped at the day before.



“Let's melt the ice first. Shibaid, put up a barrier, just in case.”

“Understood.”

Shin stood in front of the frozen gate and activated a basic Flame-type Magic skill 【Fireball】. Instead of releasing it as an attack, he held it in front of the door to melt the ice.

Shattering the ice by force was also an option, but accidentally hitting the door might cause something unexpected to happen, so Shin decided to proceed with caution.

Keeping a ball of fire alive deep underwater was in itself a strange thing, nevertheless that was but a type of miracle granted by the mysterious power of magic.

Little by little, the heat emitted by the fireball melted the ice, which covered the door as if to seal it.

“I expected as much... this isn’t normal ice.”

Shin’s 【Fireball】 was easily over 1000 degrees, so ordinary ice would have completely disappeared in a flash.

The ice covering the door, however, melted extremely slowly even with the ball of fire touching it. At this rate, it would take hours to completely vanish.

“It might have something to do with the miasma... let’s try 【Purification】.”

Shin stopped 【Fireball】 and activated 【Purification】, but there was no visible change to the situation.

“The surroundings are filled with miasma, but only this door isn’t? I guess I just have to increase the firepower then.”

Shin activated one of the most powerful Flame skills he possessed, the Flame-type Magic skill 【Flare Wall】. This high-level flame skill created a wall of fire in one spot. It couldn’t be moved, but emanated enough heat that the target would suffer damage even wearing fire-resistant equipment.

Shin created 【Flare Wall】 right in front of the door, so its heat was in direct contact with the ice. Maybe because of the higher temperature, the ice started melting much faster than when it was subjected to 【Fireball】’s heat. Even so, it would still take

considerable time.

“Let me do it too.”

Schnee created a 【Flare Wall】 herself. While not at Shin’s level, Schnee too had reached high proficiency in martial and magic skills.

Wall-type skills became more powerful if cast in multiples, so Schnee added hers to Shin’s.

“The melting speed isn’t changing.”

“We definitely have more firepower now, though”

Despite the clear increase in firepower, the ice wasn’t melting any faster than when only Shin was casting the skill.

“Try using some other skill.”

Following Shin’s proposal, Schnee tried casting other Flame-type skills. None of them seemed to be effective, however.

“What could this mean?”

“Since I’m apparently connected somehow to this place, only my magic works? Tiera, could you try too, just to be sure?”

Tiera said that she felt pulled by something, so Shin thought that her magic could have some effect.

All of Tiera’s Flame-type magic spells were Arts. Their power was far lower than Skills, so it was hardly likely for them to have a significant effect on the ice that not even Shin’s magic power could melt quickly. Shin asked her to try, nonetheless, to be sure.

“Here goes nothing!”

Tiera held a hand towards the ice cover and casted 【Fire Wall】 , right next to the door, just like Shin had done. Being the same Flame-type magic skill, firepower should increase, if only slightly.

Tiera's 【Fire Wall】 , however, instead of merging with Shin's 【Flare Wall】 , was repelled by it and vanished.

"It should be possible to use Skills and Arts together, though..."

Schnee had successfully attempted it before, so she was puzzled by this development.

"Should I try putting out my 【Flare Wall】 ?"

"I don't think we should. Even if my Art was effective then, there's too much of a difference in firepower between us. I think that our abilities are just too different."

Tiera's supposition was very plausible. It would take too much time to test every little possibility, so they decided to simply wait for Shin's skill to do its work.

"It's taking more time than expected, huh."

"Anyone or anything inside has already noticed us, that's for sure. I only hope that Ishkar is still holding on."

Filma and Shibaid exchanged words while watching Shin melt the frozen door.

There was the chance, as it had happened with Trypophobia, for miasma to suddenly burst from beyond the door, so they kept alert.

"Doesn't look like we can be too hopeful."

"Indeed."

"Do you feel anything, Tiera?"

"I feel all my senses overwhelmed by the presence of miasma. But... it feels strange, somehow."

Tiera replied that she couldn't tell what was inside the room, because of the miasma's thickness.

Maybe because she already had several encounters with miasma, however, she felt that the miasma tainting this dungeon was different than her other experiences.

“In what way is it different?”

“It’s hard to put into words... the miasma I sensed until now felt like it was a fusion of many kinds of malice and ill will. Not a firm conscience like a person might have, but something ambiguous and indefinite, like it was hollow inside.”

That was the reason why miasma had different effects on different people, she added.

“Hmm... thus do monsters become more feral under its influence because they are affected by its more aggressive side?”

“Probably. I don’t know how it is with Chimeras and Demons, though.”

Tiera concurred with Shibaid’s theory, though she wasn’t absolutely sure.

“Hearing you that say that makes me think that what they say is actually true... as long as there is a man, there will be miasma.”

There were creatures with high intellect even among monsters, but their numbers could not be compared with humans’. It was natural to think that man was the source of malice.

“Negative emotions are born easily, it’s true. They can be also reduced, however. Man does not possess only negative emotions.”

Shibaid voiced a somewhat grand-sounding rebuttal to Filma’s words.

Among the party members present, Shibaid was the one who had participated in the greatest number of battles to the death, so he was well acquainted with the malice and hostility that men could harbor. Maybe because of this, he wanted to believe in the goodwill that man could also possess.

“If monsters are born from ill will, it would be nice if something like a protector was born from goodwill...”

Filma complained that if there were creatures opposite to Demons, things could be very different. Next to her, Shibaid replied, completely serious:

“I agree with you, but I suppose it means that we have to do something about that ourselves.”

“I guess we got a bit off topic... anyway, Tiera, you said the miasma here feels different, but what makes you think that?”

“It’s only something I feel, so I can’t say for sure, but the miasma corrupting this dungeon feels like it has a strong will. I don’t know what exactly that is, though.”

“Could it be that a Demon is about to be born? A will born from malice could be an even stronger mass of ill will.”

Shibaid tried to guess what the cause could be, his guard always up. Filma nodded as well.

“I agree, this can’t be good... what do you think, Tiera?”

“I don’t know... it’s only something I feel, after all. But it seems different from malice. At least, I don’t think it’s a Demon.”

Tiera added that she had sensed something different in the presence of Demons.

Shin thought about Tiera’s words, while continuing to cast **【Flare Wall】** .

“Something other than a Demon...”

“Could Ishkar have turned into an Invader because of the miasma?”

“The possibility is there. Ishkar was never the type of monster to go on a rampage. Like Yuzuha and the merpeople said, it was like the guardian of these parts too. It probably has a bad affinity with miasma... if it’s resisting it, the emotions it projects would not be only born from malice, I suppose.”

Shin’s prediction was born also from his wish for Ishkar to be still resisting.

“Well then, we’ve made all sorts of theories, but now it’s time to find out the truth.”

Shin’s **【Flare Wall】** had melted away most of the ice. There were no locks or traps. All that was left was to push the door open.

“Shibaid and I will open the door first. The rest depends on the situation inside.”

Shin had already formulated a basic strategy, estimating the situation inside. Everyone

nodded to his words.

“Here we go!”

Shin pushed the door open.

Differently from the royal chambers where the group fought Trypophobia, there was no sudden blast of miasma this time.

“First off, 【Purification】 .”

The interior of the room was abnormally dark: even with 【Night Vision】 , it was barely possible to see anything.

Behind Shibaid, who cautiously held his shield high, Shin and Schnee activated 【Purification】 . The lights born from their palms vanished in the darkness.

“Eh... what...?”

An exclamation of surprise and confusion escaped Tiera’s lips.

The reason was clear enough. In the space where the miasma cleared, something she had not expected appeared.

“That must be Ishkar.”

“Yes. Judging from its appearance, it has not turned into an Invader.”

Shin and Schnee understood right away that the giant creature they saw beyond the door was Ishkar.

Ishkar’s torso was as much as 5-mels thick in the part nearest to its head. Because of this, looking at it from Tiera’s position — a few steps away from the door — it looked like there was a wall just beyond the door.

“So that’s... Ishkar...”

Shin and Schnee reacted calmly. Behind them though, Tiera audibly swallowed.

Ishkar, one of the monsters who had reached the apex, level 1000.

With an appearance similar to an eastern dragon, it moved through the water by twisting its long and narrow body.

Two pairs of blue eyes gleamed on its head, while crystal-like horns sprouted from its sides. The claws on its limbs could easily tear through steel. Its rock hard scales, colored blue, would be difficult to damage with average weapons.

Its enormous body, however, was its most dangerous characteristic. There were countless reports of it swallowing several players in one fell swoop.

Also because of the treacherous underwater field, it was the first monster that usually came to mind first when thinking about bosses difficult to defeat.

“Let’s go closer to its face. Keep your guard up.”

The part of the monster’s torso before Shin and the party seemed to be the upper one, the part closest to its head.

Beyond the previously frozen door was not a throne room, but a bizarrely vast expanse. Its depth seemed to extend even farther than 100 or 200 mels.

If such a large room, without a single pillar, was built above ground, it would surely crumble. Considering that it had to allow Ishkar to move, however, made it seem small somehow.

Making sure to be ready to cast defense skills whenever needed, Shin and his party kept rising up. Ishkar’s face was more or less 100 mels from the ceiling.

Shin could only see the side of the monster’s face, but it looked just like he remembered.

“...!!”

As the party was slowly nearing the monster’s head, Ishkar’s eyes suddenly moved. It was difficult to tell due to their lack of irises, but the deep blue orbs were definitely focused on Shin’s party.

Shin noticed that Tiera, behind him, stiffened up.

(Okay, what are you going to do now...?)

Shin whispered to himself, without speaking a word aloud.

Ishkar's level being as high as 1000, he could tell that not only Tiera, but also Schnee and the others were tense.

They were prepared. If Shin fought with his limiters removed, it would be difficult for them to lose.

But even then, the possibility of one of the members dying was not zero. That's how much of an opponent Ishkar could be.

[..... HIgH hUmAn.]

“!!!”

As the group carefully observed Ishkar's movements, a voice like the sound of a gong reverberated through the room.

Yes, a voice. The echo made it difficult to understand it, but the sound that reached the ears of Shin and his party clearly showed signs of intelligence.

“You're conscious?”

“To tHInK... tHAT oNe wOuLd aPpEaR bEFoRe mE. WHaT I feLT wHeN sEAlInG tHE MIASma... wAs YOuR poWEr.”

Ishkar did not answer Shin's question. It continued its monologue, as if it couldn't hear Shin's words.

“ReMovE tHE dOLls. I sHaLl dO No HaRm to THoSe bORn In THIs wOrLD. OnLy pLAyeRS cAN Be mY eNEMy.”

“What are you saying? Hey! Can't you hear me?”

“ThE pOWeR tHAt DeVouRS eVen mIaSMa... NoT eVen I cAN bEst iT. ——-hIGh HuMan. If YoU oPPoSe A rETuRn aGaiNst YouR WiLl... sLAy Me.”

Ishkar did not answer Shin, until the end.

Shin found the mention of an existence other than miasma especially puzzling. The

words lastly spoken by Ishkar, however, made him forget everything about that.

“Hey!! What do you mean by—”

As if in answer to Shin’s half-spoken question, the door slammed shut. At the same time, Ishkar’s body started emanating energy — enough to make the very atmosphere tremble.

“Nngh, as expected of a monster standing above all others... what pressure...!”

Shibaid, who was standing in front of the group as the shield, frowned. The energy, released in all directions, was Ishkar’s 【Wave of the Monster Lord】 , the skill it unleashed at the start of each battle.

Shibaid managed to block it with an attack-mitigating barrier, but if he hadn’t used the barrier, it was likely that all members except Shin would have been unable to move for a while.

Monsters above level 950 could use attacks that blew through the defenses of status immunity accessories. In that case, whether the wearer is affected by negative statuses depends on their stats, the accessory’s rank and the rank of the skill cast.

“Even with Shibaid’s barrier, that gave me goosebumps.”

Filma’s grip tightened on her [Red Moon] as she looked at Ishkar.

“Are you frightened?”

“Not a chance! My blood’s burning!”

Schnee and Filma encouraged each other.

Ishkar was slowly turning towards Shin’s group, showing clear hostility. Its pressure was powerful enough than even Schnee and others would be slowed down if they didn’t focus.

“Kuu!”

“Guruu!!”

Next to Tiera, Yuzuha and Kagerou were also in a battle-ready stance. The opponent was above them in rank, but even so they had not lost the will to fight.

Tiera, standing between them, looked straight at Ishkar, her expression stiff.

“Schnee, everyone, focus on support. The rest is as we planned!”

Shin gave his directions and leapt in the middle of **【Wave of the Monster Lord】** .

**【Wave of the Monster Lord】** lasted 20 seconds. In the game, Ishkar would not attack during that time. It was not something they could absolutely count on, however.

With every **【Limiter】** removed, Shin exceeded in stats any other creature in that world; it was not currently possible for him to be affected by negative statuses.

He was still wary of the possibility that the enemy could attack during those 20 seconds.

“—■■■■”

Something close to, but slightly different than a roar came out of Ishkar’s mouth. It was a type of chant, which could not be heard as intelligible words to the group’s ears.

Before the eyes of Shin and his party, the seawater filling the room started to change. It was compressed in an instant, then shot at a speed invisible to human eyes.

In one second, countless blades of water were formed and shot at the party, each one sharp enough to slice Legend-grade equipment in one slash.

“ **【Ice Maelstrom】** ! ”

“ **【Vortex Slash】** ! ”

Schnee and Filma countered the water blades targeting the party with their own skills.

A whirlpool of ice shards extended from Schnee’s palm. Then electricity drawn by **【Red Moon】**’s slash ran through the water, as if chasing after the whirlpool. Filma’s thunderbolts combined with Schnee’s ice whirlpool, amplifying its power and area of effect.

Ishkar's water blades clashed head on against the giant whirlpool formed by the combination of Filma and Schnee's skills.

The water blades ground and cracked, as did the ice crackling with electricity. After several seconds of clashing, Filma and Schnee's combination attack emerged victorious.

Schnee and Filma had not destroyed all water blades, but only those directed at them. The result was thus not mutual destruction, but more like a breakthrough.

"Good thing we prepared in advance."

"Yes, now we can be more versatile strategically."

The skill used by Schnee and Filma did not have a particular name as a combination skill.

Even so, combining two skills boosted their power and effectiveness.

In the game, even if two skills not meant to be combined were used together, there was no change in their effects.

In this world, however, it was impossible for skills not to influence each other.

Despite being created by the mysterious force called magic, skills manifested as physical phenomena. Some thought that they had to affect each other somehow, and the effects of such combinations had been researched and proven.

There were few opportunities of testing it in combat, but Shin's group had tried all sorts of combinations whenever they had the chance.

The whirlpool of ice and electricity broke through the barrage of water blades and collided with Ishkar's torso. The ice shards shattered the monster's scales, the electricity enveloping them seared its flesh.

The whirlpool had lost power after breaking through the water blades, but still managed to inflict damage.

The problem was that, because of Ishkar's massive body, the wound was simply a small singed area. It would have been different if the attack was powerful enough to

pierce the sea dragon's body, but a superficial burn could not slow down its movements.

"As expected, an attack like that can only scratch its skin."

"Well, let's leave that to Shin."

Their goal was to deflect Ishkar's attack in the first place. To hope to do more against Ishkar would have been arrogant, even for Schnee and the others.

"Wooooohhh!!!"

Shin mustered his fighting spirit and swung [Moonless]. For him, Ishkar's large body was a huge target impossible to miss.

[Moonless]' blade drew an arc, which extended in a 6-mels long crimson blade. It was the first step of a skill that unleashed slashes with seven blades, one for each element.

Octa-elemental composite skill, 【Seven Radiant Blades】 .

The deep red blade that tore through 【Wave of the Monster Lord】 as it advanced was the incandescent Flame-elemental slash. Now that Shin had removed the upper limiter on his stats, his slashes could cut through Ishkar's scales and flesh in one stroke, leaving a deep wound on the monster's torso.

"One more!"

Shin readied his weapon again, to perform the next slash. The blade was now formed by a large mass of sand. The katana, now a light brown color, was swung as if tracing the burning wound on the monster's body.

Ishkar, however, would not allow itself to be attacked without dodging or defending.

The seawater rumbled and covered the surface of Ishkar's twisting and winding body.

A blade of sand and an armor of seawater. The clash of the two ended with the blade emerging victorious.

An attack made of sand might not sound too dangerous normally, but the sand forming Shin's blade was anything but normal. It could vibrate and move at high speed. Thanks

to the power of magic, its movements defied the laws of physics, boosting its cutting power higher than a mere saw blade, but also any Ancient-grade weapon.

The sand blade thus sliced through the seawater armor as if through butter, carving many more wounds on Ishkar's body. With each slash, the sand also attached to the monster's body, enlarging the wounds.

This attack's gradually increasing damage made it even nastier than being burned by fire.

Ishkar had twisted its body to avoid the slashes, so it had only suffered flesh wounds until now. Shin's offensive, however, was far from over.

"You won't let me have my way, huh?"

As if the battle until now was nothing but a warm-up, Ishkar moved away from Shin at extremely high speed. The monster's huge body did not mean that its movements were sluggish. If it moved at high speed in water, the generated currents would affect even the movements of Shin's party.

"If I use my full abilities, I get this weird feeling of omnipotence..."

Shin focused strength on his legs and kicked the water. His body then accelerated forward, as if he had kicked a solid object.

The water currents generated by Ishkar would make it difficult to swim straight even for a Chosen One, but Shin advanced as if slicing through them with his body.

The third slash, a blade of ice covered by white mist, was ready to be swung at Shin's side.

Ishkar blasted a burning hot beam towards the approaching Shin. It was a massive heat barrage, large enough to completely engulf Shin's body.

Shin countered it head on, swinging the Skill-boosted [Moonless] right on the middle.

His explosive advance was halted, but his body remained unscathed.

The monster's burning beam was cleanly cut in two halves by the white mist on Shin's katana, changing directions to his left and right sides.

“Haha, that was easy!”

Shin cheered, his hands powerfully gripping the blade’s hilt.

[Moonless] once again drew an arc, freezing the surrounding seawater. The following instant, a freezing storm started blowing towards Ishkar, like a waterfall ready to devour the monster’s burning beam.

Ishkar saw the incoming attack and stopped releasing the heat beam, twisting its body away from Shin’s attack. The monster emitted lightning attacks from its horns in retaliation, but Shin swept them away with his now lightning-clad [Moonless].

“—■■■■”

A low growl escaped Ishkar’s mouth. Shin had learned the dragon’s attack patterns, but it could have new strategies in this world. Shin realized this and decided to observe what the monster would do next.

The wary Shin was then attacked from all directions.

The seawater around him started moving, all at the same time. It changed into 1-mel spheres, occupying a 50 mels radius all around Shin.

It was one of Ishkar’s skills, 【Aqua Cage】 .

The 【Aqua Cage】 water spheres, completely filling Shin’s field of view, were then struck by Ishkar’s lightning attack.

It was not the same yellow lightning that Shin had swept away before, but light blue bolts that came in contact with the spheres and changed directions, just like rays of light deflected by water.

The sphere-shaped seawater served not only to trap Shin, but also to conduct the lightning bolts.

The bolts, passing through several spheres, arrived very close to Shin’s position.

“Now this is something I’ve never seen before.”

The lightning split in two in front of Shin’s eyes and passed by him. Several seconds

later, some of the spheres were cleaved in two as well, turning back to seawater.

The bolts had been sliced by the invisible blade extending from [Moonless], a blade of wind. Someone with good eyesight could probably see that, near [Moonless]' tip, part of the scenery appeared distorted.

【Aqua Cage】 was a skill that affected the target's surroundings, but causing no damage itself. It was thus obviously possible to move.

After [Moonless] was swung, the wind blade disappeared and was replaced by a pitch black one. Shin confirmed the change with a glance and held the sword high.

“Shaah!!”

The darkness-colored katana swung down. The sixth blade's effect was to negate all magic, causing all the water spheres in the blade's path to vanish.

【Aqua Cage】, an attack meant to gradually shave the target's life down to nothing, was powerless before the black blade's negation of magic. This result affected the surroundings as well. The 【Aqua Cage】 in front of Shin too had completely disappeared.

Lastly, [Moonless] morphed into the skill's final slash, a blade of light. Shin held it firmly and quickly moved through the now open space.

Ishkar too had probably noticed the opening carved into 【Aqua Cage】.

Even with Shin's high magic resistance, however, he could not simply break through the 【Aqua Cage】 released by a level 1000 monster. He went on forward, however, despite the danger.

Shin couldn't see past 【Aqua Cage】's spheres, so he used the map and presence detection to proceed while avoiding them.

As soon as he finally managed to exit 【Aqua Cage】's area of effect, Ishkar's claws were brought down towards him.

Shin drew [Moonless] closer and used it to protect the left side of his body.



now wielding [Moonless] with his left hand, while his right was clenched in a fist.

Ishkar noticed that Shin's silhouette was enveloped in a faint purple light, different from the aura of physical boosts.

"Let's see if you can survive even with your head blown off?"

Shin hadn't noticed his physical change. His fist crashed into Ishkar's lightless eyes.



Barehanded-type Martial skill, 【Shiden – Zekka】 .

One of the most powerful barehanded skills erupted from Shin's right fist.

Ishkar's eye, already pierced by the blade of light, ruptured and burst. An instant later, the monster's cranium swelled.

The sheer power unleashed in Ishkar's head ravaged its insides and took the dragon's life. Ishkar's HP gauge hit zero instantly.

The power let loose by Shin's fist, however, was not content with simply destroying the dragon's head.

A few seconds after Ishkar's head started swelling, the monster's skull could not withstand the damage anymore and exploded. The released power traveled through the seawater and reached as far as Schnee and the rest of the party.

Having lost everything above its neck, Ishkar's massive body gradually lost its strength. From the wound supposed to be spraying blood, a blue vapor-like substance emanated instead.



“Hey, Schnee... isn't Shin acting kind of weird?”

“.....”

Shin swung the ice blade towards Ishkar. Unable to keep it in anymore, Filma asked for Schnee's opinion.

Schnee did not answer. Her grip on [Blue Moon]'s hilt tightened.

There was no need for questions, she already knew the answer.

Ishkar had started fighting with Shin, and Shin only: it was like it did not even acknowledge the existence of Schnee and the rest of the party.

While Shin had tried not to get them involved, it was more than clear that the dragon actively not attacking them.

Finding the battle a good opportunity, Shin fought with his limiters off, but his current style of fighting was kind of different from the one that Schnee was familiar with.

Regardless of how high Shin's stats were, his party members were unable to determine precisely how strong he was. No one knew how powerful of an enemy he could fight by himself, what kind of enemy could match him, or what kind of enemy could be superior to him.

More than his offense, Schnee was worried about his defense. The only way to actually know was to be attacked, so even if they could make predictions, there was no way of knowing how much he could withstand.

Shin's current way of fighting, however, did not suggest that he was sparing much thought to his defense.

"This is bizarre... for Shin to laugh while fighting such a battle."

Following Filma's question, Shibaid expressed his doubts too. His shield high, he still kept his guard up, but his gaze followed Shin, not Ishkar.

"Kuu, something, strange."

Yuzuha watched Shin with furrowed brows. Kagerou likewise cried in agreement.

"This is strange. I can't feel any miasma coming from Ishkar!"

Tiera, who had been focusing on trying to purify the miasma, as she had done against Trypophobia, suddenly raised her voice, slightly panicked.

Schnee's expression turned sour.

She was also capable of detecting miasma, to a degree. Based on the density of the miasma corrupting the dungeon, it was impossible that its boss, Ishkar, was unaffected.

Watching the battle Schnee and the rest of the party thought that Ishkar had weakened or could not move anymore, due to having sealed the miasma. If not, it would have lost to the miasma and turned into an Invader.

Despite their predictions, however, Ishkar appeared before them looking just as they

remembered, with all of his abilities intact. It was fighting against Shin as if miasma didn't affect it in the slightest.

"Shin..."

Looking at Shin's clearly offensive-oriented fighting style, Schnee felt compelled to run to him. She wanted to go to his side, to talk to him.

She could not do it though.

Shin was fighting against a monster above all monsters, a beast of level 1000.

While her stats had been boosted by the Ley Lines when they freed Filma, and she equipped Ancient-grade weapons and armor, this fight was too dangerous for her to dive into.

"...Filma, Shibaid. Let's go to Shin's side. Tiera, you go with Yuzuha and Kagerou close to the walls, make sure you stay out of attack range."

"No, I'm going too."

"It's dangerous, you know?"

"I know. But I can feel a power that's not caused by the miasma coming from Shin and Ishkar."

"A cold, mighty power from Ishkar and a raging power from Shin. The latter is especially something the likes of I've never felt before," said Tiera.

"A raging power... might that be the reason why Shin's acting so strange?"

"Let's think about that later. More importantly, even if we go, what exactly are we going to do? It'll be tough even for us to keep up with Shin as he is now, you know that right?"

Without his limiter, Shin moved much faster than anyone else in the party and his attacks were also much more powerful than theirs.

He could face Ishkar head on, after all. His power was on a whole other level.

If Schnee and the party were to participate in the battle between Ishkar and Shin, it

could only be as decoys.

“I believe that if the targets become two, it will have to look at us too. With Shin as he is, we will just act as support.”

“That’s fine as for joining the battle, but are we going to leave Shin like that?”

“I’ll go by myself. I have the highest speed among us, and even if I’m attacked I can dodge with a Kunoichi skill.”

The power-up received when they freed Filma, the usual boost attachments.

Combined with the physical boosts due to spirit summoning, available only to Elves and Pixies, Schnee’s AGI was maxed out. Being a Kunoichi skilled in dodging, she would probably be the quickest in reaching Shin’s position.

“You’re really something, you know...”

“Based on our abilities, Schnee is the most suitable one. Shin’s belligerent attitude is a concern, but even if something happens I doubt that she could be felled in one instant.”

Everyone nodded at Shibaid’s words and started moving. Shibaid led with Filma following a few steps behind. Tiera, Yuzuha, and Kagerou acted as the rear guard.

Separated from Shibaid’s group, which proceeded with every member at the same pace, Schnee approached Shin at high speed, using a different route.

She was looking at Shin, now surrounded by water spheres, Ishkar’s **【Aqua Cage】** .

She knew that they weren’t just spheres made of water.

Shin would probably be okay, but in Schnee’s heart, the worry that was supposed to be dispelled appeared once again.

“That’s...”

One second before Schnee could activate a skill to get rid of **【Aqua Cage】** ’s spheres, Shin had slipped past the spheres’ area of effect. A blade of light extended from [Moonless] and pierced one of the dragon’s eyes.

Shin then moved closer to Ishkar and readied his right hand into a fist. His body was wrapped in a faint aura, different from anything hat Schnee had seen before. Cold chills ran down her spine.

No one needed to explain it to her. Schnee instinctively felt that Shin, while possessed by that aura, could not be allowed to fight any longer.

“Shin!!”

Schnee’s voice, however, did not reach him.

Shin’s fist landed heavily on Ishkar’s skull, which burst into pieces in front of Schnee’s eyes.

“Kh...”

A wave of power spread through the seawater, exhibiting the strength of the attack.

The party felt the surge of power course all over their bodies. Schnee and the other members were stopped in their tracks by it.

“I have to go... quickly...”

Schnee focused her strength on her frozen legs and kicked the water hard. Before she could get closer to Shin, however, something changed in Ishkar.

His skull exploded. Ishkar was now headless, completely still. Blue vapor flowed out from his severed neck.

At the same time, countless icicles shot out of the dragon’s torso and neck, like a flurry of lances, covering the monster’s body.

That ice then gradually changed shape.

The ice spears all fused together into one and re-created Ishkar’s head.

It was not completely made by ice, however: the eyes and horns were a deep blend of blue and purple. After forming the dragon’s head, blue ice also covered its claws and scales.

Shin attacked again before the monster regenerated completely, but Ishkar avoided his attacks with an agility unthinkable for such a large body.

“What the.....!?!”

Schnee was confused by Ishkar’s new, unknown form and was too late to notice what had appeared before her. She slowed down instantly, but could not avoid crashing into something solid.

She received no damage, but even looking at what she crashed against, she could not see anything. She stretched out her hands cautiously and felt the presence of something smooth, like a glass wall.

“This is... a wall?”

Schnee pushed against it, but the wall did not budge. She pressed with more strength, but the wall showed no sign of breaking. Shibaid and the others caught up with her, but they did not seem to be able to pass either.

Shin seemed to have the advantage in the battle, but as time passed the aura around Shin gradually grew larger. At the same time, his fighting style changed too.

“—out of my sight!!”

Schnee swung [Blue Moon], forcefully, not holding back at all.

Filma and Shibaid noticed Shin’s state and struck the invisible wall with skills.

“Damn you, why...!?”

[Blue Moon]’s blade was repelled, and magic seemed to not have any effect either. The feeling spreading from the katana’s blade expressed that the wall hadn’t been damaged at all.

“.....Shiden.”

Schnee moved away from Filma and the others, to make sure not to hit them by accident, and unleashed one of her trump cards.

A long, thin blade of ice extended from [Blue Moon]. Unlike Shin’s 【Seven Radiant

Blades】 , the crystal clear blade looked like a longer [Blue Moon].

Katana and Water Combination skill, 【Shiden – Flowing Spark Blossom】 .

This skill ignored armor and all defenses and was also highly effective against barriers such as the one stopping the party’s advance. Schnee unleashed it against the glass-like wall without reserve.

“This can’t be...”

But even this slash, carrying every ounce of her power, could not destroy the barrier before them.

“Schnee...”

“The result was the same, then.”

Filma and Shibaid approached Schnee after trying their own Shiden skills, to no avail.

Behind them, Yuzuha and Kagerou struck the barrier with flame and lightning attacks.

“What in the world is up with this barrier? It’s way too tough!”

“I have no idea... I can’t remember ever seeing something this sturdy.”

In the game, Ishkar did not possess the ability to create such barriers.

A barrier that did not even crack after being struck by Schnee’s, Shibaid’s, and Filma’s Shiden skills could not be erected even by a level 1000 monster, after all.

“Nevertheless, if we do not pass this obstacle, we cannot go to Shin’s aid.”

Shibaid spoke while glaring at the transparent wall.

As the barrier did not show the slightest crack, it was clear that it couldn’t be destroyed just by hitting it with skills. Being invisible to the naked eye, it was also impossible to tell how far it extended.

“Tiera, can you tell us anything... Schnee, Filma, look!”

“Tiera? What...?”

Schnee looked at Tiera after Shibaid called her, and saw her floating in front of Yuzuha and Kagerou. The latter two were moving their paws up and down, as if scratching against something.

Indeed, Tiera had passed through the barrier that was blocking Schnee and the rest of the party.

“Why...?”

“Let’s go, Schnee!! We might have found a way to pass through!!”

Urged by Filma, Schnee and Shibaid rushed to where Tiera was. She seemed utterly confused and hurriedly spoke to the three as they approached.

“Master!! I-I don’t know why, but I got through!!”

“How?? What method did you use?”

“Well, I... I tried cutting through the barrier with my dagger, and I just kind of fell through...”

Tiera herself did not seem to know how she had gotten past the barrier. Kagerou, left behind, was scratching at the invisible wall with all his might. Yuzuha was also clawing at the barrier in the same way, but she suddenly slipped through the barrier. At the same time, Kagerou likewise passed to the other side.

“Kuu!?”

“Guruu!?”

Taken completely by surprise, the two spun once in the water because of their excess momentum. After a bit of paddling, they finally returned to their original stances.

“...we, passed too!?”

Yuzuha was baffled by the sudden development, then her body trembled. The same purple aura around Shin rose from her body too.

“This is... like Shin? Yuzuha, are you okay?”

Schnee, concerned, asked Yuzuha how she felt. However Yuzuha did not answer and howled loudly in response.

“Kuu... KU0000000000000000000000000000N!!!”

Yuzuha’s body glowed brightly and increased in size. When the light faded, Yuzuha had returned to her original form.

She was now much larger than Schnee or Tiera and sported her trademark nine tails as well. There was no mistaking it: Yuzuha had returned to her original form.

“Eh...? Yuzu... ha?”

Yuzuha’s sudden transformation left Tiera almost speechless. Kagerou too, next to Tiera, growled in confusion.

“...so this power can influence me too.”

Yuzuha looked at her own body and whispered to herself. Her voice did not bear any childish traits anymore. Her consciousness seemed to have returned to one fitting to her current body.

“Do not fret, I remember you all. I shall lend you my strength. You too, Kagerou, do not glare at me so.”

Yuzuha used one of her tails and lifted Tiera on her back. She then slowly turned her eyes towards Shin.

“I’m not sure what’s going on, but I guess we can only leave things to Tiera and Yuzuha...”

“...Tiera. Listen well. I am sure you understand after seeing that aura, but Shin is different from usual now.”

Schnee breathed in, then started talking. She couldn’t go herself, so there was no choice but to talk.

“Yes. It’s kind of... scary. I also feel that he changed.”

“He cannot control it, surely.”

Tiera and Yuzuha agreed while looking at Shin fighting against Ishkar. Tiera, thanks to her sharp senses, had felt the same thing as Schnee.

Yuzuha, her eyes narrowed, seemed to be trying to conclude something.

“Yuzuha, do you know what that is?”

“It is power, that much I can tell. I do not know what it actually is. However, it seems Shin has not been completely consumed by it either.”

“Could you use it to break down this wall?”

“With time, it appears to be possible. But not immediately. This form too is temporary, not complete.”

“...understood. We cannot go any further than this. Thus we entrust this to you.”

Schnee spoke to Yuzuha and Tiera, restraining her emotions. She had not lost her composure to the point of asking Yuzuha to destroy the barrier, without knowing how much time it could take, in a situation like the current one.

“...I shall break into their battle.”

Tiera swallowed her breath and looked towards Shin and Ishkar. Her reaction was perfectly natural, as both opponents were using attacks that meant instant death for someone with Tiera’s stats. Interfering in their conflict meant that one misstep would result in certain death.

“...understood. Yuzuha, please.”

“Leave everything to me.”

After a few moments of silence, Tiera asked Yuzuha for her assistance, with a resolute expression. Going together meant facing danger together. Yuzuha was already prepared for what was going to come.

“We’re going!”

Riding on Yuzuha, Tiera headed towards Shin.

Schnee could only gaze at her back as she did.

“Can’t I... do anything...?”

Looking at Ishkar and Shin fighting, Schnee remembered the words uttered by the dragon before the battle started.

“Dolls... those born in this world... could it be...!?”

Schnee reflected and realized that Ishkar could have been talking about support characters and all those that came in this world from the previous one, excluding former players.

Only players can be enemies. That probably meant that, among them, only Shin should be allowed to fight.

“If so, why...”

Why could Tiera pass through the barrier?

Tiera was a creature of this world, not a player. Schnee knew that she was not the child of players either.

Yuzuha was Shin’s partner monster. Her role was to fight alongside Shin, that could explain why she could pass through the barrier.

Kagerou had the same relationship as Yuzuha did with Shin. If Tiera had not passed the barrier, Kagerou probably would not have been able to either.

Yuzuha, Kagerou, Tiera... among them, Tiera was a bizarre case. She was born in different circumstances, but she should be on the same side as Schnee and the others.

Yet she had passed through the barrier and was now heading towards Shin.

“Why...”

Schnee could only watch. In her heart, many doubts rose and vanished.

Why is that not me?

Why is it not me the one going to help Shin?

Someone else was in the place she should be in. Just thinking that made Schnee feel like her whole body was grinding and cracking.

—was Tiera someone important to Shin?

The last doubt that rose within her, no matter how much time passed, would not disappear.



“That’s... not blood.”

Shin mumbled to himself, still in a fighting stance, while looking at the blue vapor-like substance exuding from Ishkar’s neck.

The exploded skull vanished as if melting away.

It ended all too easily. That was the reason why Shin hadn’t lowered his guard yet.

Shiden’s offensive power was high. With Shin’s stats, it was probably possible to KO even Ishkar in one blow.

And yet,... even considering this, there was no challenge. It felt “boring”.

“!? Wait, what was I thinking just now!?”

Shin felt his fighting spirit boiling, as he was facing a powerful opponent. However, he felt that his last thought had come from a completely different source.

As if someone other than him was inside his mind.

“...as I thought, you aren’t down yet.”

Before the frowning Shin, several ice pillars sprouted from Ishkar’s neck. In the blink of an eye, the pillars fused into one and rebuilt Ishkar’s head.

It was not completely made of ice: the horns and eyes were a deep blue. Shin felt some sort of will behind the eyes gazing at him.

“If you’ve revived, all I have to do is defeat you one more time.”

Shin forgot what he was thinking about for the moment and kicked the water, moving toward Ishkar, the explosive propulsion letting him close in on the dragon instantly.

Ishkar, however, blocked his advance by freezing the seawater around Shin.

Shin immediately cast magic to destroy the ice. However...

“I can’t break it? I’ll just smash it then!”

Magic should have been able to weaken the binding’s effects, but it failed. Shin guessed it was probably because of a particular skill Ishkar possessed, so he decided to force his way out of his bonds.

Half of his body was already frozen, but he could still swing his arms and legs to break free. Maybe thanks to the effects of his resistances, only the surface of his body was frozen.

As soon as Shin broke free, Ishkar’s arms swung down towards him. Shin noticed, but before performing an evasive maneuver he swung [Moonless] around him.

While swinging [Moonless], in a sweeping motion, Shin heard cracking noises from the katana’s tip. The sources of the sound were Ishkar’s scales, which had changed color to blend in with the seawater.

It was **【Dead Fragment Drops】**, one of Ishkar’s attacks which had claimed the lives of many a player in the past. The scales were very difficult to see, extremely sturdy and numerous, characteristics which made them extremely troublesome to deal with. They caused the players to separate and attacked them individually.

Shin knew how sturdy the scales were, so he activated the Katana-type Martial skill **【Blade Breaker】** to destroy the scales as they headed towards him. While Shin was busy dealing with the scales, Ishkar’s claws bore down upon him too.

“Hhnggh!”

Against the sharply gleaming claws, Shin chose not to defend or dodge, but to attack.

He turned his back to Ishkar and spun once in place. His right leg kicked the water and the left leg, taking advantage of centrifugal force, countered the claws with a roundhouse kick.

Barehanded-type Martial skill 【Rolling Wave Strike】 .

The kick, unleashed with a burst of white foam, released a controllable shockwave when it clashed against Ishkar's claws. Focusing the impact on one point allowed Shin to crush Ishkar's claws, like a raging wave.

“With this difference in size, it sure isn't easy.”

Shin had crushed Ishkar's claws, but also because of their difference in mass, he couldn't maintain his position just by using the seawater as a foothold. He suffered no damage, but was pushed back and forced to withdraw.

That instant, a familiar voice reached his ears.

“Shi—n!”

“Tch, who's getting in the way now... in... the way? No, I... wait, that's...?”

Every time he thought, he felt something unfamiliar creeping in his mind. He shook his head to get rid of it, and then he noticed what Tiera was riding on.

While not as large as Ishkar, it was a silhouette of much greater size than Shin or his party. Eyes concealing intellect, powerful limbs, and its greatest characteristic: nine tails.

“Yuzuha, is that you?”

Thanks to the contract bound with Yuzuha, Shin quickly realized that Tiera was approaching him while riding on her.

Yuzuha arrived next to Shin in the blink of an eye, stopped as if screeching to a halt, pushing Tiera out with her back, then turned towards Ishkar.

“I shall hold him back.”

With Yuzuha's words echoing behind her, Tiera headed towards Shin. Moving at a speed she couldn't reach by herself, Tiera opened her arms and legs wide.

She probably meant for Shin to catch her. Slightly confused, Shin opened his arms wide too.

“—eh?”

Just before they could touch, Tiera used her arms to change direction.

She only moved a few centimeters: from a course that would have led her to embrace Shin, she changed to a head hugging course.

Shin would have never expected Tiera to change course: the surprise, added to his initial confusion, prevented him from dodging.

As a result, Shin's head ended up firmly planted in Tiera's chest.

“Begone, evil! Be purified!”

“!?”

Tiera shouted, still holding Shin's head tightly.

Divine-type Skill 【Purification Verse】 .

When Tiera was still a Priestess of the World Tree, she used this skill to purify the surroundings before invoking the spirits. The skill removed and prevented status ailments from the user in a set radius around them; however, she was supposed to have lost it along with her Priestess job.

The aura that enveloped Shin's body dissipated. After making sure that it was really gone, Tiera let go of Shin.

“Ah... had I turned nasty or something?”

The aura disappeared thanks to 【Purification Verse】 , and Shin felt that the unusual presence inside his mind was gone.

While fighting he would instantly forget about it: now that it was gone, Shin clearly

grasped that unusual feeling and was shocked.

“You had an aura around you that master and the others said they had never seen before. Your way of fighting was violent too. Don’t... make us worry like that.”

Tiera talked with a very serious expression. Shin thanked her honestly.

“Where are Schnee and the others?”

“Some sort of invisible wall won’t let them through. I don’t know the reason, but only me, Yuzuha, and Kagerou could pass through it.”

Shin looked towards Schnee and the others and found them shooting skills towards an apparently empty space. As Tiera had said, their skills stopped and disappeared abruptly after traveling to a certain point.

“I don’t get what’s going on either, but we better wrap this up quickly. You stand back, Tiera. Yuzuha and I are going to end this now!”

Tiera nodded and withdrew, while Shin again faced Ishkar. His eyes now showed a light that was not present before.

—Boundary Guardian level 1000

The name displayed by **【Analyze】** was not Ishkar’s.

Shin recalled Ishkar’s mention of a “power that devours even miasma”. Ishkar’s consciousness was probably not present anymore in the monster.

The boundary guardian-turned Ishkar unleashed its lethal breath, which Yuzuha neutralized with five types of magic. Shin advanced under her massive body.

The two contenders exchanged attacks that would definitely inflict great damage if not blocked, so Shin was able to prepare to strike without Ishkar noticing.

Shin was now about 10 mels under the guardian’s chin. For the monster, it was a

complete blind spot.

“(I’m going to attack too. Please keep it busy a little more)”

“(Understood.)”

Shin was reminded of how adult-like Yuzuha’s original voice sounded, while he held [Moonless] with the opposite hand.

He aimed at the guardian’s jaws and activated a skill.

Katana and Darkness combination skill 【Hollow Shackles】 .

Shin threw [Moonless], wrapped in a dark aura, with all his might. The katana turned into a pitch black flash and stabbed the monster’s jaw, without being hindered by its scales, then released its effects.

“■■■■!! ■■■■!!!”

Forced to face upwards because of [Moonless]’s stabbing impact, the Guardian’s head was wrapped tightly by black bands extending from the katana.

The black bands covered most of the monster’s head, then gained even more momentum and proceeded to wrap around the Guardian’s entire body.

The monster tried resisting, but Shin’s boosted stats had also reinforced the bands’ binding power.

Because of this, the Guardian couldn’t tear through the bands fast enough: new ones would be generated and tie it down again before it could gain any freedom. It was impossible to completely seal the monster’s movements, but now the Guardian couldn’t move as freely as before.

“Yuzuha! Maximum firepower!”

“Leave it to me!”

In response to Shin’s words, a globe of golden light formed in Yuzuha’s mouth.

Shin cast a magic spell alongside her.

Globes containing magic power of each of the seven elements appeared around Shin. Red, blue, brown, green, yellow, white, black: all seven spheres were around one mel wide.

Shin then extended his right arm forward and all globes gathered in one spot. The seven globes fused together and started glowing in the same golden color as Yuzuha's.

Hepta-Elemental Composite Skill 【Elemental Order】 .

The two-mels golden sphere, capable of striking the weak point of all elements, merged with Yuzuha's breath, a unique skill named 【Supreme Catastrophe】 , and pierced the Guardian's head.

“Off with you!”

Shin and Yuzuha kept releasing their skills, while changing their directions. The golden spheres of light moved from the monster's head to its torso, tearing through its body.

Blue vapor was released from the monster's severed torso, but that too was consumed by the golden light and disappeared.

“We destroyed all we could see, but...”

The opponent was capable of regenerating its head. For added safety, Shin and Yuzuha cautiously studied their surroundings.

“Shin!”

As they were doing so, Schnee and the others approached them. The barrier that had been blocking them had disappeared apparently.

“Sorry for making you worry.”

“No... if you are all right, then it's enough.”

Relieved, Schnee put a hand on her chest.

“So, what are we going to do now? Differently from outside, there’s no miasma in here.”

“Ishkar’s transformation was bizarre as well. It wasn’t supposed to have regenerative abilities like that.”

Filma and Shibaid voiced their doubts, while looking at the space where the recently disappeared Ishkar used to be.

“It turns out there was something else inside it. The name displayed was Boundary Guardian.”

“Never heard that name before.”

All members present nodded to Schnee’s words. Yuzuha — still in her adult form — also said that she didn’t know about it.

“What could have happened here...? It looks like I changed too... it could be tied to the reason why I was brought here.”

Ishkar had mentioned a “return against your will”. It could mean that, had Shin not resisted, he could have returned to his original world.

It was just a possibility, so he had no intention of trying. More than that, Shin was intrigued by the word “Boundary”.

The real world and the game world. Maybe it was guarding the boundary between the two?

That would generate another series of questions, but being a game’s world, it was not too strange for such a creature to exist.

Supposing that the players dead in the other world lived here. That normally, the boundary could not be crossed without dying, but Shin had crossed over without dying...

(Could it have had a reason for wanting to get rid of me?)

To go all the way of taking over Ishkar’s body to attack me... could maybe mean that I can be the cause of some disaster? Or maybe it was just trying to remove an extraneous object?

“...I just don’t understand.”

Shin sighed while looking at the space Ishkar used to occupy. He pondered for a while, but in the end it was all his imagination, his delusions. He had no idea about how things could actually be.

“Shin, look.”

“...the stopgap keeping miasma in check is gone, so it’s flowing out?”

Shin looked in the direction Tiera pointed at and saw a black mist appearing in the previously empty space. In its center there was a sort of rectangular object.

Because of the mist only its silhouette was visible, but it was just as Shin remembered.

After defeating Ishkar, the certificate proving victory over a level 1000 monster, materials, gear, and other item cards appeared. Apparently, most of the miasma was housed by these items.

“Tiera, please.”

“Yes, leave it to me.”

Shin and the others kept the miasma from spreading, while Tiera purified the main mass. Maybe because the Guardian was gone, the miasma vanished with an ease that surprised even Tiera.

“Eh? This is...”

“What’s wrong?”

Tiera looked at the stack of purified item cards. The illustration on the top card made her react, surprised.

Shin became curious and took a peek in Tiera’s hands. The top card of the stack had the picture of a crystal glowing in rainbow colors.

The item name was [Divine Beast Crystal].

“Seriously...? This is the item that lets you summon a divine beast!”

“Eh...?”

Monsters called divine beasts, like Element Tails and Gruefagos, could not be tamed normally. But with the item that Tiera was now holding, the Divine Beast Crystal, they could be called temporarily as an ally unit.

Divine Beast Crystals appeared as rare drops after defeating divine beasts and allowed the summon of a monster just like the defeated one as an ally.

It was a one-time use item, but if used against boss monsters as a trump card, it was powerful enough to change the flow of battle.

Depending on the monsters they could summon, Divine Beast Crystals could have the same value as Ancient-grade equipment.

“...hey, if I use this, won't Ishkar be able to resurrect?”

“Summoned monsters usually disappear after a set time... I wonder, though. In this battle against Ishkar some unknown force interfered after all.”

No one knew what could happen to this area of the sea, were Ishkar to disappear. The sea dragon's resurrection would be the most favorable outcome.

“Do try. If I can use my power on it, I shall lend you my aid.”

“Are you sure? Your power hasn't returned completely, has it?”

“That is of no concern. The absence of this area's master is a much more pressing matter.”

Yuzuha, who did not know how long she could keep her current form, urged Shin to use the item, so he agreed to.

“...come.”

Tiera held the Divine Beast Crystal high and pronounced the keyword. The crystal then shattered, emanating a rainbow light.

The light gradually took shape: after five seconds, it had formed Ishkar's silhouette. When the light eventually disappeared, before the group was Ishkar, looking exactly

the same as when they had entered the room.

“Hmm, I see.”

The summoned Ishkar did nothing, simply floating in place. It was waiting for orders from its summoner.

“Do you think you can do anything?”

“Be patient for a while.”

Yuzuha then extended one of her nine tails towards Ishkar. She placed the tip of the tail on the dragon’s jaw, then stopped.

A few seconds later, Ishkar and Yuzuha’s bodies started glowing. They continued to do so for about 10 seconds, then the light dimmed and disappeared.

“This shall be enough.”

Yuzuha then changed back to small fox mode. She still had nine tails though.

“I’m slightly tired. Hold me.”

“Hm? Ah, sure. Thanks.”

Yuzuha floated lightly in the water and cuddled up in Shin’s bosom. Her small fox face looked somewhat satisfied.

“It appears you have won”

Just as the group relaxed a little, Ishkar’s voice reached their ears.

“Do you remember?”

“That maiden used my soul’s crystal. Would you understand if I said ‘back-up’?”

“Well, I would have never expected a divine beast to say ‘backup’...”

“It’s just a fragment embedded in my memories. Now that the Ley Lines are free of contamination, my servants above should quiet down too. You have my gratitude.”

Ishkar had already taken care of the Three Sea Beasts apparently. The merpeople and fishpeople were not in immediate danger anymore at least.

“I wish to express my gratitude, but that fox has already taken away part of my power. I cannot do much.”

“Hey, Yuzuha! What tricks are you pulling, taking advantage of a situation like this?”

“I made it possible for him to stay here and connected him to the Ley Lines. As you know, the Ley Line was already shut where I used to be. Let me have that much.”

The power that Yuzuha took from Ishkar would return over time, so Ishkar did not want to seriously find fault with her.

“Well, we didn’t come here looking for something anyway, and it looks like Yuzuha got closer to returning to her original form, so that’d be enough for me.”

Shin looked at Schnee and the others, but they all shared the same sentiment.

“Just one thing, then. Do you know anything about whatever possessed you?”

“Hmm... I remember that you were its target. That its objective was to remove you from this world. Only these two things.”

“For what reason?”

“I could not say. But it was something that even miasma cannot affect. It wiped the miasma I was holding in check as if it was mere smoke.”

An existence superior to miasma. Shin had no idea what it could be, nor did Schnee and the others, who all shook their heads.

“It was an utterly unknown existence. Do be on your guard.”

“Yes, I got it.”

Shin finished talking with Ishkar. As Yuzuha had turned back too, they left the royal chambers.

Events other than their initial goal of helping the merpeople had happened, but Shin

thought that, all in all, the result was positive. He could not be sure, but he felt that the power within him was not something negative either.

The party proceeded through the now miasma-free corridors.

Ishkar had resurrected, the merpeople and fishpeople avoided destruction.

Tiera and Yuzuha powered up, the party's overall power increased.

Not all results were to rejoice about, though. Something had definitely been proved in the battle against the Guardian.

Those stopped by the barrier, and those allowed in by the barrier. Their hearts were clearly divided.

Schnee's heart, especially, was riddled with thousands of small ripples.

With each member holding different thoughts in their hearts, the party left the dungeon.

At the same time as Shin concluded his battle against Ishkar, one man arrived in Barbatos.

At the moment no one knew, naturally, that he would bring a great trial to Schnee...

s t a t u s

ステータス紹介

THE NEW  
GATE



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**Name:** Keseldran  
**Race:** Sea Serpent  
**Grade:** None

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● **Stats**

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**LV:** 834

**HP:** ????

**MP:** ????

**STR:** 729

**VIT:** 718

**DEX:** 634

**AGI:** 752

**INT:** 638

**LUC:** 42

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● **Battle Equipment**

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None

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● **Title(s)**

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● Three Sea Beasts

● Controller of Marine Areas

● It who drifts among the waves

● Guardian Beast

● Mutated Serpent

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● **Skill(s)**

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● Azure Lightning Spear

● Seaquake Roar

● Lightning Spear Barrage

● Water Sphere Bomb

● Fortify Shell

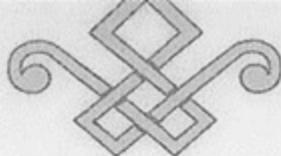
etc

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**Other**

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● Servant of the Sea King



Name: **Mascurda**

Race: **Kraken**

Grade: **None**

● **Stats**

LV: 837

HP: ????

MP: ????

STR: 834

VIT: 420

DEX: 692

AGI: 403

INT: 819

LUC: 44

● **Battle Equipment**

None

● **Title(s)**

● (One of the) Three Sea Beasts

● Controller of Marine Areas

● It who hides within the waves

● Guardian Beast

● Mutated Kraken

● **Skill(s)**

● Squirming Monster Arms

● Crushing Maw

● Concealing Ink Splatter

● Hi-Speed Recovery

● Maelstrom

etc

● **Other**

● Servant of the Sea King



Name: **Eolios**  
 Race: **Shark King**  
 Grade: **None**

● **Stats**

LV: 840

HP: ????

MP: ????

STR: 603

VIT: 861

DEX: 578

AGI: 872

INT: 403

LUC: 40

● **Battle Equipment**

None

● **Title(s)**

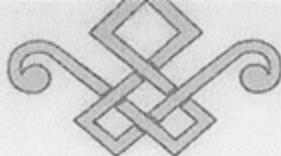
- (One of the) Three Sea Beasts
- Controller of Marine Areas
- It who scours the waves
- Guardian Beast
- Mutated Shark King

● **Skill(s)**

- Relentless Rush
- Needle Spear Burst
- Madness-inducing Evil Roar
- Sea Current Manipulation
- Fortify Shell
- etc

● **Other**

- Servant of the Sea King



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**Name:** Trypophobia  
**Race:** Undead  
**Grade:** None

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● **Stats**

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**LV:** 879  
**HP:** 23404  
**MP:** 9475  
**STR:** 804  
**VIT:** 311  
**DEX:** 425  
**AGI:** 257  
**INT:** 649  
**LUC:** 0

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● **Battle Equipment**

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None

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● **Title(s)**

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- Construct of Souls
- Dead Spirit
- Hollow One

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● **Skill(s)**

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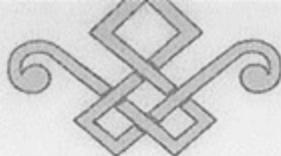
- Darkness Beckons
- Deadman's Howl
- Hollow Bonehand
- Black Ash Will-o'-wisp
- Soul Absorption
- etc

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**Other**

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- Abnormal Species




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**Name:** Ishkar  
**Race:** Ancient Dragon  
**Grade:** None

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● **Stats**

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**LV:** 1000  
**HP:** ????  
**MP:** ????  
**STR:** 999  
**VIT:** 943  
**DEX:** 830  
**AGI:** 754  
**INT:** 809  
**LUC:** 58

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● **Battle Equipment**

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None

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● **Title(s)**

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● Dragon Sea King  
 ● Sovereign of the Azure Seas  
 ● Territory Ruler  
 ● Master of the Sea Beasts  
 ● King of Stormy Seas  
 etc

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● **Skill(s)**

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● Wave of the Monster Lord  
 ● Aqua Cage  
 ● Great Sea's Water Blades  
 ● Dragonhorn Thunderstorm  
 ● Dead Fragment Drops  
 etc

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**Other**

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● Divine Beast  
 ● Monster Lord



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