



# OVERLORD

14

The Witch of the  
Doomed Kingdom

Kugane Maruyama  
Illustration by so-bin

# **OVERLORD**

**- VOLUME 14 -**

*The Witch of the Doomed Kingdom*

**-AUTHOR-**

Kugane Maruyama

**-ILLUSTRATOR-**

So-bin

[ YEN PRESS ]





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Volume 14: The Witch of the Doomed Kingdom

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OVERLORD VOLUME 14  
KUGANE MARUYAMA

Translation by Andrew Cunningham  
Cover art by so-bin

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## Prologue

# PROLOGUE

The Great Tomb of Nazarick—Ainz's quarters on the ninth floor.

The room closest to the hall had been converted into an office. The owner was absent—yet the room was filled with the sound of shuffling documents.

Here sat Albedo, captain of the floor guardians.

The imposing desk in the center was for Ainz alone. A separate desk and chair were placed nearby—smaller yet no less refined. This was where Albedo sat, sifting through paperwork.

Naturally, she had an office of her own.

One of the spare rooms intended for new guild members had been repurposed as her work area and was as grand as Ainz's. She was allowed to use it as she pleased and had full ownership over the space.

But it wasn't long before she could no longer bear it and had begged her lord to let her work in the same room as him.

Initially, he had been against the idea, but after she bombarded him with a torrential list of workflow advantages, he finally relented.

Albedo glanced at his empty seat, then at her hands, biting her lip. The maid on Ainz room duty—separate from the maid currently on Ainz duty—was standing behind her, so no one caught a glimpse of this rare moment of weakness.

Albedo's one and only master was away from Nazarick.

He was in E-Rantel, taking care of things there.

If she had her druthers, she would eliminate all who robbed her of her precious time in his company—all the fools he was meeting today included.

Sadly, that was not in the cards. She was forced to content herself with visions of E-

Rantel burning to the ground. The respite was fleeting, and the frustrations eating away at her escaped her lips.

“Loathsome insects...”

A ripple of fear ran across the rafters, but Albedo paid it no heed. She had not forgotten how certain interlopers had gotten in her way once. A few more moments of abject terror was more than called for. (Mare had made it up to her and was long since forgiven.)

Feeling somewhat mollified, Albedo sighed, rolled her shoulders, and tackled the next document.

Nazarick—nay, the Nation of Darkness was expanding steadily, and her workload was growing along with it.

Foreign policy—

Beneath the surface of official diplomatic negotiations, an increasingly intense intelligence campaign was underway.

The Theocracy, the kingdom, the city-state alliance—all had agents within E-Rantel, verified and granted free rein. Demiurge was in charge of monitoring that situation, and all Albedo needed to do was stay up to date on the reports that came her way.

Domestic policy—

They'd moved a number of races into E-Rantel, but this had not caused many issues. Not *none* but astonishingly few compared to other realms.

No overt threats had been made, so everyone was just voluntarily on their best behavior—mindful of how fearsome their ruler's undead minions could be. Crime rates were extremely low; there were some minor infractions but absolutely no major crimes. The city had become so safe that women and children could walk the streets at night without concern. This had actually created a shortage of criminals to experiment on, which made it necessary to ask the Empire for more.

It was the crimes that *did* occur in such a safe city that caught Albedo's interest. Heinrich's triangle supposes that for every major accident, twenty-nine minor incidents and three hundred irregularities go unnoticed. In a similar vein, she believed

that every irregularity should be identified and dealt with.

The binder in hand contained a month's worth of judicial reports generated by E-Rantel.

The reports were quite detailed, so it took time to comb through them all, but Albedo could process information far faster than the average mortal. She flipped through the pages so fast, it seemed like she was barely glancing at them.

She had a pen in one hand, and as she read, she quickly jotted her observations down on a nearby blank page.

Were the judgments appropriate?

Why had this criminal committed that crime? What conclusions could be drawn about order in E-Rantel, about problems hidden in the minds of the populace?

Should new laws be passed?

Where anyone else would have been combing through case precedents or assembling teams of advisers, Albedo only looked once—analyzing, weighing, and addressing the problems all on her own. This required a thorough knowledge of all aspects of domestic policy and a genuinely inhuman level of intelligence.

She finished going through the binder and laid her pen down.

Her notes were merely a list of reminders; now she needed to gather those disparate thoughts into one cohesive document.

Since this was for her lord's eyes, even a single malformed character was unacceptable. Preparing a summary of the issues and her proposed solutions took far longer than reading the binder itself.

When she was done, Albedo proofed the document and allowed herself a small smile.

Not because she was done with work but because she was confident this would be useful to her master.

She slipped the summary into the binder and held it up. The maid took it from her and carried it to their lord's desk.

It was the fifth such volume today alone.

Albedo frowned.

That was less than ideal.

Directly or indirectly, the Nation of Darkness was growing. That caused no end of problems and a distinct increase in the amount of paperwork demanding their lord's attention. But if their ruler was stuck behind a mountain of documents, that proved there were major flaws in their organization.

Ideally, the great leader would simply decide the general direction of policy by setting high-level strategic goals. Then he need merely sit upon his throne while the creations of his fellow Supreme Beings worked their tails off to achieve those ends.

Through no fault of his own, this was not the case. Few could work at the level their exalted ruler expected. Consequently, they were facing a severe personnel shortage. Albedo was in charge of both domestic policy and overseeing Nazarick's staff, so resolving this was a responsibility that fell squarely in her lap—and while she had taken steps to improve things, there was still no light at the end of the tunnel.

*The last thing I want is to burden him, but there's so much I need his input on—racial harmony, new laws, economic policy—and if I debrief the other floor guardians on their tasks in his stead, then they'll get no time with Lord Momonga, and morale will crumble.*

Their leader had given Albedo sweeping powers to make these decisions, insisting that if she thought it was right, then it must be so. But she continued to seek approval, just in case, well aware of her own potential for failure.

For instance, she had deemed some actions an insult to their lord and promptly decided to send the perpetrators along with anyone even remotely related to them to the Ice Prison. Unsure whether to call this crime defamation or stupidity, she'd asked his opinion—and been shocked to find him opposed to the punishment itself.

She had lacked a proper understanding of their lord's magnanimity—and still cringed each time she remembered her shortcomings.

*I was well aware Lord Momonga is a merciful ruler, yet...*

Her lower lip was starting to jut out. Yet another look she usually never allowed herself

to make. A fleeting expression seen only in her master's absence.

She quickly pulled herself together and reached for the next binder.

Even as she inspected the contents, part of her mind was on something else.

On the guardian she had to be most cautious around—Demiurge.

With their schemes in the Sacred Kingdom concluded, he was busy flitting around Nazarick's interior, setting up the Intelligence Agency. This was a headache for Albedo. As captain of the floor guardians, she was the natural choice to head it up—but there was a decent chance Demiurge would wind up in charge instead, and that would clearly lead to trouble.

If possible, she would like to strip him of that power and give it to someone easier to control.

Several faces came to mind, but all lacked something vital.

*If it can't be me, then I suppose I could stomach Pandora's Actor. But overtly trying to wrest power from Demiurge will be a nightmare.*

A move like that might clue him in to her true intentions.

Albedo couldn't have that—so she needed to be careful and play it safe.

Perhaps her older sister could be counted on for certain things, but even family weren't unconditional allies. She, too, might turn on Albedo if she knew the truth.

She *could* trust her younger sister, Nazarick's most powerful denizen—and Albedo was sure that even if her secret plans were discovered, her sister would stand by her. But that was only because their lord had ordered her to obey Albedo.

*This won't do.*

She needed more options.

It wasn't just personnel. There were shortages everywhere—like the amount of money she could personally handle. That was why their lord's expansion of their organization beyond Nazarick itself had been so essential.

*Personally seeing to the newly reorganized Adventurers Guild... keeping tabs on Mare... watching over Aura... Cocytus's domain... Victim's intel... the value of Shalltear's transport network... using the slush funds earned from trade... more staff... then Demiurge and that girl...*

Albedo's mind shot in far more directions than anyone else could have managed in such a short time, and her brow creased.

*No. I have to be careful around Demiurge, and bringing that girl in is too great a risk. In fact, she might require more caution than Demiurge does...*

Even as plans spun in her mind, she finished the task at hand.

She picked up the next binder.

This one had very little in it. Either it was a preliminary report on a new problem, or it had been submitted by someone like Shalltear, still mastering the art of documentation.

Albedo checked the cover.

It read, "Issues Occurring in the Sacred Kingdom Food Supply Division."

Clearly a case of the former. Albedo had not heard of any such problems before.

Curious, Albedo began to peruse the document. She blinked a few times, her eyes going wide. Then she read again from the top. When she was sure the contents contained no metaphors or deceptions, she let her mouth fall open.

"Huh?" she said, a look of utter incomprehension on her face. She was at a total loss.

It was a rare piece of news indeed that could elicit this response from one of Nazarick's brightest minds.

Yet, even now, that brilliant mind was spinning back up, contemplating potential causes and outcomes of the problem on the page.

*The most likely explanation is that the girl has betrayed us. Has some other party made a better offer? I was certain no such offer existed. No, I shouldn't rush to any conclusions. We simply don't have enough information yet.*

She needed to speak directly to the reporter and any colleagues who would be involved with the issue—particularly Demiurge.

And all that before reporting it to their master.

She looked over the other two reports, determined that they were of little importance, and called to the maid behind her.

"I must attend an emergency meeting. I'm headed to the seventh floor to speak to Demiurge. If anyone comes to see me, tell them I'll be out for a while."

With that, she activated the Ring of Ainz Ooal Gown worn on her left ring finger.

As captain, she was *always* aware of the locations of every other floor guardian.

Demiurge had wrapped up work in the Sacred Kingdom and should have been back in his residence on the seventh floor, planning how the council state, the Theocracy, and the city-state alliance would be approached in the coming days.

If he was out, then she could just grab Entoma and have her Message him or ask her sister where he might be.

Albedo teleported away.

•

Re-Estize, capital of the kingdom that bore its name.

Ro-Lente Castle, Valencia Palace.

The great kings of history toiled in this room. Yet, here sat not the current monarch, Ramposa III, but the second prince, Zanac Valléon Igana Ryle Vaiself.

Running his eyes down the document before him, he allowed himself a gloomy sigh. He was confident none who read this paper could manage a look of any cheer.

It spoke to the current state of the kingdom.

The battle on Katze Plain—more of a massacre, really—had cost the lives of far too many citizens. That said, it had not been terrible enough to deal a fatal blow to the

kingdom itself. Some nine million called the kingdom home and one hundred eighty thousand of them had perished in that nightmare. Arguably, only 2 percent of the total population had been lost. What's more, many of them were the second or third sons of farmers—spares, more or less—or apprentices who had yet to master their trades. It was hardly something to be said in polite company, but none of those losses truly *mattered*.

At the same time, 4 percent of the male population had died. And all of them at prime working age. The report before him made it clear the toll that had been incurred.

Zanac snorted loudly and let the page fall to the desk. He glanced at the other occupant of the room.

“Sister, what would *you* do?”

His younger sister was seated on a couch not far away. Smiling faintly, Renner Theiere Chardelon Ryle Vaiself looked up from the document she was reading. “That’s an awfully vague question—could I beg you to be more specific?”

“This.”

In lieu of explanation, he picked up the document, waving it in the air. Renner rose to her feet and came closer, taking it from him.

“...Oh,” she said, scanning the report. “Um... there’s not much we *can* do.”

“Ugh...”

Zanac’s eyes turned to the heavens.

His sister was far brighter than he was, and if even she was giving up... But doing nothing would make him unfit to rule.

“Is it that big a deal? Certainly, there’s a temporary dip but only temporary. I wouldn’t have thought it needed to be addressed proactively.”

“When our yields drop, it won’t be long before some people begin to starve.”

Repeated clashes with the Empire had prevented them from stockpiling provisions. On top of that, E-Rantel—originally part of the king’s personal holdings and a major

breadbasket region—had been annexed by the Nation of Darkness. *And* the casualties had reduced the number of hands in the fields.

The kingdom was potentially safe for the moment, but in a few more years, the dwindling food production would inflate prices, and odds were high the most vulnerable would not have enough to eat. That future was all but guaranteed.

“True.”

“Sister, this may not interest you, but all it will take is a drought or a cold snap in the summer to spell disaster.”

“Powerful druids can control the weather, so I doubt we need to worry about sunlight. We can just hire some adventurers—though I imagine their fees will be rather steep. Either way, we’d better find out if there are any high-level druids among the local adventurers. There was a time we could have turned to the Empire’s adventurers for help in a pinch, but they’ve been vassalized by the Nation of Darkness, so that could be tricky.”

“That would certainly help with drought. But, Sister, what about cold?”

“Again, the druids will have to pitch in.”

Zanac gave Renner’s face a long, searching look, finding nothing out of the ordinary.

Perhaps she didn’t know.

Like Renner said, a high-ranked druid could temporarily make it rain, which was certainly helpful if there wasn’t enough rainfall. But druid magic was useless against serious drops in temperature—he’d heard this from his former confidant, Marquis Raeven.

Combating the cold required constantly raising temperatures throughout the season. Even attempting such a scheme would require each village to have its own high-level druid on duty around the clock—and druids were hardly common to begin with. Assembling hundreds of them was out of the question.

Never in a million years would that sort of magic knowledge be included in the curriculum of the masses, and it wasn’t commonly taught in noble homes, either. Royal ones were no exception.

Zanac had only gotten an opportunity to learn it through personal connections.

This shortcoming was directly caused by the low status of casters in the kingdom. If they were like the Empire and had someone as impressive as the Triad Caster to call their own, perhaps things would be different. Unfortunately, the people of the kingdom had little interest in understanding magic and placed far too much stock in the heroics of knights. Consequently, it was not surprising that their society had not produced any casters capable of changing their minds.

This pervading idea convinced the nobility that magic was useless in war, and they passed that attitude down from generation to generation, leaving their heirs both ignorant and contemptuous wherever magic was concerned. A downward spiral that showed no signs of ending.

Zanac was well aware that magic could be incredibly powerful.

And if stupid conventions continued to prevent them from using it fully, then the kingdom was doomed to be defeated in battle or else to slowly wither on the vine. Zanac had every intention of assigning his own children the best magic tutor he could find. If the royals started learning magic in earnest, then other nobility would follow suit.

Of course, that sort of guidance might have already become redundant, as the Nation of Darkness was ruled by a powerful magical being, and proximity alone would change many people's minds about the value of magic. Perhaps the nobles were already studying.

While it was far from ideal for such change to come about from external pressures, Zanac could look the other way as long as it benefited the kingdom as a whole.

But given the current state of affairs, Renner's ignorance made sense.

Genius or not, if she was unaware of the facts, she could easily draw the wrong conclusions. Trusting her blindly was not without its risks.

On the other hand, Renner was close with the adamantite adventurer team the Blue Roses. It would not prove difficult for her to learn more about any sort of magic, given adequate time and interest. The real question was if Zanac knew something, would a creature as uniquely brilliant as his sister really leave it unverified?

He could see no reason why she would lie about something this trivial, so perhaps it was just a rare glimpse of human failing. A momentary mental lapse.

He was well aware Renner had no designs on the throne.

Her goals were, to his eyes, insignificant. And yet, they were indeed something she could not possibly gain if she did take the throne. In other words, fooling Zanac would do her no good.

“Sister, druid powers are no match for cold.”

“Oh? That’s less than ideal. Oh, but wait! At the end of the day, this is a question of how much food we have stockpiled, yes? Then we have more than enough. What a relief!”

She smiled while Zanac did the exact opposite.

“The stockpiles you speak of... I’d really rather not. Is there any guarantee eating those won’t turn you undead?”

The kingdom did, technically, have a surplus in storage.

Their merchants’ warehouses contained more than enough food to go around. But their plans could not hinge on *that* supply. And strictly speaking, it was not the kingdom’s property.

These provisions were in the kingdom’s warehouses, thanks to a contract with the terrifying undead king—the ruler of the Nation of Darkness. This arrangement was unprecedented—no records of anything like it were found in any kingdom history book.

The merchants were permitted to sell it at their own discretion, but the customs fees involved meant the price was much higher than ordinary foodstuffs. That price had been set by the Nation of Darkness, and no discounts were allowed. As a result, the populace hadn’t bought any, and it was merely taking up space.

This also meant none of the kingdom’s wealth was flowing into the Nation of Darkness, so they suffered no financial losses.

That made it sound like there was no problem.

But Zanac could not help but see it as part of the Nation of Darkness's schemes—and Renner agreed with him.

"The Sacred Kingdom's people are eating them, so the provisions themselves are demonstrably harmless."

"Or they want us thinking that! Then we'll only find out too late that they've left booby-trapped food behind in our territory!"

Renner winced. "You don't really think that."

"You're not wrong. We've already investigated them thoroughly, after all."

The Nation of Darkness had made it clear that the primary reason for using their kingdom's warehouses was to establish a route for providing the Sacred Kingdom aid.

All the food currently in those storerooms would eventually be shipped out.

The Re-Estize Kingdom had offered no guarantee of safe passage; if bandits or monsters attacked any of the convoys, that was a problem for the Nation of Darkness to handle. They hired guards as expected, but to defend their interests, they'd asked for permission to fly the Nation of Darkness's flag over the wagons hauling these supplies to make it obvious who owned them. Not wanting any headaches, the kingdom had allowed it—in return for customs fees and a promise not to allow any of the Nation of Darkness's undead inside their borders. This had proved to be a mistake.

Now the Re-Estize Kingdom was full of convoys flying the flag of the Nation of Darkness. The wagons rolled right down city streets into a harbor with shipping routes to the Sacred Kingdom. It was a clear demonstration that the kingdom could not refuse the Nation of Darkness's requests—and since their neighbor was so enthusiastic about "foreign aid," these convoys were painfully frequent.

The more tactics like this undermined their authority, the more likely the Re-Estize Kingdom would be forced to raise a fist or bend the knee. And the nature of these encroachments meant the latter was far more likely. It was as effective as it was underhanded.

Worst of all, since it was outwardly for a morally upstanding cause, the Re-Estize Kingdom could hardly ask them to stop.

Before being defeated by the King of Darkness, the great demon Jaldabaoth had rampaged through the Re-Estize Kingdom, including its capital. He and the host of monsters under his control then laid waste to the northern half of the Sacred Kingdom, and Zanac had been told the damage was far worse than anything his kingdom had suffered.

Yet, as extensive as the damage to the Sacred Kingdom's northern reaches was, the southern regions remained largely unharmed.

With the Holy Lady's death, a new holy king had taken the throne. He had his hands full with the disorder caused by the deaths of northern nobles and conflicts with powerful leaders to the south.

These competing interests had piled up until a struggle for power began, threatening to split the Sacred Kingdom in two.

As a result, aid to the north was delayed, and the people there were struggling to find their daily bread.

Salvation came in the form of supplies bearing the mark of the Nation of Darkness, which were shipped to them from the Re-Estize Kingdom's warehouses.

A good plan, Zanac admitted.

With conditions that dire, a gift of food would make anyone forget it came from the undead.

"If only we were capable of sending food, the goodwill their king is earning would be ours. But after... Well, it's simply not possible."

Were it not for that bloody battle.

Or were it not for everything stolen from the capital during Jaldabaoth's attack, perhaps things would have been different. They could have fed the Sacred Kingdom themselves, and the King of Darkness would have remained untrusted.

Their complete failure to do anything of the sort had earned their representative a frosty reception at the new holy king's coronation.

This wasn't due to any lingering resentment caused by long-simmering conflict

between two neighboring countries; during the reign of the Holy Lady, Calca Bessarez, the Re-Estize Kingdom and Sacred Kingdom had been on fairly cordial terms.

But even before the famine, when Jaldabaoth had been tearing the Sacred Kingdom apart, the Re-Estize Kingdom had refused to send any and all aid, causing a fatal rift in their relations.

Naturally, it had never been an option for them given their own difficulties.

Ainz Ooal Gown, the King of Darkness, had unleashed his most powerful spell upon their armies, and with *so many* dead, they'd been at their wit's end simply dealing with the aftermath. And losing many of their best warriors—including the kingdom's strongest, the captain of the Royal Select, Gazef Stronoff. As resources dwindled, how could they have offered anything in the struggle against that vile demon?

But anything they might offer by way of explanation would only sound like the feeble excuses of a heartless realm. What the Re-Estize Kingdom had done was what *any* country would have done—except the Nation of Darkness. *They* sent both military aid and humanitarian relief. Tearing the Re-Estize Kingdom down a peg in the process.

Zanac's own diplomats reported that the northern reaches of the Sacred Kingdom held the Nation of Darkness in high esteem.

“One delayed response after another...”

All leading to even bigger problems.

A run of bad luck but leading unerringly to their current predicament.

“But if...”

“Brother!”

“Ah! Sister, you need not shout. I hear you loud and clear—I am not old and decrepit yet.”

“You've been ignoring me, lost in a world of your own. Some small discomfort is entirely justified. Where did your thoughts take you?”

“Perhaps... a mite too far from here.”

Renner was giving him a look of great pity.

"It never does to dwell on things," she said. "Gloomy affairs take the mind to the darkest of places, but you must not allow that."

This struck a nerve.

"Perhaps you're right."

"I know I am... In any case, it seems like the Sacred Kingdom may well split in two, leading to a civil war—but which side do you think will win? As exhausted as the northern half is, I'm not sure I favor their chances."

"Agreed. Too many of the north's renowned warriors have perished. And I heard that paladin woman fell as well at one point or another."

"I'm not familiar. Was she famous?"

"Quite. They said she was a match for our captain. I heard she paid us a visit once but, sadly, missed the chance to meet her myself."

She had not been an officially designated dignitary, and it would never do to bump someone like that up the schedule and grant them an unplanned audience. Doing so would have undermined the crown's authority. And while they were diplomatically stalling, she'd left the capital.

Had he known what lay ahead, Zanac would have found a way to meet with her—perhaps in the hopes that it would have laid the foundation for *something*.

"If you had not insisted that we stay the course with our foreign affairs policy, I might well have arranged an audience. Certainly, letting her see the king would have been improper, but I am merely a prince."

"The final choice was yours, Brother," Renner said, puffing up her cheeks. This was downright adorable and would have charmed a lesser man. Most people would be fooled by the display. "You are next in line for the throne, yet you do not enjoy universal support. To ensure your claim, you need to avoid making unnecessary enemies. We can't afford rebellions anytime soon. That would leave you unable to fulfill your promise to me."

“You’re not wrong.”

She was hardly hiding her own ambitions, but that lent credence to her words.

“Hmm... conventional wisdom may not apply here. If the Nation of Darkness continues to support the north, they may bend the entire kingdom to their will. Perhaps we should reach out to the south.”

An ally to the northern half of the Sacred Kingdom was a potential enemy to their southern cousins. But if the Re-Estize Kingdom stepped in, it might discourage the Nation of Darkness.

“Yes, not a bad idea. The teachings of the Faceless One are a key cause of the divide and hardly play to our interests.”

“Ugh, that woman...”

The Faceless One.

With Jaldabaoth defeated, she had founded a new religion. She had a real name, of course, but the alias was far better known.

Her sect had swollen in numbers, and her core teachings made a certain kind of sense: *It is a sin to remain weak. All must strive to be stronger.*

While these beliefs were becoming more entrenched in the north by the day, they were not only unpopular in the south, they were being actively pruned. The reasons were obvious—her teachings could undermine the authority of the ruling class.

The nobility still held sway in the south, but in the north, they had already lost much of their influence. And that difference had been key to the growing rift in the Sacred Kingdom.

The sect led by this Faceless One was less a new religion than a social movement or community; they continued to worship the Four Gods, caused no sectarian conflict with established temples, and the new holy king had chosen to give them his tacit approval, allowing them to establish themselves across the north.

“...But hiding her face is inherently suspect.”

Her moniker came from the mask she wore in public.

The emissaries the Re-Estize Kingdom had dispatched held the same concerns Zanac had just voiced, and despite asking her followers about it, none had given a clear explanation. Almost like the subject itself was taboo.

And that only deepened their concerns.

Why would anyone hide their face without a compelling motive?

"Her parents were warriors of some repute, but that's all the more reason to show her face, use their fame to help her teachings spread. Perhaps she hides her face because her lineage itself is a lie?"

"Why lie about something so unimportant? The risk doesn't match the reward."

"True. But what if she's no longer human? A faceless undead?"

"—An agent of the Nation of Darkness?"

"Wouldn't that explain a lot of things?" Zanac asked.

"It certainly would. Yet, hiding her face seems so obviously suspicious that I feel there must be some less clear cause."

"Fair enough. But what other cause could there be? If she'd been badly scarred in the battles against Jaldabaoth's forces, I could see it, but—magic can fix *that*. Or are scars left by those demons incurable?"

"That theory makes far more sense to me than the other. Especially given her gender."

Zanac felt that exposing such scars and earning herself pity would be far more advantageous, but that *would* depend on the nature of the disfigurements themselves.

"At any rate, if we wish to support the south, we need more information on the state of the Sacred Kingdom. I should order our men to investigate."

"I think that's best, yes."

"To our south, half the Sacred Kingdom favors the Nation of Darkness. To our east, the

Empire has become a vassal state. What a nightmare.”

“Indeed.”

Renner’s curt answer sat poorly with him, and he fixed her with a glare.

“...You don’t seem all that concerned.”

“Oh? I agree wholeheartedly. The state of our neighbors is far from ideal. And on top of everything you just mentioned, our own kingdom’s underworld interests remain just as strong.”

“The Eight Fingers? I’ve seen the reports. Too many addicts in withdrawal causing social unrest. They’re still hard at work, I assume. If that demon hadn’t shown up, we could have dealt them a serious blow.”

Zanac sighed.

Gazef Stronoff had been symbolic of the Re-Estize Kingdom’s might, and with his loss, they could not afford a direct confrontation with the Eight Fingers. They had a real shortage of individual might.

There was one exception.

One of Renner’s men, Brain Unglaus. That man had potential, yet he had pledged his allegiance to *her* and showed no interest in serving anyone else. Zanac had attempted to curry his favor without success.

*He refuses to be the kingdom’s new captain. Instead, he’s searching for someone with talent, intent on training them for the position. I at least wanted to loan him our kingdom’s treasure, that sword, but my father is dead set against it.*

Gazef had meant far too much to the king.

The throne was a lonely place.

The closer he got to it, the more that phrase rang true to Zanac.

To his father, Gazef Stronoff had been a campfire, the only thing that broke up the lonely darkness. Though separated by a considerable number of years, there had been

a genuine bond between them, perhaps one greater than simple friendship.

Zanac envied that.

As the second prince, he'd had no such confidants. Everyone had assumed his elder brother would take the throne. Zanac was merely a backup; no one desired a strong connection with him. And they'd deemed whatever benefits that relationship might bring would be offset by the chances of turning Marquis Beauleurope against them.

The only man who'd gone against the grain was Marquis Raeven, concerned for the future of the kingdom. However, Raeven had been merely a collaborator, not a friend. Thus, Zanac found it hard not to fear his future.

A life of isolation.

He shook his head, driving these gloomy thoughts away. Renner was giving him that look again, like she'd discovered some strange new creature, but he ignored it.

When he became king, there was a decent chance he would have to order Brain to recover the kingdom's four treasures from his father's clutches.

He wasn't confident Brain would obey, but if he did, they'd be his. Only that would be an adequate reward for the man's efforts.

Brain was not the captain—merely Renner's subordinate. He had little to no sense of loyalty to the crown and was a mere commoner—loaning the country's treasures to a man like that could well earn the enmity of the nobility.

But he deserved nothing less.

“What if we vow to become the Nation of Darkness’s vassal?”

Renner's sole purpose was to hole up in a little manor with Climb. She could easily do that even if the Re-Estize Kingdom were the Nation of Darkness's client state. There was a distinct possibility that the decline of the royal family would actually make her safer, which had to be an appealing idea for her.

“Hmph.” Zanac snorted, rejecting the proposal out of hand. “That may have worked for the Empire, but if we tried the same thing, it would start a civil war.”

The Fresh Blood Emperor had made his realm a monolith. Any nobility capable of standing up to him had long since been purged, so once he declared their vassalage, there had been little resistance. And the Empire had never been the Nation of Darkness's *victim*. They might harbor fears but bore no grudges, no resentments—only intimate knowledge of the threat at hand. The Re-Estize Kingdom was another matter.

There were four factions within the kingdom right now: the royals, the nobles, the unaligned, and the emerging faction that had been born after the war. The split was roughly 3:3:2:2.

And this new faction was the biggest headache of them all.

Why? Because they were composed entirely of people from families that had lost their first or second heirs, of people who'd lucked into power—and knew little of what passed for common sense or the unwritten rules of aristocratic society. They lacked class or education, and an even cursory examination revealed that any number of them were drunk on their newfound power.

They were a blight upon the land.

But each held sway within their own domain, and as long as they didn't break the kingdom's laws, Zanac could do nothing about them. Even if they did break the law, flexing royal might would provoke a response from the other factions. And the royal faction had lost much of the influence they'd held before that fateful battle.

But Renner's idea of becoming a vassal was not without merit. If the balance of power shifted sufficiently, he would definitely have to consider it.

"A civil war?" Renner said. "I hardly think so, Brother."

*Liar*, Zanac thought. She wasn't seriously arguing the point but absolutely wouldn't mind if he was stupid enough to take her bait. That much was obvious.

And that's why he could never fully trust her.

*If only Elias would return.*

Another surge of desperation washed over him. Marquis Raeven may not have been a friend, but their shared concerns for the future of their homeland had made him

trustworthy. But that comrade would likely never return to his side. All he had left was this wild card—frighteningly talented yet impossible to control.

Shaking off his despair, he turned toward Renner, doing his best to look amused.

“I still can’t believe the Empire purchased *that* from the Nation of Darkness.”

“...What an abrupt change of subject.” Renner sighed. “Very well. But is it really that bad? They *are* a vassal, so...”

The Nation of Darkness’s most profitable export to the Empire was *undead*. Whether as manual labor, soldiers, or freight haulers, there was a wide range of uses for this... merchandise.

“They’re still the undead! The enemy of all living things!”

“But they don’t need to be fed and never tire. I cannot imagine a more ideal workforce. True, there is a risk to allowing undead under the Nation of Darkness’s control inside their borders. It’s like allowing foreign soldiers to enter your territory. But as a vassal state, it allows them to demonstrate they have nothing to hide—like putting on a collar and offering up the leash.”

Renner’s gaze turned to the ceiling.

“Perhaps we could learn something from that attitude. There are advantages to revealing a weakness, to letting a foe know they can threaten you at any time.”

“Fair. For a leader dealing with an untrusted opponent, having clear weaknesses is preferable to showing none. From that viewpoint, the Empire’s actions make sense. And E-Rantel is now trading with the dwarfs in the Azerlisia Mountains. Their undead work the mines, and they supply fresh food in return for ore and dwarven-crafted farm tools.”

Agents they’d sent into E-Rantel had heard all this from the dwarves themselves.

“They can just have their undead make the trek to and from those mountains, ignoring all the usual costs of transport and labor. Far cheaper than buying those supplies from us. And if they’ve accepted the undead labor, I think it’s safe to assume the dwarves are effectively a vassal state as well.”

“Mm.”

“—An alliance with the council state?”

“Already working on it, but... without much success. Some dragonlords have been responding positively but need time to persuade representatives from other species. And if they do not succeed, I’m told they’ll be unable to help us.”

This was partially a lie.

Attempts to establish a coalition to oppose the Nation of Darkness were proceeding at a snail’s pace but making steady progress nonetheless. It seemed like they might manage to obtain a promise of mutual defense based on goodwill and friendship, but this would be inexplicit, without clear binding language. And that was hardly an alliance anyone could boast about.

Making proper allies of them would require jumping through many more hoops and add months to the process besides.

“I see. The sooner we form a military alliance, the better. And when exactly will you be coronated? I think it’s high time you kept your promise to me.”

In return for her assistance, Zanac had promised her a manor of her own in which she and Climb could retire together.

“Hold your horses. It won’t be long. You’re perfectly aware we’ve lined up most of the cards. I’ve spoken with Father about the remaining steps. He’s got to make one last big political move.”

If this move failed, the king would take responsibility by promptly abdicating.

On the chance that it succeeded but provoked the nobility, leading to unrest—that was when the prince would propose a compromise, mollifying them, and the king’s subsequent abdication would leave those nobles solidly on his side. It might be a blot on his father’s final years of rule, but the benefits to the royal family outweighed that loss of prestige.

“But what about your own project, that orphanage? You go there and cook for them, right? Any need of further financing?”

“None. My allowance alone is covering operations.”

There were already nearly fifty orphans housed within those walls.

That was no small number. It was far more than any other orphanage in the kingdom. Yet, Renner insisted she needed no help keeping the place going and was funding it all by herself. The third princess received a pittance of an allowance, but they’d married off the older two, and some of what originally went to them must have found its way to her, making this venture possible. And she was scrimping and saving through other means, drastically reducing the number of maids in her service.

Come to think of it—he often saw her wearing clothes he’d seen before.

Part of him was vexed by this, as it was unacceptable to give the nobility any excuse to look down upon a member of the royal family, but another part of him was proud of her for knowing the value of money and how to use it most effectively.

“I can share some of my own allowance. Your orphanage is clearly a magnanimous effort.”

“Don’t,” she said, an unusual note of steel in her tone. “If there are any children of talent within the orphanage, I shall be taking them to the manor with me. I won’t tolerate any attempts to steal my workers away.”

“Ah, I supposed that makes sense.”

“It does. I have Brain teaching them basic sword skills. And we’re educating them all. They’re growing up fast.”

“What about any untalented children?”

“Anyone can learn to read and write and do basic arithmetic. Those skills should be enough for them to find employment.”

“Then you don’t mind if I take a few?”

“That would be lovely of you. I need not worry about any children left—”

There was an urgent knock on the door, interrupting her.

“—What’s all the commotion?” Zanac roared.

The door burst open. “Your Highness! Urgent news!”

A noble of the robe flew in. One of their ministers. He held a bundle of parchment in his hand.

“What is it, man?” Zanac said.

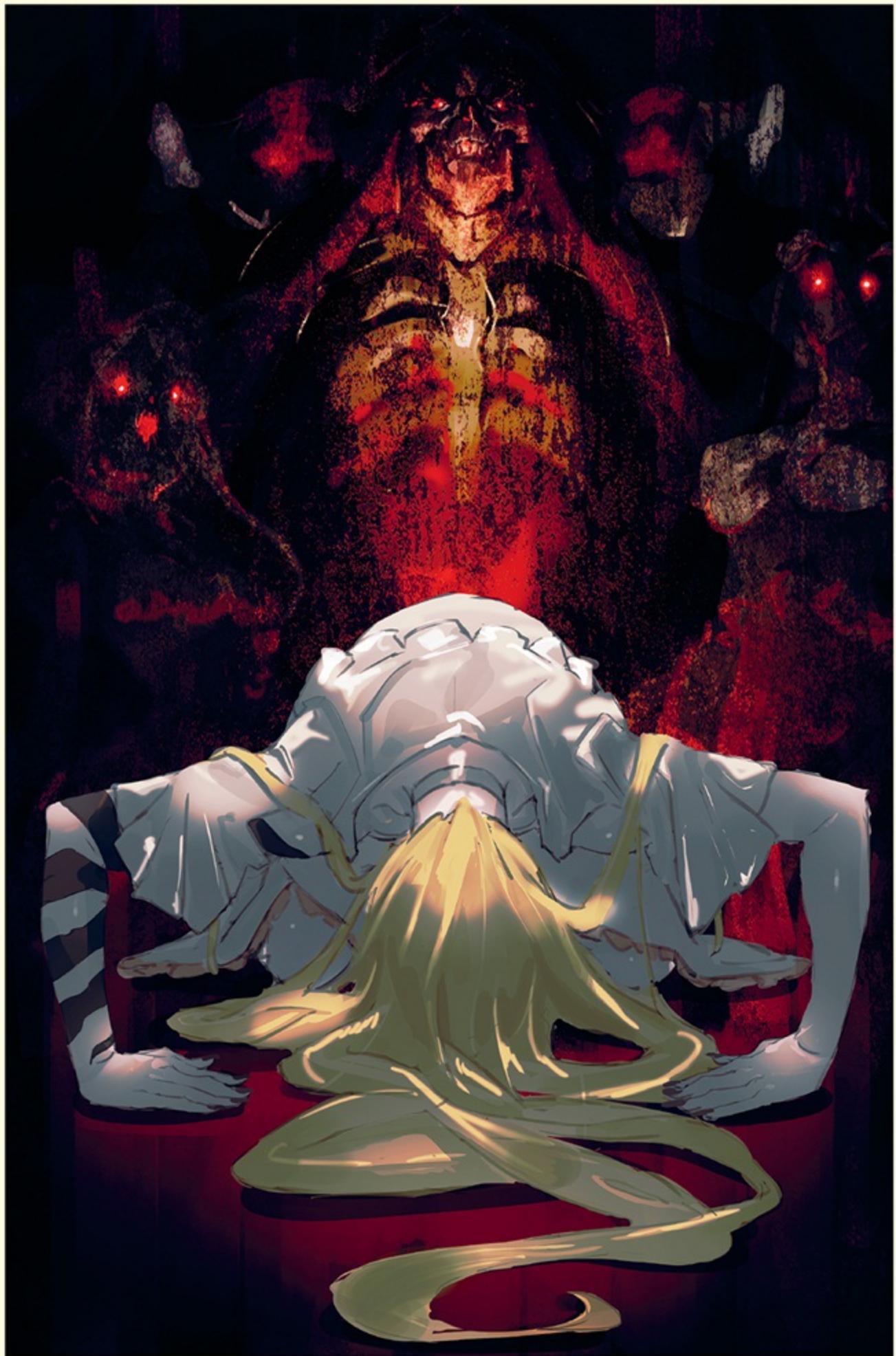
He took the bundle and read it over, a look of shock coming across his face. It made no sense—no, his brain refused to let it make sense.

“What’s wrong?” Renner asked.

Unable to muster a response, he handed her the bundle.

“Har?” And got a rare note of utter confusion from her.

Zanac allowed himself a momentary smile. Once again, she’d seemed almost human.



# **CHAPTER 1**

## **AN UNEXPECTED MOVE**

# 1

He knocked back the brimming mug of ale, savoring the feel of it going down.

Top-rate stuff like this was never an option in his own domain, but he'd developed a taste for it.

He let out a hoppy burp and set the half-emptied mug down on the table. Back home, everyone drank from wooden tankards and were prone to raucously slamming them down, but this was porcelain and required a more delicate touch.

Naturally, even if he did break it, he would not have to pay. He was drinking in a space provided by his patron, Hilma Shugneus, while surrounded by noblemen of his faction—or those brought here by them—and he need not pay for a single thing.

All this was an investment in his future as Baron Phillip Didon Rile Mocharath, aristocrat at large.

Everything could be paid back later—until then he felt free to run up the tab.

Hilma might have far more money than Phillip could ever dream of, but she was merely a commoner. She could only bow her head before true power. That was obviously why she was so desperate to get a nobleman like himself in her pocket and so enthusiastic in her efforts to establish his faction.

It was the clearest distinction this world had to offer.

Birthright above all.

But he did owe her rather a lot.

Phillip prided himself on paying his debts, which made him eager to obtain a higher rank. Hilma surely wanted that as well; as a mere baron, there was only so much he could do.

And he was more than ready to clear this slate.

Until his debt was settled, he had to defer to her at times and obtain her permission to act, even when it was obviously in her best interest.

He was itching for more freedom. To flaunt his power.

That was all Phillip wanted.

And yet—

“It was supposed to be easy!”

He'd accidentally said that out loud and hastily glanced around.

This was no commoner's pub but a room in one of Hilma's mansions, remodeled to look like a bar. The boisterous clamor normally heard in plebeian watering holes was unacceptable here. As a result, while his grumble had not been that loud... if someone had been standing close, there was a considerable chance they would have overheard him.

He was relieved to find no one looking his way.

There was no benefit in anyone learning of his failures.

And failing he was.

*All these fools should be put to death!*

Phillip drained the rest of the mug, trying to douse the flames of frustration.

He chugged it a bit too fast, and a trickle of ale escaped his lips, running down his neck and soiling his clothes.

Now the fabric clung to his skin, and the unpleasant sensation made his mood that much fouler.

Nothing was going right.

Phillip's face twisted in anger.

He originally expected his domain to increase productivity several-fold and be overflowing with citizens grateful for their new ruler. The nobility around were supposed to have been taking note of his success and gossiping about his brilliance by now.

But what had actually happened?

Not only was the food production steadily declining but the villagers looked at him with contempt in their eyes whenever he ventured outside.

*The audacity!*

He was from the storied house of Mocharath. No mere villager had any right to treat him with anything less than the utmost respect. Perhaps these villagers were actively plotting his downfall!

That made sense.

Many envied true talent. Unable to accept their own mediocrity, they invariably grew jealous, bitter, and delusional.

But not everyone was like that. There was a great deal of villagers. Some other factor had to be at play. Perhaps they were in the pay of a neighboring domain and were actively trying to undermine Phillip's authority.

He couldn't rule it out.

It was a simple fact that if they focused on lucrative cash crops, the profits would come rolling in eventually. The logic was so simple, a child could understand it. That was how their fields should be used; any food they needed could just be purchased from merchants.

And yet, the complaints would not stop coming in.

*Scum! I should have Hilma punish them all. Maybe then they'd buckle down and do their jobs! We need to investigate and make sure they haven't betrayed their loyalties. No, wait... perhaps I can just punish them all on my own?*

He could whip them. Like cattle.

*Yes, there's no need to consult Hilma. No need to indebted myself any further. She's done more than enough for me. It's high time I started paying her back.*

He was destined to be a great nobleman, while Hilma was a mere commoner. It would be a trifle to cancel the debt he owed her, to bleed her dry. But that approach was little

better than theft, and a proud aristocrat like himself was honor bound to shun such moral turpitude. He should repay when he could.

Besides, a debt too great could become a shackle on him in the future. He might one day find himself forced to heed her every word.

*The question is how to best clear this debt.*

His original plan had been to grow the profits of his holdings by a tremendous amount and pay her back with a large sum of money, but that was clearly imposs— Difficult. Very difficult.

Instead, he decided to take the initiative and show Hilma what this new faction could do for her.

*Regrettably, the faction isn't exactly mine to command...*

By joining this faction, Phillip had formed and strengthened all manner of connections.

There were plenty of voices calling for him to become the group's representative, but many nobles remained unconvinced he was fit for the job.

Hilma was backing him, but the barriers of age and rank were steep. If he looked at it from their perspective, their reluctance was understandable.

Words simply carried more weight coming from an elderly count than a young baron. But Phillip was convinced that would make them no different from the old, conservative factions.

The whole point of a *new* faction was to avoid being shackled to antiquated ways and breathe new life into the aristocracy. It should be led by a man like Phillip, someone willing to try new things.

*Why don't these imbeciles understand?*

He angrily raised his mug only to find it empty.

There was a servant of some kind passing nearby, so he barked, "Bring me another!"

"Certainly, sir." She bowed. She strode away, hips swaying—a gait that caught the eye

and held it. She was not wearing many layers, giving anyone who stared a tantalizing hint as to the shape of her hindquarters.

“Hmph.”

A fine backside was certainly appreciated, but her prompt obedience was even more appealing; this was how the people *should* treat their lord and master.

Phillip was borrowing two such maids.

He could do anything he liked with them and didn’t even have to pay their wages. They were handling all the housework. Hilma had also provided him with a butler and purveyor.

He would have preferred to dismiss all the old servants and fill the house with his own people, but his father had insisted, and Phillip eventually conceded the point. He could tolerate his father’s demands *because* Hilma was paying for everything—if this has been coming out of his coin purse, he would have insisted the expense was too great and fired them long ago.

Phillip’s mind was dragged away from these thoughts by a voice at his side.

“Oh, Baron Mocharath. Is there something wrong? You seem quite out of sorts.”

He turned to find two noblemen standing nearby.

They had both entered the peerage and acceded to their domains around the same time as he had and were members of the same faction. The two of them had mugs in one hand and bowls of nuts in the other.

“Oh, Baron Delvie! Baron Loquillen!”

Baron Delvie was a thin, unassuming man, terribly lacking in noble bearing or refinement. Only his clothes suggested he was of high birth; if he was dressed in commoner’s garb, no one would ever mistake him for an aristocrat. Even in a venue like this, if he was introduced as an actor playing the part of a noble on stage, no one would even question it.

Baron Loquillen, on the other hand, was magnificently built. Broad in all directions, vertically, horizontally, and back to front. He cut an imposing figure yet struggled to

assert himself; Phillip had swiftly deemed him the type that was easy to take advantage of.

Their respective domains shared a border, so they were often seen together. Phillip distinctly remembered dismissing them for this; it was most efficient to act and move alone, as he did.

“Mind if we join you?”

“Not at all! Please sit down.”

Baron Delvie took the offered chair, and Baron Loquillen bobbed his head, taking a seat beside him. And almost as if she’d timed it perfectly, the girl returned with his ale.

“Let’s have a toast!”

“Gladly!”

Knocking their full cups together mixed their drinks and was a gesture that proved there was no poison in them. Well aware of this custom, Phillip deliberately used quite a bit of force.

A splatter of ale hit the table.

“Oh dear!”

And a few drops got on Baron Delvie’s clothing.

While the clothes suited his status, they were hardly impeccable by aristocratic standards. Perhaps one could say they had history? They reminded Phillip of what he’d once worn himself—hand-me-downs.

A brief burst of pity swept through him.

Phillip’s current wardrobe was all the latest finery, custom-tailored for him at Hilma’s expense. Meanwhile, the state of *their* clothes meant she’d deemed them unworthy of similar investment.

Such palpable gulfs in their potential. The world was an unfair place indeed.

“You’ve come to drink?” he asked.

“—Yes, we have. We have indeed. A drink was what we were originally after, but then we spotted yourself here and thought we’d take the measure of your mood. Isn’t that right?”

“Tis true, Baron Mocharath.”

“No need to stand by on pretense! We share the same rank and status. We are companions, are we not?”

“Oh! Kind words from an esteemed man such as yourself. You honor us both, and I am glad to hear it. Isn’t that right?”

“So it is. Please help yourself to these.”

The man held up some refreshments, something dried that paired well with their drinks.

“Why thank you, Baron Loquillen.”

“My, Baron Mocharath. No need for formal titles here. Please call me Vianney, and my friend here is Yg.”

“Very well! And by all means, call me Phillip.”

Grinning broadly, all three took a quaff of ale.

“But, my dear Phillip, what ails you? You seemed most out of sorts when we arrived.”

“Did I?” The alcohol slowed the wheels in his mind, and it took him a moment to gather his thoughts. “Oh, just frustrated by all the fools in this world. Specifically, the peasants in my domain.”

“Ah, ah, I share your suffering! A man of your brilliance must constantly find himself beset by those incapable of understanding new ideas. Would that we shared that burden, eh?”

“Indeed. A vexation befitting your wisdom, Lord Phillip.”

Their praise was music to his ears.

True aristocrats simply understood. They, too, must be constantly fighting the stupidity of the masses.

“You know how I feel?”

“But of course! Of course we do. We face the same problems—although naturally, not on your scale. Right?”

“Very much so. Oh, your mug is empty. You there—fetch Phillip a fresh drink at once!”

The girl soon placed a new ale in front of him, practically overflowing. He held it high.

“Another toast?” he said, and their crockery clashed once more.

Phillip poured the ale down his throat.

Delicious.

It had never tasted so good before. This was the joy of drinking with compatriots who shared his hardships.

Since Phillip was something of a faction leader, the other members often kept their distance, reluctant to befriend him. He was delighted to have company for once. He even found himself throwing his arms over their shoulders before long.

“My, Lord Phillip! I appreciate the overture, of course! However, it does make it rather easy to spill. Perhaps once you’ve sipped a bit more— Oh!”

His drink sloshed over again. The ale was free, but wasting so much was rude to Hilma.

He removed his arms from their shoulders and chugged the rest in his cup.

“You certainly can put it away! Right?”

“Indeed. A magnificent display, Lord Phillip.”

“Pwahhh! Oh, this is nothing. But I must say, ale enjoyed with two such fine fellows certainly does taste better!”

"My, oh my! What a delightful thing to say. I'm afraid I cannot hold my liquor, but it warms the soul to see you put it away so heartily."

"Oh? Neither of you drinks much?"

They *were* still nursing their original drinks.

"I'm afraid so. It shames me to admit it, but my tongue simply finds little pleasure in the taste. You agree, yes?"

"I do. But in a venue like this, drinking is a must to fit in. And I always end up taking little sips."

"And that's why we envy your fortitude! Please, our drinks are yours. Chug away!"

Phillip happily took them up on that offer.

His head was starting to spin, and he could feel his cheeks burning.

"Good, good. Lord Phillip, you mentioned troubles with the fools in your domain, but what exactly is the issue at hand?"

"Mm? Uh, what? Were we talking about that?"

"Yes, you mentioned it yourself, in fact. Perhaps you've had a bit too much? Should we get you something nonalcoholic? Mm?"

"Indeed, Lord Phillip. Water might clear your head. The water here has no mossy aftertaste to it at all!"

"Oh no, I'm fine, I'm fine." But even without a mirror, he could tell his face must be very red. "...Um, yes, the troubles I'm having. They're all about money, really."

His companions glanced at each other.

"Isn't that always the case?"

"Indeed. Our domains simply aren't very fruitful."

"No, no, that's not it! If they'd simply do as I say, we'd be raking it in! But instead of

doing what they're told, they slack off or find ways to circumvent my orders. Every last one a fool!"

"Right you are, Lord Phillip. I know only too well the burden of dealing with fools. Incidentally, what is it your domain is known for?"

"Nothing but crops, I'm afraid."

He was trying all sorts of other things but to no avail.

"Crops... Well, if you have a specialty, those can make money, but without one..."

"Ordinary crops don't fetch high prices. Everyone knows that."

Both sounded equally frustrated.

That was his point exactly. That was why you had to grow something of value. It might not be immediately profitable, but it was vital to investigate what would grow and what would not. This was an investment in the future. But every time he gave such an order, the response was that they didn't have the manpower for it.

"All we can do is hope for crop failures elsewhere in the kingdom. That would certainly drive the price up!"

"In my do—," Yg began, but Vianney elbowed him in the ribs.

Then he leaned in, speaking low in Phillip's ear.

"You are absolutely correct. But even with a bad harvest, the price might stay steady. Have you heard? Our kingdom's warehouses are filled to the rafters with cheap provisions shipped in from the Nation of Darkness. Those will prevent any major upheaval in the market. Without some unique... added value, your crops will sell for a pittance."

"Really?!"

"Whoa, Lord Phillip. Keep your voice down."

Phillip hastily glanced around, then asked quietly, "You're sure of this?"

"Yes, it comes from a trusted source. Well, really, here in the capital, quite a few merchants are buzzing about it. These stockpiles of foodstuffs are occupying a substantial amount of their storage. And they've been told they can sell off as much as they like—though naturally, the Nation of Darkness's interests are given priority."

"Mm? So the Nation of Darkness is just leaving it in their care? The merchants aren't buying food from the Nation of Darkness to sell here?"

"That's what I've heard. I'm unsure of the details, but the food is merely in their care. They receive a payment for storing it—essentially a warehouse fee. Hardly a significant amount but enough to turn a profit."

"...Are warehouses something a trader can afford to just... rent out like that?"

"Ordinarily, it would take a lot of persuasion. But that demon attacked the warehouse district of the capital, remember? That left quite a few of them empty, so their owners were only too happy to put them to use. But until that stockpile is turned over or depleted, the merchants won't be raising any prices. If we try to press them on the matter, they'll simply say, *Any higher than that and we're better off selling the Nation of Darkness provisions.* Do you know anything about E-Rantel's largest food depot?"

"N-no, I'm afraid not."

"It's a simply massive building dedicated to stockpiling foodstuffs—and they've got a magic item maintaining Preservation on the interior at all times so that nothing within can go bad. Previously, its main purpose was preparing for the annual campaign against the Empire, gradually accumulating enough rations to feed a hundred thousand soldiers. But normally if you gather food over long periods of time, some of it inevitably rots, and depending on the time of year, there may be nothing to purchase. This storage facility was built to solve both problems. The magic item itself can't be moved, so they had no choice but to let the Nation of Darkness seize it. Which means if the Nation of Darkness can't move the provisions stored there right away, they can just keep storing them *indefinitely* until they do."

"No matter how long they can store supplies, the Nation of Darkness only has the one city, E-Rantel. I can't imagine they have the capacity to grow that many crops."

Even if some of their produce flowed into the kingdom, given their relative populations, the price deflation would be minimal.

"See, that's the thing. Rumor has it—and I trust these rumors—the Nation of Darkness is using undead labor to work a vast expanse of farmland. Their output is extremely high—that tiny development is producing as much as the entire kingdom. If you think about it, undead need no rest—although I certainly wouldn't want to eat anything they grew."

"You must be joking! That's so unfair!"

Phillip was shouting again. He could not abide this King of Darkness easily pulling off everything he'd tried and failed to make happen in his own domain. If he was struggling, so should that king!

Or—should he bring in undead to work his fields?

"It may be a tad exaggerated. Just because the undead work tirelessly doesn't mean they can equal the output of a far larger realm... but it *is* true their crop yields are rather high, enough that the Nation of Darkness can afford to provide the Sacred Kingdom foreign aid."

"They can?"

"Yes, that Jaldabaoth demon laid waste to the Sacred Kingdom—the same demon that attacked our capital. And his rampage was so devastating, it outright caused a famine or at least pushed them to the brink of one. The Nation of Darkness is using the provisions stored here to cover their shortfalls. Convoys laden with foodstuffs have been rolling through my domain regularly, so this much is true."

"If they're sending enough food to stave off a famine, is there anything left in the merchant's warehouses?"

"At first glance, anyone would be tempted to think the answer is no. But in case of bad harvests, they need to keep the stockpile above a certain threshold for emergencies. It's safe to assume they have held some back."

That was convincing. If Phillip were in the Nation of Darkness's position, he would simply use foreign aid as an excuse to rid himself of old excess provisions.

"Indeed. Well, not like a bad harvest comes—ugh!"

"—So we can't exactly put our faith in the weather. We need something better.

Something that will rid us of the Nation of Darkness's food—only then will the crops you're growing sell for a profit, Lord Phillip. But no matter how vexing the Nation of Darkness's stores are, we can't exactly start a war over them."

A flash of inspiration hit Phillip.

Crop prices could only go so high. Even if there was a bad harvest, the profit would be minimal. But this was because the Nation of Darkness's stores existed. What would happen if they didn't?

The answer was clear.

The price of crops would rise.

Which begged the question—how could they rid themselves of the Nation of Darkness's stockpile?

Vianney himself had offered up a clue.

They need merely lower the Nation of Darkness's yield. This was easier said than done. Phillip couldn't exactly march into Nation of Darkness territory and set fire to the fields on his own.

But could he steal the crops?

When that thought crossed his mind, it felt like a bolt of lightning.

Steal from another country. Common sense dictated that the risk was hardly worth it. However grand his future might be, Phillip was not yet equipped to contend with a foreign realm. But the kingdom and the Nation of Darkness were enemies. With all the citizens the King of Darkness had killed in that war, where else could they stand? And stealing food from an enemy country was an act of outstanding valor.

In which case, the kingdom leadership would naturally take Phillip's side. They might even grant him a title to reward him for striking boldly at their enemy.

*...I like it. This is a very good idea.*

If he stole from the Nation of Darkness, it wouldn't be long before merchants were lining up to buy Mocharath crops. And if he also sold them the crops he'd stolen...

*That's three birds with one stone! It's perfect. But how do I steal them? Consult with Hilma and hire some mercenaries? No, that would never do. You can't trust anyone hired with money. Exposing oneself to blackmail is the act of a fool.*

He would have to use his domain's levies. They were just ordinary villagers, but Phillip had long dreamed of creating a standing army. Rather than drag villagers out of their fields, it would be far better to have fully trained soldiers. And using the stolen crops to pay these soldiers only made sense.

*Still, venturing into Nation of Darkness territory is a risk.*

Phillip's domain was rather far from the Nation of Darkness. The price of moving troops over such a distance was prohibitive.

*No, wait... Someone mentioned it a moment ago. The Nation of Darkness's convoys move through his domain. If we attack those...*

Could he pull off that attack? There was a limit to how many villagers he could levy. And given the resistance the convoy would put up, he needed a clear advantage of numbers to ensure his victory.

"I have an idea, if you care to listen."

"An idea, you say?"

"Yes. A very good one."

Phillip leaned in and began proudly laying out his scheme.

•

"—Tsk. Not even a word of apology," Vianney spat. They had just parted ways with Phillip.

Phillip's drink had splattered clothes that had once been his father's; both fabric and design betrayed their age. The outfit in and of itself was an unusual sight. Clothes were something you ordered anew as you made your forays into society in earnest.

Nobility lived and died on such vainglory. Clothing was but one aspect of it, and dressing like this earned him nothing but scorn. But Vianney's position was at the very

bottom of aristocratic society; coming to events dressed to impress would earn him next to nothing.

Rather, looking like he did was a silent testament to his insignificance, a distinct advantage when trying to place himself under the wing of a greater power. His garb was a costume, one that allowed him to play the role of a weak noble on the stage of society. And it would help him to secure a better part in the future.

He couldn't let such an important piece of his arsenal to become soiled.

"Right you are," the man next to him said.

Vianney glared at him. "...You can stop doing that now."

His tone was bleak. If Phillip heard him speak like this, his eyes would have popped out of his head; the difference in bearing was that remarkable.

Vianney was neither prone to good cheer nor raucous conversation. He had piled on layers of pretense, doing his damnedest to sell the role of a loose-lipped comrade.

His friend Yg was only too aware of his true nature.

"Whoops, sorry. Ain't never been no good at flattery, so I had to dump it all on you."

Yg's mannerisms were also a dramatic departure from his earlier performance. The rough words did not even *sound* like they came from a nobleman.

"If you were even a tiny bit sorry, you'd put in the effort to learn. Minor nobles like us thrive only if our betters like us."

"It's a shite world. I thought getting this title would be my ticket to the good life. But it's nothing but brownnosing and ass-kissing."

"Bah. Don't be absurd. Commoners do the same. I don't know who has it worse, but knowing when to kiss an ass or two is the mark of a grown-up."

"Then I wish I'd never grown up. Wish I was still swinging a stick around and dreaming about being a dragon slayer."

"There's no turning back, and you know it. Learn to brownnose a little. It's all you need

to control a man with no brain. Even if it doesn't work, it's no skin off our teeth."

If they were dealing with a high-ranked nobleman or one with experience—someone accustomed to flattery—they would need to be far better at it to get anywhere. And that meant they needed practice and experience.

"Mm... well, if we meet him again, I'll try and do better."

"Don't try—just do. Everyone loves flattery. If they look annoyed by it, that just means you're bad at it. I know it's not your forte, Yg. I help cover your weaknesses, and you help cover mine. That's our deal. But giving up on improving yourself is a death sentence. There's no guarantee we can always stick together."

Vianney was smarter than average but hardly athletic. Yg was the other way around.

If they'd been the same type, perhaps the two of them would have seen each other as rivals, but both considered it a stroke of luck things hadn't turned out that way. Lords of neighboring domains rarely got on well, but since both had been third or fourth sons originally, they'd been raised ignorant of past grudges and any friction that shared history might have caused.

Perhaps most importantly, they'd just clicked from the moment they met.

"Fair... but what'd you make of him?"

"Scum," Vianney snapped.

The thought of allowing a man like that to take the reins of their faction was horrifying.

"But even a half-wit has his uses if you can lead him the right way."

"True."

Their faction was basically a refuse pile.

Those with no interest in managing their domains, nobles only in name. Those spinning out of control, drunk on power beyond their means to control, like a child handed a sword. Those who had accomplished nothing yet were absolutely certain they were destined for greatness. Most of the faction was beyond help, lacking even the sense Vianney had to recognize that they were nothing but another mediocre

aristocrat.

And that put their entire faction in a serious predicament.

"Leaving the Nation of Darkness's stockpile sitting in the capital is bad news. They can control food prices as they please. The moment the kingdom's harvests fail, they'll jack everything way up. Worst-case scenario, some lords will ignore that obvious trap and start converting their fields to only grow cash crops. I'm sure more than a few of them are totally convinced that even if prices go up a bit, we can simply buy food from the Nation of Darkness and avoid any risk of starvation."

Vianney could think of a number of nobles in his faction who believed exactly like that. He'd tried indirectly explaining just how horrifying that outcome would be, but they all seemed dead certain they alone would come out ahead. Nothing he said could dissuade them.

"...We lost too much labor in that war. When considering how to divide up the remaining manpower... well, I get why they'd want to chase an immediate profit."

Anyone—especially someone in charge—naturally wanted to grow their income.

"But only a madman would consider stealing from the Nation of Darkness's convoys. Even a complete idiot knows that attacking a wagon flying their flag is tantamount to an act of war, and the retribution will be swift and merciless. Yet, that fool—wait, unless he played *us*?"

Perhaps he'd tricked them. But Vianney had no idea what that man could possibly be after. And that meant the suggestion they'd taken was their best move.

"Don't overthink it," Yg assured him. "I guarantee he's just too dumb to realize anything."

"Come, now," Vianney said with a chuckle. "Do you really think *anyone's* so dumb they'll waylay a convoy without considering the consequences?"

"Well... it *is* hard to believe."

Phillip might be woefully ignorant of things any nobleman should know, but if he was genuinely *that* stupid, his father would never have ceded the title to him. Phillip must have had an angle. Except... what could it be?

“Maybe we should run it by Shugneus?”

“—No, better not.”

—Hilma Shugneus.

The woman who'd been instrumental in creating this faction. There'd been rumors she was the mistress of a count, but the establishment of this faction wasn't of any obvious benefit to him. It was only natural to wonder where all these funds and connections were coming from.

That woman was most likely backed by an organization rather than an individual. And there was only one in the kingdom with this kind of reach.

The Eight Fingers.

A criminal society operating in the shadows of the Re-Estize Kingdom.

Was Hilma merely a pawn in their schemes?

Vianney was confident that wasn't the case.

He'd spoken with her a few times, and she did not seem like an expendable stooge.

She likely occupied a prominent position within the syndicate. For someone like that to be deeply involved in their faction was alarming, to say the least. There were nobles out there who had gained substantial power through ties to the underworld, but Vianney preferred to keep his distance from any criminal enterprise.

Neither he nor Yg was conceited enough to think they'd come out ahead in such a risky deal.

“What, you think it's a bad idea? You're getting all cooped up in your thoughts again, aren't you? Time to start sharing, man. Even I can tell his plan puts us in danger. Phillip wants to attack a convoy in your domain! Boneface ain't gonna take that lying down. That guy's gonna want Phillip's head *and* yours!”

He would. Yg was absolutely right. But Vianney had good reason to go along with this harebrained scheme, even with the risks it entailed.

"That's probably the bumbling idiot's goal. Pin the crimes on us and make a clean getaway with all the goods in the ensuing chaos. So why not turn the tables on him? Say we're patrolling our domains and just so happen to come across some bandits attacking one of the Nation of Darkness's convoys. Then we simply drive them off. And it's vital they die by our hands."

If a trade caravan was attacked on their land, no noble would consider the matter concluded simply because they'd slain all the bandits. Especially if a foreign power was involved. Swift and fierce retribution was to be expected. They needed to eliminate any evidence of their involvement and prove beyond a doubt they'd attempted to address the crimes occurring in their jurisdiction.

"What do you think? Good opportunity to curry favor with the Nation of Darkness, isn't it? Even if they suspect our involvement, we can demonstrate we did our best to protect their interests. We just need to make sure the culprits perish. Dead men tell no tales."

"I can tell you exactly how that'll end. They're gonna find some godly priest to resurrect the dead. No use trying to hide anything from *them*."

"You think the Nation of Darkness has a priest skilled enough to bring back the dead? In a place where undead stalk the streets and all living beings tread lightly?"

"Probably not, no," Yg admitted.

Vianney chuckled. "Whatever that man is planning, we'll turn his ambush to our advantage. Whether his plan succeeds or fails—and I can't imagine it will—the Nation of Darkness will have to take precautions against future attacks. They might even completely abandon the idea of asking the kingdom's merchants to manage their food inventory. If that happens, our faction's half-wits will finally wake up from their daydreaming and start managing their lands with a bit of common sense. Besides..." Vianney's grin broadened. "Either way, we can rid ourselves of *him*."

"Is that worth going this far? We're putting ourselves in a lot of danger for his ass."

"He might not be, but that Shugneus woman is backing him, and we need to knock her down a peg. Her goal is to definitely prop up that numbskull as a figurehead and keep the rest of us under her thumb. It's all to bring her syndicate out from the shadows so they have a respectable front that'll let them move in broad daylight. I can't see any

other reason why she'd drop so much cash on us."

Neither the royal family nor the long-standing noble faction retained much of their old power. Anyone who could control a new power bloc would be able to wield a genuinely terrifying amount of influence over the kingdom as a whole. That kind of influence would put the Eight Fingers in charge of the kingdom by day and by night.

"I never thought of this faction as much more than a rest stop on the way to something better, but you've been planning real far ahead."

Yg's comment rang true. This wasn't something any one noble, let alone a lowly baron, should be worrying about. Naturally, the baron title covered a wide range of nobles, and there were those with domains rich enough to be the equal of a higher title. But Vianney and Yg had domains all too typical for someone of their status and didn't stand out whatsoever from the crowd of minor barons.

With no connections to either the royal or noble factions, the only thing motivating Vianney was a genuine desire to make his own domain a better place. And that would be difficult if the kingdom itself did not make strides.

It had nothing to do with being a nobleman. It was just his personal goal.

He wanted to be richer. To be happier.

And he was willing to put in the work.

"If we want to join a better faction, we need clear-cut achievements to our name and connections. Right?"

"Ain't wrong."

The two of them had joined this new faction hoping there would be opportunity in a group that had not yet fully cemented its place in the annals of power. But perhaps it had been a mistake joining a faction led by a complete birdbrain and so transparently backed by the Eight Fingers to boot.

"But are we sure this won't start a war with the Nation of Darkness?"

Vianney considered that for a moment, then shook his head.

"I doubt it. That fool's plan will never succeed, and I can't imagine a war starting over something so trivial. The Nation of Darkness has only one city to their name. They won't have the numbers needed to seize and occupy the entire kingdom's territory. They may have undead to bolster their numbers, but those aren't good for anything beyond basic manual labor. They can't run the place. Even if war does break out, I'm sure it'll be settled by peeling off a few more border provinces... and that means nothing for those of us on the other end of the country. So..."

He held up a fist. Yg did the same, and they bumped them together.

"Let's do this!"

"Hell yeah!"

## 2

The road through Baron Delvie's domain.

Phillip and his forces had set out the day before, camped for the night just inside these lands, and had at last reached their destination—the site of the ambush. Word was the Nation of Darkness convoy would pass through here at noon.

From horseback, Phillip glanced down at the row of soldiers.

The troops under his command were all villagers.

He'd mustered fifty in all.

Despite the call going out to every corner of his domain, he had gotten barely anyone. Every village had the same answer—they'd already done their share.

Phillip was not pleased.

This plan was for the sake of his domain's future, to ensure the happiness and prosperity of everyone who lived there. The benefits of this battle would be tremendous, and he planned to share the bulk with them. He had even said as much. Yet, they offered no help.

What simpletons.

And such ignorance. No clue where profit lay. That was exactly why they needed his wisdom and guidance.

He had tried to be understanding and magnanimous, but his anger was winning out. He had considered forcibly conscripting more men, but that would just infuriate his half-dead father.

So he was forced to offer payment in advance from the funds Hilma had loaned him.

That had barely managed to get him fifty, but most who had agreed to go were well past prime working age, obviously infirm, or uncooperative boors who kept picking fights with people from other hometowns.

The villages had sent him their deadweight. Not a single one of them seemed worth the money. But it did feel good to see them all assembled before him.

Phillip was sure this was where his legend began. The bards would sing of his deeds this day.

He was only getting started.

He would expand his domain, earn greater titles, and bask in a shower of glory.

He would strike the first blow against the Nation of Darkness, when no one else dared. The royal family would sing his praises and reward him with a rank befitting his achievements. Perhaps he would even be offered the hand of that beautiful princess!

“You’re sure it’s fine to attack?”

Phillip glared at the soldier who’d dared to interrupt his fantasies.

A plain-looking man, maybe thirty. Dressed in filthy clothes and inexplicably carrying a wooden hoe. It seemed so pitiful that even a basic club would probably be more useful—and if one wasn’t available, then at least he could’ve grabbed a random stick. But Phillip had merely ordered them to bring a weapon, and this was what he’d got.

There had been several villagers who didn’t even have clubs, and it had been a real headache. Even ignoring that, the overall impression of his band was definitely *starving bandits*, which Phillip had to admit *would* help deceive their targets.

The man's inopportune question drew a series of nods. Clearly many of his men were wondering the same thing.

"No need to be concerned. Our actions today will help save our country."

"We ain't talking anything that grand a scale here," another man said. "We just wanna know if our necks are on the hangman's block."

That drew a chorus of *yeahs*.

Phillip shook his head. How shortsighted could they be? Still...

*That's just how most people are. That's precisely why they need the leadership of a brilliant mind like myself. It's this dim-witted thinking that prevents them from following my plans to cultivate new land...*

"And I'm saying that's not a concern. Or didn't you hear me the first time?"

"...No, we did."

He was clearly not satisfied.

Phillip wondered if making an example of one would inspire the survivors—but reconsidered when he realized that would seem like an admission that he lacked motivational skills and was unable to convince anyone the risks were worth it.

As he considered his options, he heard hooves pounding the dirt and turned to find two mounted knights coming his way. Each had a mask on their head, leaving only their eyes visible. But their identities were clear enough.

They stopped a short distance off and beckoned to him.

He wondered why they didn't come to him—they *should* come to him! But then he realized they probably had news they didn't want anyone to overhear.

"Hmm, very well."

That sounded suitably dignified. Patting himself on the back for it, Phillip allowed himself a sneer.

He rode over to them. He'd been practicing and could make a horse walk easily enough.

"Baron. Everything set?"

The speaker's face might be hidden, but from the build and his voice, this was clearly Baron Delvie—Vianney.

Dressed so shabbily it was hard to believe he held that title.

Filthy leather armor, an ordinary sword at his hip. The horse had no sheen and was clearly more used to pulling a plow than carrying a warrior. Baron Loquillen—Yg—was no better. Dressed almost exactly the same and riding a very similar horse.

Phillip had a patron who kept him well equipped, but clearly neither of these men had any money. He'd seen how shabbily they were dressed before and had to repress the urge to let his smug superiority show.

*I can't allow myself to be irritated by my men's dismal morale in front of these two poor saps.*

Leaders must always demonstrate how superior they were in the presence of their lessers. Phillip had to set the standard. And those beneath him had to obey his commands. That was how the world was supposed to work.

"Just the two of you? Are your troops ready?"

"Naturally, they're in position. Right?"

"Indeed they are. Our troops are deployed on either side of yours, Lord Phillip. An inverted wedge."

"Oh! An inverted wedge formation!"

Phillip had read about this. He was pleased to be taking part in such a storied battle formation. It felt like being a hero from a war story.

"If you find yourself in any danger, divide your men in two and flee to either side. If everyone runs the same way, you can't divide the enemy forces, so make sure you split up."

“Excellent. Although there’s no need to belabor—”

“—Best to decide who will go in which direction before we begin. I doubt anyone will be able to follow complex orders in the heat of battle. Same for yourself, Lord Phillip. Which direction will you run?”

This all sounded as if defeat was inevitable and was most aggravating.

“You think my men will lose?”

“No, no, nothing of the sort, Lord Phillip! This is a classic strategy. Pretend you’re retreating, then turn and wipe out your pursuers. I’m sure you’ve heard of it before.”

“O-oh, yes. Of course I have.”

That was convincing. Phillip was not about to admit he’d never heard of such a thing before, so he simply pretended he had.

“I was certain you had! But there you have it. A clever ploy. Retreat is all part of the plan.”

*In that case...*

As he considered which way to run himself, Phillip realized he was missing a key piece of information.

“One question before I answer—you haven’t mentioned the size of your forces. How many men have you brought?”

“Seventy-five each.”

If the numbers matched, it didn’t matter which way he ran—but before that thought crossed his mind, he was shocked that these two had mustered more troops than he had. Then he realized it was hardly remarkable. Gathering men was easy enough. The true problem lay elsewhere. Had this been his own domain, Phillip could have easily mustered twice as many.

“...With that many troops, wouldn’t it be better for us all to attack at once? I mean, we have two hundred in all!”

"That could work, yes. But if your men keep them pinned down, our forces can swoop in from the flanks. That's the whole point of the inverted wedge!"

"Oh, right you are."

He'd completely forgotten that.

Vianney let out a sigh, but with that mask of his, his expression remained unreadable.

"I'm glad you understand. Now, which way will you be retreating?"

"Hmm... I think I'll be heading in Yg's direction."

"Then you'll be retreating to the left wing. Very well! Please relay this to your men. Oh, and do watch out for archers. It's all too common for a stray arrow to knock a man off his horse, and if he was to get trampled— Well, it's a sad end."

"With my armor, no horse hooves could ever lay me low. We hired a skilled smith and had the Wizards Guild enchant it."

The full plate Phillip currently wore had been a gift from Hilma. The enchantment improved the defense, and it was a far finer piece than the armor his family had treasured for generations. He'd received it ages ago but never had a chance to wear it until now. He was thrilled to show it off.

These two minor barons had almost certainly never seen the like. Phillip did his best to keep from sounding *too* smug.

"Still, you can't be too careful. If the caravan guards kill you, this whole thing will end in failure."

"Very true. You're our general, Lord Phillip."

"Even with armor as grand as that, one blow to the wrong spot can still be very deadly. And no matter how much metal armor is enhanced, it will still be powerless before magic. Stay vigilant, please. We need our general."

They were being most insistent, but he could see why. It was a fact that the death of a general would ruin everything.

And knowing how important he was to them made Phillip unable to suppress a smile.

"I am aware."

".....So where will you be deploying your troops? Leading the charge is obviously dangerous, so I imagine you'll be taking up the rear, but if it looks like you might not have time to retreat, I will need to know where you'll be so we can rush to your rescue."

*Mm-hmm*, Phillip thought.

If a general was in trouble, it was his subordinates' job to come to his aid. It was a natural question, and one he should have considered himself.

*I'm sure I would have, normally. Perhaps I'm a bit too worked up. It is my first time commanding a battle of this scale, after all.*

Phillip swallowed and took a few deep breaths.

"Wh-what's wrong?"

"Oh, just trying to calm my nerves. What with the coming battle and all."

".....Oh, I see. So that's what it was? Um, so where are you planning on waiting at the start?"

"Let me see..."

Phillip looked around.

The road was paved and rather wide. Two wagons could pass each other with room to spare. This road must be an important source of revenue for Baron Delvie.

Dense forest lay on either side. But the area directly adjacent to the road was just a scattering of bushes, a measure against bandit ambushes. Anything you could hide in had been pruned away.

This was a closely managed forest, possibly planted to allow pigs to forage for acorns or the like. And that meant they need not be concerned about monsters or wild animals.

In which case...

"Hiding in the woods seems appropriate."

"I agree. I know just the place. A path where the shrubs and low branches have been cleared so one might flee on horseback. How does that sound?"

"You made a path?"

"I did! I thought one might be necessary, so when you selected this location, I made sure it was ready."

There had been a number of locations considered for the ambush, but Phillip had ultimately chosen this one. He had asked Vianney and Yg for their opinions, but both had said it was entirely up to him. They must have put in a considerable amount of work once his choice was made.

"Why, thank you."

"Not at all. You're striking the first blow and assuming all the risk that entails. We should be thanking *you*."

"And we are!"

The two gentlemen led him to a clearing. It was just as Vianney had described. From here, they could easily ride out.

After a few more words, they split up, and Phillip headed back to his men.

The full plate armor was very heavy, and he was already starting to sweat. Given the locale, he was constantly in danger of tripping and falling, especially with his helmet on.

As his breathing became more labored, he removed the helmet to carry it under one arm. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed his brow.

Perhaps this had been a poor choice. Having strong armor was obviously vital for defense, but he should have made it more mobile. Enchantments that made armor lighter did exist. He'd have to ask for those next time. And if possible, something that would prevent him from sweating every time he moved.

He made a mental note to talk to Hilma the next time he was in the capital.

When he reached his men, he saw they were all awkwardly standing around.

“I have returned.”

“Sir, who were those masked men? They looked like bandits! Are you sure this isn’t a trick?”

“Rest assured, it is not. Both of them are true aristocrats. Please don’t mention their appearance. Not all nobility can afford full plate.”

Many families that had lost their scions on the Katze Plain also lost their ancestral arms and armor at that battle. If a house of Phillip’s standing lost their household equipment, they would certainly struggle to replace it.

His soldiers seemed unconvinced, but he didn’t see a need to reassure them.

“Listen up! Stand by till the convoy’s in sight. When they arrive, attack!”

There was no response, so Phillip raised his voice.

“Understood?!”

“Aye-aye, sir...,” a few muttered. Far from enthusiastic.

Phillip was less than satisfied but decided not to press the point. It was his first battle, too. There was no use asking for too much.

He need merely point the way forward and wait for them to become fine soldiers.

With that thought, Phillip sat down heavily, obeying his body’s demands for rest.

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The Eight Fingers were a massive crime syndicate lurking in the shadows of the Re-Estize Kingdom.

As the name implied, they had eight divisions. Kristoffer Olsson worked in one of these—the smuggling division. Officially, he was a merchant, with a few trade routes

running from the capital to the western side of the kingdom. Like so many similar merchants, his warehouses had been cleaned out during the Jaldabaoth disaster.

The losses had not outright killed his business but had been substantial enough that it would take a tremendous amount of time and effort to recover. And to do so, he'd been forced to borrow some money from the Eight Fingers.

In business, the greater the investment, the greater the profit. There was always the possibility of incurring greater losses, but a smart merchant knew how to minimize that risk.

But a loan from a place like the Eight Fingers was much like a ravenous wolf. They were known for forcing struggling merchants into a life of crime to repay their debts—often by smuggling or dealing drugs.

Many a merchant had been corrupted that way.

But Kristoffer had been corrupt already. What was his fate?

Securing the loan had led directly to a meeting with the Eight Fingers chiefs. This had been quite a shock. He'd already worked for the smuggling division and had assumed the loan would come through his superiors there—he'd never imagined he would meet with leadership from *another* division.

Yet, there he was, meeting with them all. Did they have a high opinion of his work? Or was this due to some reason beyond his fathoming? Even after their meeting ended, he'd had no idea. Feared throughout the underworld, the shadowy council had been unsettlingly *nice*, which only baffled him.

Of course, any display of goodwill from criminal masterminds likely had some ulterior purpose.

His other main takeaway had been that people in their position clearly took their health seriously. He'd actually felt they were almost a little *too* thin, but that didn't seem worse than his own corpulence.

And they'd given him a job to do.

Was this job based on the size of his loan, his value as an individual, or merely the profit the Eight Fingers stood to gain? Just thinking about it made his head spin. If they

thought highly of him, the work they assigned would be safe. If not, then it could be very risky indeed.

But the job itself...

"Transporting provisions for the Nation of Darkness? Who could possibly tell how dangerous that really is?"

"Mm? Did you say something, governor?"

"Oh, never mind. Just thinking out loud."

The man with him was a mercenary.

Rippling with muscle.

Kristoffer was well into his forties and had a solid layer of fat around his torso, but this mercenary was all youth and vigor.

He'd said he was in his mid-twenties.

He wore a steel breastplate with mail beneath it. There was a full-face helmet resting nearby, alongside a sword that showed signs of frequent use.

This was the head guard for this seven-wagon caravan hauling food from the Nation of Darkness.

There were twenty-four guards in all. Every last one was on the Eight Fingers payroll and, like Kristoffer himself, part of the smuggling division.

Same division or not, using Eight Fingers guards still required payment—and cost more than the market price for mercenaries of their skill. But there was no need to ensure their silence after a clandestine job, and their loyalty was assured.

If they ran into danger beyond their skills, ordinary mercenaries might turn tail and flee, but these men would risk their lives to guard the rear. They knew full well that abandoning their client would ruin their employer's name, meaning it could only end with their eventual capture and subsequent murder.

Kristoffer had no personal connections to trustworthy independent mercenaries, so

he was definitely better off using Eight Fingers employees whatever the fee. More importantly, he was never given a choice in the first place.

His orders specified that he should use these guards.

In return, their services were paid for. He could have put the money saved into hiring extra guards, but that would make it seem like he didn't trust the ones he already had, and they'd been handpicked by someone upstairs. Bringing anyone else along might well look like he was up to no good.

For that reason, Kristoffer had stuck with the specified mercenaries.

And the guards he'd received were supposed to be reliable indeed. He had no combat abilities himself and no way of personally gauging their strength. All he needed to know was that someone more important than him had given their stamp of approval. It was always risky going against a superior's decision, no matter the reason.

But were there enough of them to make this a safe journey? Deep down, he would have liked to hire someone even better.

Ideally, someone as good as the old Six Arms, who'd once led the Eight Fingers security division and had been responsible for all the violent needs of the organization. But he was well aware that was little more than a pipe dream.

The Six Arms—including Zero, the strongest member of the Eight Fingers—had perished in the conflict with the royal family just before Jaldabaoth's attack.

According to reliable sources, they'd been slain by a warrior named Brain Unglaus, who served the Golden Princess.

One man felling all six of them was clearly suspect, but the adamantite adventurer team known as the Blue Roses had also taken part, and Kristoffer was certain the battle had been six on six.

A lot of other security division personnel had died in the fighting, and now each division of the Eight Fingers was amassing their own guards, trying to rebuild their shattered forces. To the point where people from the assassination division were moving around in public.

But the upside was that the mood within the Eight Fingers was far more communal

than before Jaldabaoth's arrival.

There had been a time when constant internal conflict defined the syndicate, with each division always undermining one another's interests. Kristoffer knew of cases where merchants moving contraband for the smuggling division had been caught because a different division tipped off the authorities.

But now the chiefs were almost disturbingly cooperative.

That had broadened the scope of their operations and increased their (illegal) profit margins.

The guard leader next to him yawned and farted at the same time. Biological functions, to be sure, but no apology offered.

No class at all.

Kristoffer's brow furrowed. The worst sound to be dragged back to earth by.

He considered complaining, but they would be traveling back and forth to the western port town Re-Robel, and it was more important to keep relations cordial.

From Re-Robel, the provisions would be carried by ship, so that was the job of a seafaring merchant. Kristoffer knew him well—he was a big deal in this line of work, and it had been a shock to learn he was also involved with the Eight Fingers. He insisted they were simply working together because doing so had proved mutually advantageous.

Still, that flatulence was concerning for a different reason.

"You seem relaxed," he said. "Not worried someone might attack?"

"Mm? Yeah, not feeling it on my skin, so— Oh, you mean to say, *Don't trust a hunch*, don'cha? I get that. But I bet you've had deals where you could just tell *this one's gonna pay out!* And when it was the other way around, you played it safe."

"...I suppose I have."

"See? Experience gives you *instincts*."

The way this man spoke was far more relaxed than his appearance suggested.

“Is it really that simple?”

“That simple. Plus, we’re flying Nation of Darkness flags. Anyone who’d attack us is so ignorant, they don’t even know what that means, so it’s gonna be some starving villagers turned bandits at best. My crew could easily wipe out a hundred of those.”

“But if it isn’t villagers?”

“You’re thinking washed-up mercs? And assuming they don’t recognize the Nation of Darkness’s flags by now?” The man shrugged that off. “Mercs who’ve been in the game a spell tend to know things. Anyone so clueless they can’t even recognize their neighbors’ flags is frankly not gonna be much of a threat. Not convinced? Think about it, though. If you don’t know what nobleman you’re picking a fight with, you could be in for a world of hurt.”

“That’s certainly true. Out of idle curiosity, which noblemen are you loath to pick a fight with?”

“Well, top of my head, Raeven and Beauleurope. They’ve got powerful armies of their own. Maybe not as scary as they used to be but... definitely not worth the risk. Blumrush has deep pockets, so best to stay on his good side... but basically, you don’t want any of the big names pissed at you.”

“Even though you’ve got a crime syndicate backing you?”

“That goes for both of us! But yeah, if I start a fight with those big shots, our bosses would cut me loose in a second. Same goes for you.”

“Fair.”

They fell into a silence. A rather gloomy one at that.

Kristoffer was well aware of the leadership’s mercilessness, but he had taken this deal after deciding the profit was worth the danger. Perhaps he could have led a life without any such ties, but he never would have grown his business to its current size. Most likely, he’d still be stuck doing insignificant trades for chump change.

There was no shortage of what-ifs but no means of turning back the clock. All he could

do was accept the path he'd chosen.

"...So you've got good reason not to worry, then. Fair enough. What would be the worst-case scenario?"

"Someone with flaming arrows lighting up our cargo. If they're trying to destroy, not steal, that means there's a bigger plot—and it means we're getting mixed up in geopolitics. Or at least some rival syndicate's scheme."

"A rival to the Eight Fingers? Are there any?"

"I dunno. Even if there are, I dunno why they'd wanna burn the Nation of Darkness's stuff. They'd have to be pretty dang certain they'd leave no evidence. Personally, I think we'd more likely be dealing with the kingdom itself or some neighboring country's conspiracy."

"And there's no use worrying about something of that scale."

"Right? For now, the journey's going fine. Kick back and relax."

The convoy was entering a forest.

That told him their approximate location.

Kristoffer unfurled a map in his mind, checking it over. He was relieved to find they were right on schedule. Who knew what terrors awaited anyone who screwed up a job from the Nation of Darkness?

It was noonish, and they'd be taking a rest once they cleared the forest. This wood was not primordial but man-made. It would not take that long to reach the other side.

As the wagons rattled onward, he heard the clatter of horses' hooves. The wagon he was riding in began to slow.

He glanced at the guard beside him and found the man looking suddenly grim.

"Sorry. Work to do."

Two men popped their heads in through the wagon's flap. Both were mercenaries.

"Sorry, boss! This guy said he saw a bunch of villagers hiding in the woods up ahead."

The leader explained that he'd sent one of his men ahead to scout.

"...Not bandits but villagers? What gave that away?"

"Uh, their gear mostly. No decent weapons, not even a speck of armor. Several of them were carrying hoes. Not even clubs, if you can believe it."

"Even a rock can be a weapon but a hoe? Ridiculous. Are they at least iron?"

"Not like either of us got a good look, so hard to say, but... probably wood."

To Kristoffer's ears, this just sounded like farmers on their way home from the fields. What else could it be?

"Hoes? Is this a joke?"

"Didn't look like it."

"Send a few men in to scatter them?" the head guard muttered. "Maybe that's overdoing it, but..."

He probably meant for that to be overheard. Sharing his thoughts.

"Sorry, I don't mean to tell you how to do your job, but may I offer an opinion?"

"Go right ahead. We're all in favor of constructive opinions."

"Thank you. First, these woods are well maintained. Forests like these are often used for pig grazing. Perhaps that's why these villagers are here? If we mistakenly try to run them off, we could be mistaken for pig thieves. We're currently flying Nation of Darkness flags, which complicates things. If our actions start rumors that the Nation of Darkness is stealing pigs... well, we wouldn't want word getting back to *them*, would we?"

The head guard swore under his breath.

These flags had all but guaranteed their safety thus far. Each city they passed gave their little procession top priority and were nothing but courteous. But that blessing

tied their hands here. Anything they did wrong would reflect poorly on the Nation of Darkness and bring disaster down on their heads.

That was why Kristoffer had elected not to bring any additional—which was to say, illegal—merchandise on this trip.

“You said ‘a bunch,’ but exactly how many?”

“Uh, rough estimate? Looked like maybe fifty.”

“Sounds like a lot for simple farmwork, but what do you reckon?”

Kristoffer’s parents had been merchants, too, so he knew nothing about raising pigs.

“Well, honestly, I have no idea if that’s a lot or not or how many people it takes to catch pigs. And they could be here to plant or prune trees instead. I’ve even heard there’s valuable forage that pigs can sniff out for you.”

Considering how they had hoes, that seemed more likely than anything else.

“What’s the latest on the local noble? He starving his people?” the guard asked.

Kristoffer tugged the roll of fat around his neck.

“Hmm, I’ve met him before. Young but has his wits about him. Manages his lands with a steady hand. If he learns a little more and gets used to playing politics, he might have a decent future ahead of him.”

They’d exchanged a few words while Kristoffer was restocking an Eight Fingers-connected bar.

The noble in question was no purveyor; so he hadn’t sold anything directly to the man while passing through his domain, but he’d sensed enough potential in the young ruler that he almost regretted not having the chance. He was certainly not the type to mobilize villagers and attack a convoy. And Kristoffer’s impression of him as a ruler suggested he was managing his holdings well enough that there’d never be this many starving villagers so desperate they’d attack passing merchants.

He was far better than that man Hilma Shugneus (another Eight Fingers chief) had introduced one time. It would be hard to find anyone worse.

Remembering that near torture he'd endured, Kristoffer rubbed his temples.

"Boss, even if they do attack, we can easily drive off fifty barely armed villagers."

"What are the odds they're bait, and there are more soldiers hidden around?"

The two other guards glanced at each other.

"High enough. Should we look around? It might take a bit..."

"Better safe than sorry."

"My only concern is that if it takes too long, it'll throw off our schedule. We can make up some ground, but I don't want to end up in a forced march."

"Fair. You heard him, boys. Make it quick. Go!"

The scouts nodded and ran off.

They came back in ten minutes, reporting no sightings of any troops other than the original fifty.

Concluding that this must be actual farmwork, the convoy starting moving again—only to stop less than five minutes later.

"Sorry, governor. Better come take a look. The villagers are blocking the road. If they showed any sign of being hostile, we'd just charge on through, but they look spooked. None of them is exactly fixing for a fight. Which means... well, I dunno what to make of it. Could use your opinion. Of course, we'll make sure you're safe. Got a man with a shield, so you stay behind that."

He would have loved to refuse if he could. He was of no use in a fight and had lived a life entirely free of violence.

But the situation demanded it. If they got in a pointless conflict here and had to avoid this road in the future, it would affect not only him but also whatever progeny of his who would inherit the trading company one day.

"...I suppose we'd better."

Kristoffer and the head guard stepped out of the wagon and moved to the front of the convoy. A guard carrying a tower shield joined them; these negotiations were best held from behind the shield's cover.

A mercenary carrying a menacing halberd was also accompanying them. Not to mention several archers hidden in the trees on either side. And the head guard was right at his side. If anything did happen, Kristoffer would be following the head guard's orders to the letter.

He spied the villagers up ahead on the road that wound through the forest.

All looked like they were on their way home from the fields.

But if that was the case, why were they blocking the road?

That doubt must have shown on his face.

The head guard muttered, "See what I mean? If they're planning to attack, they'd be better off hiding in the woods off the road. No need to stand out here in front of us. Even if their leader's a total idiot, he'd know that much."

"Perhaps it's a protest?"

"A protest? Dressed like that? With these numbers? And frankly, we're not dumb enough to believe that. I sincerely hope you haven't been hiring buffoons who'd fall for something like that up until now."

Kristoffer had to admit he had a point.

In lieu of further debate, he faced the villagers. From a safe distance, of course, with guards standing before him.

"I'm a simple merchant hauling this merchandise I've been entrusted with. If you're blocking this road to send a message to some noble, that's not our problem. Please clear the way. Otherwise, we'll be forced to defend ourselves."

As he spoke, a man emerged from the forest.

He wore magnificent full plate. No helmet, though, so his face was clearly visible.

As it turned out, Kristoffer had seen him before.

"For the sake of the kingdom, we cannot let you pass!"

"...Huh?"

Kristoffer was not the only one gaping. All the guards around were just as stunned.

".....Um, you seem to be confused. All we're carrying is food. The Nation of Darkness is sending aid to those in need in the Sacred Kingdom."

"I know that! Hmph! Obviously! That's the point!"

What was he going on about? What was he thinking? How was this even happening?

Kristoffer was completely lost.

No—

*There's no point in trying to understand this imbecile. His lands aren't even anywhere near here! What does he think he's doing?! Is he in cahoots with—? Actually, would this domain's lord agree to this in the first place?*

Kristoffer quickly decided it didn't matter. The man himself had just admitted his intent to disrupt Nation of Darkness business. They could kill him, and neither the kingdom nor the Nation of Darkness would raise a single word of protest. He was about to order the mercenaries to do just that, but something felt out of place.

Phillip was backed by Hilma Shugneus. When he'd been arrogant and insulting, Kristoffer had been forced to hide his fury behind an appeasing smile—and Hilma herself had said the bumbling noble was useful *because* he was so very stupid.

If he was a pawn of the Eight Fingers, killing him might be a bad idea.

Common sense dictated that no sane nobleman would attack a convoy bearing the Nation of Darkness's flags. Doing that could only infuriate the Nation of Darkness, and anyone would know that could start a war. Even the most mindless aristocrat could think that far ahead.

In other words, there *had* to be some reason why he was doing this.

*I mean, first of all, if he's pretending to be a bandit who's just after the cargo, why isn't he hiding his face?*

Even the dumbest man alive knew to keep his face hidden while committing a crime. There was no way his set of full plate didn't come with a helmet. Which meant...

*The goal here is for us to see his face? To know this is Phillip's doing? Then that means... Oh!*

At this point, Kristoff remembered that the Illusion spell existed.

*That's it! This is an illusion! He's using magic on his face to make us think Phillip is behind this! That's why he's not wearing a helmet. And these villagers may not be what they seem, either.*

Flawless logic. No margin for error.

In which case—

“S-so you want to steal food from the Nation of Darkness?”

“Um, what? Sir?”

The head guard looked confused. Understandably. They'd assumed he would order the man dead, which made his current indecision look like he'd gone mad.

“Exactly! We'll put those provisions to better use.”

Phillip sounded immensely proud of himself.

*That's so dumb! He must know how stupid that sounds. But...*

Someone must have scripted this. All he could think of was an Eight Fingers' rival syndicate, like the head guard had mentioned earlier. Or one of the Eight Fingers chiefs?

If the former, they had to do whatever it took to get out of this. The Eight Fingers reserved their harshest penalties for traitors and the second harshest for failures. But if this really was some competitor's scheme, then they would have brought enough soldiers to make this attack a success; fake or not, it made no sense to involve hoe-

wielding farmers.

Then perhaps it was the latter. That would be bad news. Very bad news. Were the heads of his organization starting to work against one another again? Was this more of the typical interference that had been all too common once before? The worst-case scenario was that all the chiefs were in on some plot that was unfolding right before Kristoffer's eyes.

*Have I been betrayed? Am I being forced to kill Phillip, a noble of the kingdom? The real one is likely already dead.*

So what was his best move?

"Uh, boss? What's got you so spooked? We can scatter these clowns no problem. That noble-looking chap has some pretty good armor on, but he clearly can't fight."

All this was said in a low whisper. But Kristoffer was far too preoccupied to hear any of it. He needed to focus.

"Wait—give me a second!"

If they were trying to force him to kill Phillip, then why not give him that order in advance? That puzzled him. If they'd simply told him, he would have happily given the order without a moment's hesitation.

But if a convoy ostensibly serving the Nation of Darkness's interests killed a kingdom noble... was the goal to provoke a war between the two countries? That notion baffled him further.

At its core, this would just be seen as a kingdom merchant killing a kingdom nobleman in self-defense.

That seemed like an extremely thin justification for war. Kristoffer had enough underworld ties to know there were people out there who would start something for the flimsiest reason, people who had no compunctions about taking a life. But it was hard to picture countries operating like that.

*...It must be something else. Is there a chance he got approval from above, but they neglected to tell me, or he's just assuming they did? Or is he certain he can kill everyone here to prevent word about this from getting out? Argh, there are too many possibilities.*

This wasn't the kind of thing people screwed up lightly, but Kristoffer couldn't be sure that the whole encounter was due to some random person's oversight. Given all the possibilities, what was his best move?

If he acted out of line, it wouldn't be strange to be eliminated. He needed an excuse, a justification. *Something* he could pin on a scapegoat if need be.

*Killing this "Phillip" is the worst option. Once he's dead, there's no turning back. It might earn me Shugneus's wrath, too...*

"...If we leave our cargo and... simply walk away, do you promise not to chase us down?"

"Huh?"

The head guard was rattled, but Kristoffer ignored him.

"Of course! I have no intentions of harming a kingdom merchant."

He *was* actually doing exactly that, just indirectly. But Kristoffer kept that thought to himself.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, are you serious? You can't be! Why? What's going on? Did he cast a spell on you? Is there some army hanging around here that I can't see?"

"Orders from your client. Get ready to run."

The head guard gaped at him for a long moment. Probably considering the possibility this *was* the work of some spell or how this would impact his own future. Not looking remotely convinced, he finally nodded.

Kristoffer promptly retreated with his guards.

The provisions would be stolen. But he knew exactly what his cargo was. Worst-case scenario, he could buy more and ship that to the Sacred Kingdom instead. There was no need for it to be the exact same food he was currently hauling.

He would owe the seafaring merchant a profuse apology, but for now it was best that he return to the capital and speak to Shugneus about this.

Kristoffer could only imagine what a nightmare that would be.

•

The merchant clearly knew who was in the right and retreated without a fight.

That just left several wagons' worth of spoils.

Phillip peered inside and found them stuffed with barrels and crates, all filled with food. As the contents had been chosen for longevity, there was nothing fresh here, but it was perfectly edible.

Sadly, despite the size of the trade caravan, there was nothing *but* provisions.

Phillip had been hoping for a memento to commemorate his feat, but he couldn't exactly keep *crops*.

*If there was armor or a sword or some other prize...? Perhaps I should have demanded those men leave their weapons behind.*

The only valuable-looking things were the wagons themselves.

Unfortunately, the caravan runners had taken the horses. There was no way to move the wagons now. Naturally, he'd insisted they leave the horses, but the leader of the guards had refused.

And an arrow had hit the tree next to Phillip to punctuate the refusal.

He'd been forced to reluctantly cede the point.

*I might be safe in my full plate, but my soldiers aren't. Heh. What a merciful soul I am. No profits are worth the loss of my men. A flawless victory. Not a soul injured, no blood spilled. Let's keep it that way.*

Phillip looked his prizes over, and one of the Nation of Darkness flags caught his eye.

*Let's call that my trophy. I'm sure I'm the first man to steal a flag from the nation that defeated a two hundred thousand-strong kingdom host on the Katze Plain.*

He nodded to himself, pleased with the idea.

A rush of joy surged through him, and he could not repress a grin.

The perfect prize for a perfect plan. Just as he'd always known, he was a brilliant tactician.

No one could deny his genius now.

There were a number of flags, but one would be plenty. He lowered the flag to the dirt, grinding it beneath his feet.

Seeing the Nation of Darkness flag covered in dirt was a real thrill. No one else in the kingdom had been up to the task.

Phillip had done what no one else could.

*See? I am no failure! I'm better than my brother, my father, anyone in this kingdom! I'm better than all of them!*

At this point, one of the villagers turned away from the wagons, asking, "Er, um, sir? Can we really just take all this? And should we really be lingering here?"

His elation dissipated. Not even trying to hide his annoyance, Phillip demanded, "What are you talking about?"

"Just, you know, uh... they might come back with more soldiers."

"What? You think we should have killed them all, then?"

"N-no! Not at all. Best not to kill anyone."

"Then what?"

"Um, sir, how should we handle all this stuff?" another villager chimed in. "Are we just going to carry whatever we can back home with us?"

Phillip had been considering this, too. "Hmm..."

Even if all fifty of them cradled as much as they could in their arms, they'd be forced to leave most of the spoils. And the wagons themselves were well-built, covered in fine sailcloth. They'd fetch a good price, or Phillip could make use of them himself.

But it would be extremely hard work for ordinary villagers to pull them away.

As Phillip pondered the question, he heard something approaching through the grass. He looked up to find two masked men.

“Lord Phillip!”

The voice was Vianney’s, but the gear was nothing like before. In place of that filthy leather armor from earlier, he wore a solid cuirass and had a sword at his hip. Phillip briefly wondered why he’d changed but was far more interested in boasting about his feat.

“Oh, gentlemen! Come look! See what I have procured!”

“My word... what on earth happened...?”

Vianney stood where he was, glancing around. He seemed utterly baffled by the wagons just sitting there. Or perhaps it was because of the bloodless victory—at this point, Phillip was sure he knew where the doubt lay.

And Yg’s next words confirmed it.

“...Indeed. It would appear not one of your men has sustained any injuries. And there’s no blood on the ground. What strategy brought this about? Did you have some remarkable magic item with you?”

His means had certainly been magical, but not the way Yg meant.

“Nothing like that, no. Our foes were simply reluctant to risk their lives in the face of such overwhelming odds. Or perhaps that merchant secretly loathed serving at the Nation of Darkness’s beck and call.”

The two men glanced at each other. Their faces were covered, so he could not see their immediate reactions.

“Well, then... How shall we divvy things up?”

By rights, these spoils should all go to Phillip, and it galled him to share any of them with two men who’d just watched from the sidelines. But if he kept them all to himself, they would likely be displeased. They *had* mobilized their own villagers, so... he could

probably live with an eighty-twenty split.

*They're each getting a tenth of the spoils for simply showing up. Surely that's enough.*

"Oh, no need for that. We did nothing, after all. It would pain me to steal away the fruits of your valor. Lord Phillip, these spoils are yours and yours alone. You don't object, I'm sure?"

"Certainly not. Lord Phillip, take all this back with you, wagons and all."

They were so obsequious, he felt a bit guilty. The village nearby had been too small for his men to quarter there, but they'd pitched some tents in the woods not too far away and offered to feed his band. He owed them *something*.

"No, no, we all worked together here. I'm happy to leave a few scraps if they'll prove useful."

"We really don't need a thing, Lord Phillip."

Vianney seemed quite firm on this point. Like the offer was not remotely tempting.

"This is all your doing, Lord Phillip. We are nobles like yourself and have our pride. We cannot accept a thing"

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely," both said together.

It seemed there was no persuading them. Fair enough! The spoils were all his, and he was dancing on the inside in celebration.

"Well, if you insist, I'm happy to take it all. But I'm afraid I do have one additional request. Would you mind lending me some horses to pull these wagons?"

"Horses...?"

".....What should we do?"

"We should discuss this in private. We'll be back momentarily!"

The two of them stepped away to consider the matter. They'd moved far enough away that Phillip couldn't even tell if they were talking or not! But eventually they seemed to reach an agreement and came back.

"We can arrange horses soon enough. They'll be farm horses, not warhorses, so if you could arrange for their swift return, that would be most appreciated."

"I thank you."

"Oh, and this is very important—make sure you remove all the Nation of Darkness flags. And until the horses get here, we wouldn't want any travelers seeing them, so could you move the wagons into the woods? I'm sure that won't be easy, but..."

"No, it makes sense. I'll set them to it."

With that, the two gentlemen promptly took their leave.

They were soon back inside the woods. Phillip turned to his wagons.

Proof of his victory.

Of his glorious future.

The filthy flag with his footprints on it seemed to symbolize the bright future of the kingdom.

### 3

Ainz was walking boldly down the streets of E-Rantel.

Momon at his side.

Naturally, played by Pandora's Actor.

Being Momon required full plate and two large swords on his back.

There was a confidence to his stride, a dignified bearing worthy of his reputation. He was far more heroic than Momon was when Ainz played him. He almost wished Pandora's Actor would tone it down a bit for fear the citizens would notice something

amiss the next time he donned the armor.

But he didn't dare say that aloud. He settled for watching how this Momon walked out of the corner of his eye, trying to imitate it. Fortunately, it seemed Pandora's Actor had not noticed this attention.

Walking quietly behind them was Narberal Gamma, who was currently acting as the adventurer Nabe, watching their surroundings like a hawk. At a glance, it seemed like they had no other guards, but the Hanzos were hidden nearby, and since Narberal was lower level than them, her efforts served no real purpose.

But when he thought about it, Ainz realized any time he had visited E-Rantel as Momon, she'd pretty much always done this, so it seemed pointless to stop her now.

The three of them weren't walking through the city with any goal in mind.

It was just a routine stroll.

Walking with Momon and Nabe had several purposes. And that was why the maid on Ainz duty wasn't with them.

While he had several goals here, the main one was to sell the idea that Ainz and Momon were working closely together.

And that required Narberal's presence. Momon himself always wore full plate, so no one had ever seen his face. If Narberal was absent, there was a risk people might say the King of Darkness killed Momon and some undead was wearing his armor. Some *had* actually said as much, and this was really to prevent that rumor spreading further.

Anyone who saw them coming quickly stepped to the side of the road. Like the parting of the sea.

Clearly, this was because the King of Darkness walked with them. This didn't happen when Ainz was walking around dressed as Momon. It had been a while since the Nation of Darkness had been founded, but the masses were still afraid of Ainz himself.

And it wasn't just the humans who feared him. Plenty of subhumans also nervously kept their distance—just not quite as many.

E-Rantel was no longer a purely human city; the subhuman population was growing

by the day.

A quick scan of his surroundings turned up several nonhuman races. It would've been a stretch to call them numerous, mind you. Some were working, others just shopping. There was even one shop where the owner was a subhuman.

Ainz had taken the old slum and had it converted into dwellings for other races. Subhuman sightings were much more common there, but he was currently walking down one of the city's main thoroughfares, on the opposite end of town.

Their presence here spoke to the advances subhumans had made within E-Rantel.

He hadn't really done anything—Albedo had been in charge of everything—but it was still something Ainz was proud of. All these races living in harmony.

*I'd like to do something to help promote that cause...*

He did have one idea about how to do that. Ainz had long been thinking about holding some sort of major festival.

That kind of event would also bring in tourists and their money. But more importantly, he felt like this world was depressingly lacking in festivals or special occasions of any kind. And that was dreadfully dull.

His time in the arena in the Empire had been fun enough, but there was already one of those—he wanted something new.

It should excite and inspire everyone. And if a sports team or something with subhuman members did well, that would be yet another step on the road to overcoming the barriers between races. And it would give people a topic they could bond over. It could become a source of infinite shared enthusiasm.

*Maybe some sort of sport. Baseball or soccer? Or would something else be more popular?*

Wondering what would help him decide, Ainz took a good look at the orc running the subhuman shop.

As far as he could tell, the shopkeeper was talking earnestly to a human customer.

This was most likely one of the orcs he'd met in the Sacred Kingdom or one he'd

rounded up in the wilderness after supposedly losing to the Evil Lord Wrath. He had no memories of inviting any other orcs to E-Rantel.

But he couldn't begin to say who this orc actually was.

For one thing, there were a *lot* of orcs under his control, but more importantly, he still went by rather human standards, and he found it quite hard to tell orcs apart.

This wasn't unique to orcs, of course. For example, zerun females were distinguished only by their luster, which made Ainz incredibly curious about how their eyes worked. To him, they all looked exactly the same.

But apparently, people of other races had just as much trouble as he did.

Orcs struggled to tell humans apart.

They tended to fixate on details like hair length or eye color, but that could easily lead to quite a few errors. It was common for orcs to confuse one person for another, despite them looking nothing alike to Ainz, and hand over a parcel meant for someone else.

But the Nation of Darkness was largely crime-free. Even minor crimes were rare, and almost no major crimes ever happened. The laws themselves were not particularly strict; people were just deeply afraid of having their corpses repurposed as undead.

So even when these sorts of mistakes happened, both parties forgave each other, and the matter was generally resolved peacefully. It was this atmosphere that allowed orcs to do business with humans.

"Subhumans are now allowed to join the Adventurers Guild, and in the future, we'll see them contribute to all kinds of fields," he murmured.

"Right you are, Lord Ainz," Pandora's Actor said. "The subhumans took one look at the undead you created; realized they would have little chance of working as soldiers; and knew they'd have to put their skills, culture, handicrafts, and research into other enterprises."

Currently, the Nation of Darkness was generally handling division of labor by roughly saying something along the lines of *Your race is suited to these things, so get a job doing that*. But as humans and nonhumans alike came into contact with a variety of races

and cultures, the experience broadened their horizons and planted the seeds of desire to do things that they had never done before. At the moment, these desires were little more than budding sprouts, but they were slowly starting to grow.

The fact that undead workers handled all the basic manual labor only contributed to this trend.

“Albedo is watching over that carefully. It would be troublesome if any of them develop techniques we can’t handle, after all.”

Ainz and the Nazarick denizens were powerful, but they were already at their peak. They had to take steps to ensure they would not be defeated by those who were weak now but had potential to grow.

And naturally, part of that meant keeping those advances from progressing too far. The weak had to be kept weak. Of course, that came with a major caveat—their advances had to stay ahead of the countries *around* them. Only Albedo could toe that line.

*That’s why we need an intelligence arm, gathering information on our neighbors and industrial secrets... We’re still not great on that front.*

To create monsters that didn’t spawn within Nazarick required two things: data on the creature in question and a corresponding amount of *Yggdrasil* gold.

The library in Nazarick had data on all manner of monsters in book form, but it was far from a complete *Yggdrasil* bestiary, and this data was limited in quantity. For instance, he’d already used nearly all the Hanzo data, and the library no longer contained any data on eight-edged assassins.

And creating high-ranking minions required vast amounts of gold.

That made weaker minions a tempting proposition, but that increased the odds of them getting detected during clandestine missions.

And around here, only the Nation of Darkness relied on monsters. Detection meant exposure. From a political standpoint, it was better to use high-level monsters that wouldn’t be caught, even if that meant keeping operations small in scope. Otherwise—

“—Human spies.”

He hadn't meant to say that out loud, but Narberal caught it.

"Lord Ainz," she said. "How goes the spy training? Should I earmark them?"

"Nabe," Ainz said, lowering his voice. "You currently are the companion of the hero Momon. Do not forget your position."

Officially, Momon and Nabe were reluctantly cooperating with Ainz Ooal Gown, since he effectively held the city's citizens hostage. But enough time had passed now; perhaps they could change up the role-play and begin acting like they respected the King of Darkness. But that decision could only be made after consulting Albedo and carefully scripting it. Until then, it was better they not volunteer anything potentially sensitive out in the open, reserving those comments for within Nazarick itself.

"—My deepest apologies."

He couldn't very well say, *You are forgiven* here, though. Ainz quickly glanced around.

Too many eyes were on them. All the faces he saw were plastered with fear. He could only pray this wasn't because they'd overheard what Narberal said. If he killed a slew of civilians because they *might* have seen through the ruse, that would instantly shatter the reputation he'd built as a surprisingly reasonable undead.

But if he ignored her question entirely, Narberal would remain dejected, and that would be a shame. He didn't want to turn her into someone who never offered suggestions. He settled for keeping his voice low enough so those around them couldn't hear.

"...I've loaned out the Hanzos, and Tira is heading the training program. Honestly, a single eight-edged assassin is far superior, but... well, it's an investment."

Odds were high the results would not be worth the labor, money, and time. But you never knew. Million to one odds paid off sometimes. The success with runes and other magical techniques had set a precedent.

There was no telling what would be a waste of resources and what would turn out to be a rare opportunity, so it was best to make at least a minimal investment.

As their conversation reached a lull, they walked in silence for a while.

They occasionally passed patrols composed of a death knight, a death wizard, a death warrior, a death priest, and a death assassin. Even in town, they maintained formation, with the death assassin at the fore, ever vigilant. Not because there was danger in town but because they were undead and were rigidly obeying the orders he'd given them to remain in formation at all times.

Incidentally, death assassins were not good at clandestine work despite what their names implied. They were just offensive units with a high crit rate. The type of foes that would seem like they weren't doing much damage and then hit extremely hard when you least expected it. Undead like that weren't much use in intelligence work.

They had ended up on patrol squads simply because he had plenty to spare.

*We are exporting undead, but it's all skeletons and other weak ones.*

Naturally, weaker undead were cheaper than strong ones, and most were being used for simple manual labor. That meant they were almost exclusively renting out the cheapest types. Skeletons were the Ainz Corporation's best-selling product by far.

Consequently, he had rather a lot of death knight-level undead just standing around.

But it seemed a waste to let a day pass and not use up his undead creation limit, so he kept on making them. Naturally, he didn't mention to anyone how he was starting to worry about what to do with all these extra undead.

*If we lower the rental fees, then no one will rent them when they're not on sale; I don't want to just slash the prices for no reason. Maybe I could make a point card system? The Empire is borrowing death cavaliers often enough, so if we focus sales on country leadership... But even then...*

Ainz's gaze turned toward Pandora's Actor.

*Walking in silence is awkward. But I don't really have anything I want to ask...*

But if they looked unfriendly, it would defeat the purpose of this exercise.

"Uh, Nabe."

He was still reluctant to converse with Pandora's Actor and ultimately went with Narberal instead.

“Yes?!”

See, he *didn't* want these overly enthusiastic responses... but he let it pass. Her behavior wasn't that odd, all things considered. Momon was technically working under him, after all.

“Um, so. How is Yuri's orphanage going? Have you been to see it?”

“No, I have not.” Her answer was pointedly apathetic.

The issue wasn't Yuri; she simply had no interest. Still...

*Isn't it normal to be interested in where your family is working? Then again, this does feel very in character for Narberal.*

If Shizu or Entoma were working there, perhaps it would be different. Pondering that, he shrugged.

“Should we go look?”

Ainz had left the orphanage's management entirely in Yuri's hands and didn't know much about the details. He'd seen the documents and skimmed them, but not a fragment of them remained within his empty skull.

There were likely regular reports on the orphanage expenses, but he'd been leaving that all up to Albedo and merely pretended to read them.

He'd extolled the virtues of education but wasn't mad enough to consider educating all the commoners in the Nation of Darkness. Education could lead to major advances in culture and technology. But that could also strengthen the weak. Forgoing universal education might mean letting skills go undetected and wasting undetected potential on a life of farmwork, but peace in Nazarick was his top priority.

“Not a bad idea,” Pandora's Actor agreed. Narberal made the turn, leading them onward.

But less than two minutes later, Ainz received a Message.

“—Lord Ainz.”

“Entoma? What is it?”

He answered as they walked, fully expecting the worst.

It had been a year since anyone Messaged him like this. Odds were high this was an emergency of some kind.

The thought made him grin.

After the stomach-churning stress of the Sacred Kingdom, this would be a simple matter.

*I survived that hell. Whatever this is should be a piece of cake!*

Entoma requested that he return to Nazarick at once, and he told her he'd be right there. Then he told Narberal to escort his maid back home, bid them adieu, and opened a Gate. This bought enough time to collect the Hanzos on lookout around him.

One step brought him back into Nazarick.

The Hanzos came through the Gate after him and promptly took their leave. Solution was already there waiting for him, offering the Ring of Ainz Ooal Gown. He accepted it and used it to instantaneously shift to the tenth floor. He then walked the rest of the way.

Rooms within Nazarick that were particularly important or unique were tagged, and the ring's power allowed him to teleport directly there. But other rooms—rooms that had once been unremarkable spaces—had no such tags and could only be accessed on foot.

It was the only real downside to a ring that otherwise granted unrestricted movement around the tomb. Moreover, it was no longer possible to change this functionality. Perhaps it was doable with the *Yggdrasil* creation tools, but Ainz didn't have any, and there were none to be found in Nazarick itself.

Albedo was standing outside his destination, clearly waiting for him. He didn't ask how long it had been and simply praised her for the effort.

“Thank you.”

"Of course!"

She bowed low, and Ainz sighed inside.

He'd said he was on his way but not how long it would take. He'd likely made her wait unnecessarily and felt sorry. But he didn't let that show. Couldn't.

Similar situations had arisen before, and he'd told Albedo there was no need to wait on him, but she refused to be dissuaded. She always insisted it was a servant's duty to await the return of her master.

He'd polled the other floor guardians on the topic—and included the domain guardians and the maids in the mix—but all he got was the same answer. Ainz could still see the maids' eyes gleaming with the light of fanaticism. It had been so alarming that he'd barely stopped himself from taking a step back and apologizing out of instinct.

If everyone but him agreed, then it was his job as their leader to swallow his personal misgivings.

Albedo opened the door, ushering him in.

He didn't deserve so much pomp and ceremony. That thought brought on another pang of guilt. But he roused himself and acted like it was only natural before stepping through the entryway.

Shalltear.

Cocytus.

Aura and Mare.

And Demiurge.

The floor guardians were already assembled, down on bended knee and heads bowed toward the dark, gleaming throne.

Behind that flew the flag of the Ainz Ooal Gown Nation of Darkness.

All the attendees had already assembled. Gatherings like these were organized so Ainz

would arrive last. He was kept waiting only under the most exceptional of circumstances.

He glanced at the busy guardians.

Each of them had packed schedules to begin with, and lately he'd been forced to spoon even more work onto their plates.

Shalltear was managing a communication network, using dragons and other flying monsters as aerial couriers among the Nation of Darkness, the Empire, the dwarf country, and the subhuman dwellings in the wilderness to the east of the Sacred Kingdom. She was already taking what she'd learned from that to secure ground-based trade routes.

Mare was in charge of weather control in all their territory and the new dungeon near E-Rantel. That meant he also worked closely with the newly restructured Adventurers Guild.

Cocytus was in charge of managing and training the Nation of Darkness's armies—primarily undead but a small number of humans and various subhuman races, too.

Aura had originally been handling land management with just the beasts under her control, but as the Nation of Darkness's territories expanded, it quickly outstripped the numbers she could muster. She was now establishing an entire office dedicated to overseeing those vast holdings.

Demiurge was working on Nazarick's seventh level, building up an intelligence department for their espionage needs.

Each guardian's workload was only getting more daunting by the day.

As a result, the minions once dedicated to Nazarick internal security were now being delegated new tasks. And as captain of the floor guardians, Albedo was busy checking everyone else's progress, offering suggestions for improvement, and generally supervising all aspects of the Nation of Darkness's operations.

If Ainz was being honest, he had the least to do out of everyone.

It was almost like his main job was just polishing his acting skills, getting better at playing the role of a great leader. And that was inherently uncomfortable for him.

But whatever this meeting was about, it was apparently important enough for *all* of them to take time out of their busy schedules.

Ainz strode down the center aisle. Albedo closed the doors and followed on his heels.

Once Ainz lowered himself on the only seat in the room, Albedo kneeled before him.

“Lord Ainz,” she began. “The floor guardians have assembled before you.”

*Well, yeah, they were here before I even walked in the room!* He kept that observation to himself, though. Some things were best left unsaid.

“Mm. Guardians, well met. Raise your heads.”

“Yes, Lord Ainz!”

Their sharp responses rang out, and the guardians’ heads came up as one. They moved in perfect unison.

Albedo would have preferred to be the one to address the assembly, but he’d managed to put a stop to that, at least. She’d argued that a supreme leader shouldn’t let his subjects hear his voice for every little thing, but he didn’t want to put that kind of distance between himself and everyone else.

All eyes were now on Ainz, radiating absolute loyalty. There was a time he would’ve found that nearly unbearable, but he’d built a healthy tolerance since then.

*Still... is it my imagination? I feel like they’re even more devoted than before. That can’t be right... Right?*

Ainz had no memory of doing anything that should’ve inspired such faith. Their gazes weren’t exactly uncomfortable, but he did suddenly feel compelled to briefly break eye contact and quickly scan the rest of the room.

There were doors on either side of him—separate from the ones he’d entered through—but the interior itself was not all that large. The decor, however, was resplendent. Majestic even.

This was an audience chamber they’d made inside the Great Tomb of Nazarick. There was a similar room back in E-Rantel.

Nazarick already had an official Throne Room, but it was a bit *too* large and felt rather drafty with only a handful of guardians in it. They could always fill the space if need be, but it seemed unwise to carelessly display one of Nazarick's greatest treasures—the throne itself was a World Item. That was why he had ordered the construction of an alternate audience chamber.

Everything within the Great Tomb of Nazarick was made by the members of the guild he'd once belonged to. But this audience chamber was an exception. The guardians had remodeled an empty chamber, and he could only assume they had agonized over every detail.

And that was itself a delightful development.

The NPCs he and his fellow guild members had made were stepping outside their original roles to become their own entities.

*Children eventually leave the nest behind.*

Ainz smiled inside.

He was proud of them all.

Satoru Suzuki had no children. Not many of the guild members did. That's why he wasn't entirely sure if these feelings were paternal. He was pretty sure they weren't *maternal*.

Perhaps he'd dwelled on his idle thoughts for too long. These meetings never started until he initiated proceedings. He was hardly a master of ceremonies, but it was high time he spoke.

"Well, Albedo. Inform me of the reason for this assembly. I imagine it is vital to the future of Nazarick... and the Nation of Darkness?"

"Yes, Lord Ainz. I'll get straight to the point. Four days ago, a convoy of provisions bound for the Sacred Kingdom... was stolen."

"Oh? By whom?"

"A nobleman of the Re-Estize Kingdom."

The fires in Ainz's eye sockets flared. It was rare for Albedo to mince words like this. She would ordinarily have given the man's name, the size of his forces, and his motives. There had to be a reason why she was holding that back.

"The merchant in charge of those shipments is associated with the Eight Fingers. Did he not have guards? And these convoys fly our flags. In other words, does this mean the Re-Estize Kingdom has decided to openly challenge the Nation of Darkness?"

So far, the Re-Estize Kingdom had shown no indication of wanting another fight, but Ainz wondered if he had misread things. Was there a chance this was evidence of a grander conspiracy? That brought another thought to mind.

"Or have the Eight Fingers betrayed us?"

"No, um..."

Albedo hesitated and kept her eyes on the ground. Then she glanced up, as if trying to gauge his mood.

He had almost never seen her act like this. It was possibly the first time ever. She was acting like a little girl afraid of a scolding. No trace of the collected floor guardian captain he knew.

"What's wrong, Albedo? What happened?"

Careful to maintain his authority, he felt a bead of sweat run down his back. Of course, Ainz was not capable of actually sweating.

Was this the result of an error on his part? That would explain Albedo's behavior.

This definitely seemed like the attitude of an employee forced to point out their boss's thoughtless blunder.

*I can't think of any noble of the kingdom who's a likely suspect, though... Did I do anything particularly dumb the last few months? Am I still doing it?*

Ainz couldn't even recall documents he'd stamped a few weeks ago, so the more he thought about it, the more certain he was this *had* to be his fault.

*No, wait! I can use my fallback! Like that excuse I gave Albedo and Demiurge during the*

*Sacred Kingdom mess! I got everyone together when I returned and made sure they all knew I planned to deliberately mess up sometimes! Man, that was a good idea. Yeah, it might be the time to make that claim.*

He'd known from the start that he could never maintain the illusion of a flawless leader. It was time to drop the facade.

Ainz gave her a gentle smile.

"Come, Albedo. No holding back. Speak your mind."

"Yes, Lord Ainz. I'm sure you remember our plans to bring the Re-Estize Kingdom under our control hinged on making use of a particularly foolish nobleman..."

*Hmm?* Ainz thought. This didn't sound like what he'd expected. But it was enough of a hint that even he saw where it was headed.

"And this foolish nobleman is involved in this robbery?"

Albedo nodded.

"Yes, that fool is personally responsible for this incident. However... I'm sure you've noticed already, Lord Ainz, but there is a chance this is all part of a scheme orchestrated by the Re-Estize Kingdom's top minds."

She was clearly overestimating his analytical abilities, but Ainz nodded sagely, mulling it over. The deeper implications escaped him, but if a Nazarick-connected noble was the culprit, that might serve the Re-Estize Kingdom's interests in some way. And be a real thorn in the Nation of Darkness's side.

"I am well aware, but... are we sure this fool is involved? Could it not be a deception on their part? Wait... Albedo, you must've already looked into the possibility. Forgive the question."

"No, it's a natural one, Lord Ainz. However, I have someone here who can speak directly to the matter. Shalltear"

"At once."

Shalltear bowed her head, rose to her feet, and moved to the door on the left.

She soon returned with a woman flanked by death knights.

She was sickly thin and had dark circles beneath her eyes. No signs of makeup. Her hair was a wreck. The veins in her eyes stood out, and the trails of tears marred her cheeks. She kept looking this way and that like a terrified animal.

Ainz was sure he'd met her before but could not remember her name or occupation.

As he racked his brain, the hands holding her up let go.

She slid onto her hands and knees in one motion.

It was magnificent.

So smooth, it was downright graceful.

You could not manage that without extensive training—Ainz almost respected her for it.

“Y-Your Majesty,” she said in a shaky voice. Words failed her for a moment before she worked up the courage to speak again. “It is an honor to be in your presence, Your Majesty.”

There was a long silence. Eventually, Ainz realized it was his turn.

“Woman, I permit you to speak your name.”

“Whatever you desire! My name is Hilma Shugneus, Your Majesty!”

He finally unearthed the memory.

This was one of the chiefs of the Eight Fingers, a crime syndicate based in the Re-Estize Kingdom.

“Oh,” he let slip.

However she interpreted that, she planted her face firmly on the floor—not that it had risen off the ground even once.

“I knew nothing! I swear! I would never dream of acting against your interests! I have

nothing to do with the stolen provisions!"

Ainz glanced at Albedo's back.

Was this woman telling the truth or not? It would be easy enough to investigate. So Albedo must have already done so. But why had she not told him the results?

He wasn't sure where her intentions lay, but this wasn't an attempt to trip up Ainz—quite the opposite. Her opinion of him was too high, for reasons beyond his comprehension. And that meant he could ill afford to just... ask.

*But by continuing to not ask, I'm digging myself into an even deeper hole... Should I just tell her I'm lost? If it was just Albedo, maybe I'd be willing, but with the others here...*

Ainz glanced at Aura and Mare.

*No, best save it for another time.*

"Hmm, then allow me to determine if your words are true. Dominate."

Once she was under the thrall of his spell, he began questioning her.

"Did you have anything to do with this nobleman's theft?"

"I did not."

The target of Dominate couldn't lie to the spell's caster. As she had claimed, Shugneus was not directly involved. There might be some roundabout involvement, but it would be on a level she could not be blamed for. If her words were false, that would mean her memory had been rewritten... which was unlikely.

Other possibilities included...

"Have you ever been told you have multiple personalities?"

"I have not."

"Hmm. Do you have any plans to work against us?"

"Absolutely, positively none!"

That was the most intense response yet. Ainz released her from the spell.

"Even if she was indirectly connected to this crime, holding her responsible for that is beneath us. Shugneus is innocent."

Her head came up a bit, and she looked at Ainz, eyes gleaming. It was slightly disconcerting.

"But, Lord Ainz," Albedo interjected. "Are a subordinate's failings not the responsibility of their superior? This woman was supposed to be keeping that fool in line."

She had a point.

"Th-that much is true!" Shugneus admitted in a desperate cry. "I told him repeatedly not to take any actions on his own! Insisted he should talk to me before doing anything! And I placed one of our people at his side so he could easily do so!"

Albedo disputed none of this. It had to be true. She had done her level best, and it would be cruel to blame her for the outcome.

Albedo had recruited a fool and foisted him off on an unsuspecting local manager. The new hire then screwed up spectacularly. Perhaps there were issues with how her department was being run, but Ainz could appreciate the struggles of managing personnel.

His own work experience put him firmly in Shugneus's camp

If he left the resolution of all this to the guardians, her punishment would no doubt be rather severe. In which case—

“—a subordinate's failings are the responsibility of their superior. I agree with that sentiment.”

All color drained from Shugneus's face. Ainz didn't fail to notice as he kept talking.

"But those words are meant to encourage leaders to protect their followers—not to push the blame on anyone else. And there is always the question of how rigidly we should follow that principle. Albedo, tell me, if Shugneus was in charge of monitoring this imbecilic nobleman, who was in charge of monitoring Shugneus?"

"That—would be me, I believe."

"Hmm. And likewise, I am *your* master. In that sense, this failure is ultimately *my* responsibility."

"N-n-not at all! You are not to blame here, Lord Ainz!"

It was rare to see Albedo this flustered.

Shugneus's eyes had gone from dead to sparkling once more. She really was *very* expressive.

"Shugneus was this man's direct superior, and perhaps there were some errors in her oversight. But one look at her proves it was not due to lack of effort. In which case, we can forgive her this once. A first mistake is something we all do. A second one is careless. A third mistake is a priority to correct. And a fourth mistake is proof of incompetence. Shugneus!"

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

Her head went down again. He heard a distinct *thunk* as it hit the floor. It sounded painful.

"Make sure this does not happen again. Propose several policy changes and deliver them to Albedo for evaluation. That will be your punishment."

"Thank you, Your Majesty!"

She was now rubbing her forehead on the floor. Almost like she was trying to find a way to lower her head still farther.

Ainz genuinely thought she was taking this too far but didn't let it show. Instead, he looked around at his guardians.

"Those are my thoughts on this matter. Does anyone have anything to add? I will not chastise you for it. Speak freely."

No signs of any dissent. But the guardians frequently claimed that any decision he made was inherently correct. It was possible they were just keeping their objections to themselves. Probably best to be sure.

“Albedo.”

“I have nothing.”

“Demiurge.”

“Same as Albedo.”

“Aura.”

“Not a thing.”

“Mare.”

“Oh, er, um... I don’t have anything, either.”

“Cocytus.”

“NOTHING TO ADD.”

“Shalltear.”

“Nothing from me.”

Was it really fine, or were they all holding back? Ainz couldn’t tell, but they’d made their answers clear.

He nodded and passed judgment.

“...Very well. Then, Shugneus, prepare your new plans shortly... say, in two days’ time.”

Shugneus’s head snapped up.

“Of course, Your Majesty! Thank you for your mercy! I am forever in your debt! I, Hilma Shugneus, will forever serve the King of Darkness!”

“Good...”

She was starting to remind him of that girl, the one with the scary eyes. The fervor was a bit unsettling.

"I look forward to your demonstration of that loyalty. Shalltear, escort Shugneus out."

"Right away."

Shalltear led Hilma out and used the ring. That moved her to the top layer, from where they could activate a Gate. He assumed this would not take long and waited; Shalltear was soon back, alone.

"Well, then. I imagine I was not summoned here to pass judgment on her."

He would be glad if he was, so perhaps there was some wishful thinking couched in that comment, but Albedo instantly shattered that hope.

"As you so astutely discerned, no."

Ainz shot her a slightly resentful glare. She couldn't have given him a moment to dream?

"Ah? Is there something on your mind? If it has to do with the earlier matter—"

"No, never mind," Ainz said, cutting Albedo off before she could continue. "Pray, tell me why I am here—and with all the floor guardians assembled to boot."

He saw Albedo and Demiurge exchange a look.

"First, we believe it important to determine what motivated the imbecile or who might have been attempting to manipulate him for their own gain. We believe this question might dramatically change how the Nation of Darkness approaches our conquest of the kingdom, so please forgive our desire to know your thoughts on the matter."

"Hmm. The current kingdom conquest plan is the Carrot and the Stick. Aura, Mare, Cocytus, Shalltear. Have the four of you been briefed?"

"That operation is run by myself and Demiurge, so the others have not heard the details."

"Ah. Well, Albedo, it's time to share information. Their opinions and ideas may prove valuable here."

"Understood."

Albedo launched into an explanation.

The Carrot and the Stick—a name Ainz himself had come up with and one that had been praised as an elegant encapsulation of the concept—was a plan to bring the Re-Estize Kingdom under their control by instigating a civil war, creating a justification for the Nation of Darkness to step in and restore peace at the behest of the populace.

Demiurge's involvement might be the reason that the plan bore a striking resemblance to the one they had executed in the Sacred Kingdom: Start a war; then kill a whole lot of people. Was it a demon thing to prefer inciting civil wars over straightforward invasions? Cocytus or Shalltear would likely have proposed much more direct means—conquest by overwhelming force.

But apparently, this proposal had originated from someone who hailed from the kingdom. Albedo and Demiurge had merely made a few adjustments to their plan.

And at the heart of the plan was a stupid nobleman.

It would start when he raised the flag of rebellion. Driven by lack of food, he would instigate a war and ask the Nation of Darkness for aid. There were many other uses for him, but the ultimate goal was always the same—fabricate a reason for the Nation of Darkness to join the fray.

From Ainz's perspective, this played right into that plan. So there must be some problem here that Ainz hadn't figured out.

Once Albedo's briefing was over, Ainz asked the obvious question.

"So, Albedo. We should put the obvious question in words. Do we have clear proof this nobleman has caused an issue? Are we sure this isn't the kingdom's own scheme at work? If memory serves... you sent this nobleman a letter designed to ensnare him?"

She had repeatedly complained about having to send a loathsome nobleman a letter, frequently using the phrase *a mere human*, and had demanded he review the contents of it. Several times.

He knew a thing or two about business correspondence but had no knowledge of postal censorship or, indeed, proofreading. He would have preferred to stay out of it, but he could not very well turn down Albedo's request.

Some time had passed since their arrival in this world, but Ainz remained unable to read the local writing. He could write his name and Momon's and had learned the numbers. Meanwhile, Albedo and Demiurge had mastered the languages of multiple countries—as had Pandora's Actor—and were clearly far brighter than he was. He'd been forced to resort to a magic item.

Honestly, he'd seen absolutely no room for improvement and often said as much.

"You showed me his response as well, and I got the impression he was entirely in your thrall. I find it hard to believe he would act against the Nation of Darkness."

But he did remember hearing that if someone you doted on betrayed you, that affection could turn into a nasty grudge. He glanced at Shalltear, seeing a vision of his former friend over her shoulder. He was crying tears of blood over the news that a favorite voice actress had a *boyfriend*.

Meanwhile, his older sister stood behind Aura and Mare, ruthlessly mocking him for it.

"Yes, we verified the matter exhaustively. There is no doubt he was the one who was responsible for this incident and the one who made off with the food. While we can't rule out the possibility that he was charmed or brainwashed, there's no question that it was the man himself."

"My concern is the possibility of someone outwitting us," Demiurge said gravely. "That would mean any careless move on our part could be turned against us."

Ainz was at a loss. Was there really someone out there who could outsmart the two of them? Or...

"Are we sure this nobleman didn't just act without thinking at all?"

That made far more sense to him.

"Lord Ainz, I find that hard to believe," Albedo said, looking very sorry as she raised her doubts.

This was genuinely refreshing. He might never have seen her act like this.

"No, let's think this through, Albedo," Demiurge said. "We have the means to outwit a

wise opponent, but Lord Ainz can even predict the self-destructive acts of a complete nitwit. Maybe that *is* a possibility. Maybe that is, in fact, the most likely possibility.”

“B-but... it’s *so* stupid... Can anyone *be* that dumb? But if Lord Ainz says so...”

“Lord Ainz has spoken. It *must* be true, Albedo.”

“I—I think the same thing!”

Aura and Mare were already voicing their support. Ainz had just thrown the idea out there without much thought and was rather taken aback by the sudden insistence that he was right.

“In which case...”

“Yes, that means...”

Albedo and Demiurge were frowning, exploring the possibility.

“W-wait, this is where I’d like to inquire what the other floor guardians think about this plan. I’m sure you have questions, so let’s get some answers. Anyone ready to ask, raise your hand, and Albedo and Demiurge will answer.”

*Please don’t ask me anything.* Ainz was waving a white flag inside.

“Um, okay,” Aura said, hand up. “Why didn’t we start by bringing a bunch of nobles on board? If we had, then when something like this went wrong, we could just kill the man responsible without affecting the plan.”

Demiurge fielded that question.

“Originally, that was considered. But after thorough examination, we rejected the idea. Bringing talented noblemen on board is one thing but fools? The more you gather, the more problems arise, and the more leaks occur. We ultimately decided to focus on one man, form a faction around him, and then control it through him.”

At no point had any of them imagined they’d lose control of their incompetent figurehead.

Cocytus raised a limb next.

## "WHY NOT A SMART NOBLEMAN?"

"That might have worked. We are actually bringing some on board. Threats against beloved children have proven highly motivating. But for our later plans, we wanted to leave a fair number of skilled noblemen in place. This plan is better served by someone expendable. We want the kingdom to be worthy of Lord Ainz's dominion, so the more fools we purge, the better. That's why we gathered the inadequate and the insufferable into a single faction. A wastebasket to put all the trash in. Naturally, we're receiving personnel data from several sources, but we wanted to gather information directly as well."

"The Nation of Darkness only needs a handful of talented vassals. The rest should be a rabble of unambitious nobles we can herd like cattle."

"Right," Shalltear said, languidly raising a hand. "I am confused. Whether this stupid nobleman was manipulated or not, he has brazenly attacked the Nation of Darkness. Why should we not raise our banners and invade the kingdom? If this is someone's trap, then we need only crush it."

"That is true, especially if someone is plotting something. It's just... well..."

Albedo glanced at Demiurge, who nodded and looked at Ainz. Then Demiurge faced the other floor guardians to address the group.

"It's tricky to find the right move here. As Ainz discerningly pointed out, this nobleman was likely acting without any forethought. But if we let him off too lightly, then the Nation of Darkness's standing will be diminished. This man attacked a convoy bearing the mark of Lord Ainz. He dragged Lord Ainz's face through the dirt. What punishment do you think that deserves?"

"We should kill him."

"Mm-hmm. I agree with my sister."

"Yes. Exactly. Which begs the question... do we just kill this underling and be done?"

"Of course not," Shalltear snapped. "Whoever they call master is equally responsible."

Cocytus nodded impassively.

Ainz was rather shocked.

It was partly because of how furious they all seemed, but that was par for the course given their personalities. What really shook him was how everyone was taking the idea that this nobleman had simply been acting moronically—something he'd just suggested off the cuff—and was treating it as gospel.

That was genuinely alarming.

"Exactly, Shalltear. I feel exactly the same way. If anyone has insulted Lord Ainz, then their country must pay the price! It's just..." Albedo trailed off.

"Lord Ainz once said a ruined country is a blot upon his name. And he has said he takes little pleasure in standing upon a heap of rubble. Thus, we are endeavoring to respect those wishes as much as possible."

Albedo nodded in agreement when Demiurge finished talking.

Ainz had several questions.

First... had he actually said those things?

If he surveyed the residents of Nazarick with a question like *Who is right, Ainz or Demiurge?* the vast majority would immediately declare that it must be Ainz. The only exception would likely be Ainz Ooal Gown himself.

How could he trust himself when he barely remembered what had happened a week ago?

So it was entirely possible he *had* told Demiurge these things and simply no longer remembered. In which case there was only one possible reaction.

"I'm impressed you remembered those words, Demiurge. Impressed and pleased."

"I—I also remember them!"

"Same here, Lord Ainz."

"Mm-hmm. Thank you, Shalltear, Aura—I am grateful to you both."

Did they actually remember? Or had they forgotten like him and were just playing along with Demiurge? He couldn't be sure.

Why was it none of them could tell how incompetent he was? Was he really *that* good an actor?

Quite a lot of time had passed since he appeared in this world as the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick. He'd spent that whole time playing the part of a Supreme Being. That mask should have long since fallen off, revealing Satoru Suzuki's incompetent face beneath it.

But even as he wrestled with that idea, the discussion moved onward.

"And in accordance with Lord Ainz's wishes, we must refrain from laying waste to the entire kingdom. That said, we cannot let the punishment be *mild*. Our plans will have to be paused or abandoned completely. At the very least, they will need major revisions."

Ainz felt rather guilty that his words were becoming such a detriment to their efforts.

"...Hmm. But, Demiurge, has our plan really *failed*?"

Demiurge, Albedo, and their kingdom collaborator. Three geniuses Ainz could not possibly hope to comprehend. Could their carefully wrought plan really fail this easily? If so, he would have to watch his words even more carefully than before. Perhaps he would be better off never speaking again. With that thought in mind, he gave the current matter his undivided attention.

"Are we really abandoning the Carrot and Stick plan?"

"....."

Demiurge was looking at Ainz, brow furrowed. He'd seen this look before. It was the look he got when trying to decipher the hidden meaning behind the cryptic words of what he considered to be a vastly superior being.

*No, Demiurge. I'm just double-checking! There's no deeper meaning! Take a long shower and clear your head!*

Those words rose up within Ainz but died before they reached his lips.

Just as his dread peaked, Demiurge's expression changed to one of surprise, like he had just worked something out.

"...No, wait... Lord Ainz! Is *this* why you quietly brought the Empire under your influence?"

*I knew it. This can't be good.*

The hell was he talking about?

Ainz was screaming inside. What possible leaps of logic could have brought Demiurge to *that* conclusion?

Would it be best to just come out and ask him? Was he even allowed to do that?

"-----That's right."

After deep deliberation, that was the answer he had reached. Now Albedo looked just as shocked as Demiurge.

Equally terrifying.

"I see... That's why you kept asking! It all makes sense now. I should have picked up on that immediately! I am sorry to disappoint you."

"No, Demiurge, we lowly minions could not possibly compete with the depth of Lord Ainz's wisdom. Perhaps our greatest failing is forgetting that Lord Ainz always has several interwoven schemes in play."

"—Point taken. I never would have thought the Carrot and Stick was operating on an international scale. Brilliant, Lord Ainz. No wonder you were the Supreme Beings' mastermind."

Ainz let out a chuckle.

He had no clue what these two were talking about.

And that brought a moment of clarity. Perhaps they *knew* he was a fool and were hamming it up to conceal that fact?

*They're both smart enough to realize it. Intelligent beyond my comprehension. Would anyone that bright really think I know what I'm doing? Of course not!*

“ONCE AGAIN, LORD AINZ PROVES HIMSELF THE SAGEST MIND OF NAZARICK.”

“Yes, indeed, Cocytus. Lord Ainzel is constantly peering a thousand—nay, ten thousand years into the future, and a plan that won’t even span a decade is but a trifle to him.”

“Er, r-really? Wow, Lord Ainzel.”

“A thousand years... That’s amazing, Lord Ainzel.”

What was Demiurge even *talking* about?

*Who said I’m thinking that far ahead? When? Don’t just make things up!*

Ainzel was ready to scream. Having those two innocent children buying this wholesale was one more nail in his coffin. But since he spent the bulk of his time just agreeing with whatever Demiurge said, he had no clue how else to react. If he denied this claim, it might cause problems down the line.

Should he just do what he always did?

If he’d had a flesh-and-blood body, his face would have been plastered with an extremely awkward smile. After some thought, he found words that neither confirmed nor denied Demiurge’s assertion.

“Y-you flatter me.”

“There is no cause for modesty, Your Greatness,” Shalltear said.

“YOU SEE SO FAR AHEAD. IT WOULD HAVE BEEN IMPOSSIBLE TO LEAD THE SUPREME BEINGS OTHERWISE.”

It was no use. Best to just give up.

Ainzel simply left it up to fate.

“Well, now that Lord Ainzel has given his permission, we can make the kingdom’s punishment far more grandiose.”

“Huh?”

He had no clue how this conversation naturally led to “grandiose” punishments.

But Albedo had her hands cutely clasped together, smiling brightly.

“The Empire swiftly knelt before Lord Ainz, so they get the carrot. The kingdom failed to do so, so they get the stick. These two facts will be a message to the rest of the world. Every leader will be forced to ask themselves which they’d rather have. This is going to be *delightful*, Lord Ainz.”

“..... Mmmm.”

•

Hilma was thrown out of the Gate. She looked back just in time to see it disappear.

She’d banged her arm, so she rubbed it as she got up and looked around. She was in a large hall.

The chief of the gambling division, Noah Zwedane, had purchased a large plot of land in the capital fully intending to open an illegal casino. They’d built a manor large enough for their future plans, but that’s when their fortunes took a sharp turn for the worse.

This had left them with an empty building filled with large rooms meant to house various games—and this hall was the largest of them.

Hilma let out a sigh of relief.

A wave of joy rushed through her, and she found herself shaking like a leaf.

“Hilma!”

Her people came rushing over to her. Three were present, but one of them, Oscas, grabbed a bell from the desk and rang it.

There were tears in every eye.

They must have been worried about her. Every face was ashen.

"You're safe? Unharmed? How's your stomach holding up?"

"I've got some fruit liquor here if you need to wash the taste out."

"The others are on their way!"

"Noah, Endio, Oscas..." Her voice quieted them down. "I appreciate your concern."

"This is no time for manners!" Noah said, wiping his tears. "It must have been horrible. You should get some rest."

He clearly had one very particular thing in mind and was assuming that was what had happened to her. She'd better explain.

"They didn't do *that*. They did nothing to me."

A stir ran through the room. Astonishment was plain on every face. *Is that even possible?* they wondered.

"I met His Majesty, the King of Darkness."

The tears welling up in her eyes spilled over, drop after drop rolling down her cheeks.

"The King of Darkness..."

The simple act of whispering that name induced a wave of unimaginable fear. Endio even made the sign of a god he placed no faith in. The others' eyes darted nervously in all directions. Probably searching for whatever monster lurked here watching them. Hilma had never once caught sight of it, but all here were certain it existed.

"You met... You were granted an audience and... survived?"

"Heh-heh..." Hilma smiled through her tears.

Everyone here had met the King of Darkness once but obviously with their heads down. They'd barely caught a glimpse of his face.

But those glimpses and the stories they'd heard had been more than enough for Hilma and the other Eight Fingers to conclude that he was evil personified. The vicious torture they'd endured, the brutal devastation unleashed upon the kingdom's

armies—that was what they associated with that undead king, the enemy of all living things.

“His Majesty... was a very intellectual man. Generous. And merciful.”

It was like time itself had stopped.

Noah gasped and bowed his head, his face twisting up. He looked like he had just laid eyes on something heartbreakingly tragic.

Mere minutes ago, if anyone else had said this to her, Hilma would have reacted the same way. The only explanation was that their mind had snapped.

The others' eyes were red. “Hilma... I almost envy you.” “If only I could be where you are...”

“No, wait. Perhaps someone cast a mind-control spell on her. Is that what happened, Hilma?”

Noah was clutching at straws. Hilma knew full well there was no malevolent magic at work, but it was also true that she could offer no persuasive evidence to disprove the idea. Best to pretend she knew nothing and tell him whatever she could. It was up to them to decide if they wanted to believe it.

“I never imagined I would return at all. The only reason I am back unharmed is entirely thanks to His Majesty’s mercy. The King of Darkness is a man worthy of the throne. If he had not been there...”

She would have paid a terrible price. It was far too possible—no, without a doubt—she would have been put through the same hell now awaiting that imbecile. She was certain the Nation of Darkness’s prime minister, Albedo, had planned such a fate for her.

What would Hilma herself have done? *Someone* had to be held responsible for this brazen transgression. Even if she spared their life, she would certainly have chosen to inflict a toe-curling punishment. Yet, the King of Darkness had chosen mercy.

“...Hilma, I hate to interrupt these tears. But the King of Darkness’s generosity is just a part of the Carrot and the Stick doctrine.”

"Perhaps. Perhaps it is," Hilma said aloud—but she did not believe it for a second.

She weighed each person she encountered by the tone of their voice, their facial expressions, their tics, their habits.

This was hardly an unusual power, merely one acquired through experience. But she had polished it to an unusual degree, and her senses were telling her that neither the King of Darkness nor Albedo was acting.

But it was hard to get a read on the king, as he lacked human facial expressions, and she could not say for certain her measure of him was accurate. Perhaps what her comrades said had more merit than she first thought.

"Yes, I've used that technique myself. I know it well. But... I had no idea the carrot could seem this sweet to those who know the pain of the stick all too well. It's possible he has me fooled. Perhaps the King of Darkness is a being of pure fear, unable to understand the hearts of men, barely kept in check by his retinue. But I felt I could trust him. No... I *wanted* to trust him."

She has seen any number of ladies of the night duped by men like that and ruined because of it. She knew full well she might be sinking into the same mire that had doomed those women. But she couldn't tear herself away from the king's pull.

".....Hilma, you know better than anyone what men are like. You are the best judge of character we've ever known, especially where men are concerned. What are your instincts telling you about the King of Darkness?"

A high-class courtesan saw all manner of men. Far too many of them highborn.

And a comparative analysis suggested—

"First and foremost, he is very broad-minded. He has his own thoughts and values, but if he deems a subordinate's words worthy, he is flexible enough to acknowledge them. And he does not take pleasure in the suffering of others. How should I put it? He simply doesn't have a taste for it. However, if a harsh sentence is required, he seemed fully capable of doing what is required without remorse."

"A high opinion indeed."

Cheeks still stained with tears lifted in a smile.

"Yes." She laughed. "His Majesty may be undead, but he is both impartial and magnanimous. He is neither cruel nor heartless. He could easily have punished me and used that as a tool to control all of you, yet he chose a different path."

She heard them swallow. The sound echoed loudly in the chamber.

"I found myself hoping that his reign would last forever. As long as he remains in charge, then..."

The silence was crushing.

But in due time, someone let out a bated breath. Like a disciple hearing the words of an oracle, witnessing a miracle with their own eyes.

They had lived through hell, and then they lived in fear of its return. This was the first hint of salvation.

"I see. Then we must demonstrate our loyalty anew."

"Yes, Noah. That we should. The other thing I learned is that the Nation of Darkness's prime minister, Albedo—she is *truly* terrifying. I don't believe for a second her words were spoken on His Majesty's behalf."

This last line was mostly directed toward Hilma herself but overheard by all. They seemed unsure what to make of it.

Albedo was a demon, and her intent was naturally difficult to predict, but in that instant, Hilma's every instinct had screamed aloud.

Perhaps the stress of the moment had pushed her mind into overdrive.

She *knew*.

The King of Darkness had a warmth to him, but Albedo saw humans as little more than *toys*.

She fervently hoped she and hers could find a place for themselves working directly under the king himself. His Majesty would reward them justly for their labors. Hilma was certain his demands would not be beyond reason.

"We must do all we can for the King of Darkness," she firmly declared.

The other three present could feel her drive as she asked for their help in completing the task the king had given her.



# **CHAPTER 2**

# **COUNTDOWN TO DOOM**

# 1

Valencia Palace in the capital of Re-Estize Kingdom.

The temperature of the chamber was elevated by the crowd within. The total number of occupants was not especially high, but the room wasn't the most spacious, and above all, the gravity of the situation ensured that no one felt comfortable.

There was a long table in the center of the room, and Ramposa III sat at the head; at his right hand was the second prince, Zanac.

Joining them were the heads of the kingdom's various ministries, most of them elderly, with pure white or graying locks or bare caps that reflected light.

Ordinarily, any gathering would begin with all but the monarch standing, as a formal gesture of respect—however, not only did they remain seated but also maids were filling the cups before them. A clear sign this meeting would be a long one.

Zanac looked around the room, making sure everyone was served, and then got the ball rolling.

"Court is now in session. The topic of the day is the declaration of war from the Nation of Darkness."

*Declaration of war* was a powerful phrase, but he'd used it precisely because he wanted everyone here to understand the significance.

Indeed, the ministers—all as old as his father—furrowed their white brows, looking deeply concerned.

Zanac glanced sideways at his father. The king's judgment was his biggest concern here. It was vital he impress how serious this development was and prompt him to make the optimal choice.

*Given who the King of Darkness killed, I'm sure this is hard for my father...*

His father had been beside himself when he learned that Gazef Stronoff had perished. Zanac had been with him when he'd heard resurrection was impossible. He had never seen his father lose himself as waves of fury rolled over him.

Since that day, his father had aged rapidly. It seemed like he had lost all vitality, reducing him to skin and bones.

After a blow like that, could his father pass sound judgment where those responsible were concerned?

*If need be, I'll...*

Zanac stifled his fears, scanning the assembled ministers.

This meeting had been called after an envoy reached the kingdom with an official missive bearing the seal of the Nation of Darkness. It simply stated that a Re-Estize Kingdom subject had forcibly seized Nation of Darkness supplies bound for the Sacred Kingdom and that this had been taken as a hostile act that impugned their honor and could lead to war.

What's more, the message also bore the seals of other countries, decreeing that they believed the Nation of Darkness's allegations.

The envoy had been ordered to wait within the kingdom's capital until a reply was forthcoming. It was quite common for an official statement to take a week or two to prepare. Even that might not be enough time to put out feelers and ensure that the response had the endorsement of every stakeholder.

"Of the six seals on the document the envoy brought, two of them have taken far too long to verify. My humblest apologies."

The speaker was the minister of foreign affairs. The Ministry of Seals lay under his purview, and they'd been investigating the seals on the Nation of Darkness's missive.

"The recognizable ones came from the Nation of Darkness, the Empire, the Dragon Kingdom, and the Sacred Kingdom?" the minister of financial affairs asked.

"Correct." The previous speaker nodded. "Of the remaining two, one comes from the dwarf country. The design bears their distinctive style, which allowed us to narrow it down in the first place, but our last records of it are two centuries old, and the seal we've been examining bears several distinct differences. We investigated with help from Re-Blumrushur and found other similar impressions, so we believe it safe to assume the design has been altered over time. Which brings us to the last seal. This is placed beside that of the Sacred Kingdom, and we're now confident it is the seal of the

individual known as the Faceless One.”

“Personal heraldry placed beside those of states?”

The minister of war looked aghast.

He was the youngest of the officials here—enough that he and Zanac were drastically lowering the average age in the room. But that was only relative, since he was over forty.

Despite his post, he had a frail build and a nervous disposition. The man looked more like an accountant than a soldier.

He and Gazef had never gotten along. Or rather, as far as anyone could tell, he loathed the former captain. As a result, Ramposa had never even given him the time of day, and he was often absent from court sessions; this general lack of contact meant Zanac had no real grasp on his abilities.

But Zanac’s former conspirator, Marquis Raeven, had sung his praises, vouching for him; putting his social skills aside, he likely knew his way around the job. It was hard to believe anyone could become a minister without some degree of competence.

“Perhaps you’re aware of the convention, but historically speaking, when the Sacred Kingdom seal is used, the high priest often places their seal—that of the temple—beside it. This is likely a nod to that.”

“So this tells us the Faceless One has either seized the temple’s influence or now possesses greater authority than them.”

“Precisely, Your Highness. The temple’s seal was used at the holy king’s coronation, meaning—well, she’s clearly grown far more powerful since then. We had never encountered the Faceless One’s seal before, so verification has proven impossible, but given its positioning next to the Sacred Kingdom seal, we have deemed that the most likely explanation.”

“So the fact that everyone but the council state and the Theocracy are rebuking the kingdom is not a ploy by the Nation of Darkness but a simple fact.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Zanac's father let out a weary sigh.

"So the Dragon Kingdom has fallen under their influence as well."

"I wouldn't go that far, Your Majesty. We've had no reports on any shake-ups within the Dragon Kingdom, so they may have been deceived or decided they had more to gain by backing the Nation of Darkness than ourselves."

All this really conveyed was that the Dragon Kingdom approved of the Nation of Darkness's actions as far as this incident went; it didn't suggest they were likely to join the fray themselves.

"Understood, Minister. We applaud your work on this. Domestic Affairs, to what extent do our people *believe* the contents of this declaration?"

"Sir, I can't speak to the kingdom as a whole, but within the palace, seven out of ten are convinced this is a conspiracy concocted by the Nation of Darkness. One out of ten believes it to be the work of bandits—commoners ignorant of politics. And the remainder suspect this to be the plot of some third party."

"Hmm. A scheme to whittle away at our power or the Nation of Darkness's. Someone who hopes to set us against each other. That would mean either the council state or the Theocracy."

"Your Highness, let us not be hasty. Perhaps the Empire is searching for a way to get out of being a vassal. I'm sure imperial knights could easily take out a trade caravan."

Zanac mulled that over. But if that was true, the kingdom was already at an impasse.

"—Out of the question," the war minister said. "The incident happened on kingdom land. And the reports make it clear dozens were involved. Any of those three countries running a clandestine operation would send far fewer agents. Now, if they were pulling the strings from behind the scenes or hiring bandits or mercenaries within the kingdom—that I could see. But either way, the blame falls squarely on our heads."

Since the war, this minister had been working overtime to maintain order within the kingdom borders. And that had required a shrewd mind. As a result, he could speak with confidence on this matter.

"Bandits are one thing, but I'd like to get those mercenaries on our payroll. If only we

had the funds for it.”

“You’re blaming the treasury?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“It certainly sounded like you were—”

“—Ministers, let us not argue among ourselves. This is not the time.”

At the king’s words, both men bowed their heads.

Silence followed. Eventually the war minister spoke again.

“What is clear is that *someone* must be behind this. We gathered reports from various town guards, and they all say the convoy was clearly flying Nation of Darkness flags. When they left the capital, the wagons were guarded by a company of skilled mercenaries.”

Most kingdom residents knew the Nation of Darkness had butchered their armies on the Katze Plain. No one who lived within their borders would dream of provoking a country that terrifying.

As to who this *someone* might be—one country’s name was on everyone’s mind.

Only they fit the bill.

The Nation of Darkness.

If they assumed this had all been arranged by the Nation of Darkness themselves, the facts lined up.

They could have ordered their own caravan to burn or abandon the cargo—or they might have sent out empty wagons to begin with—and then claimed a fictitious robbery had taken place. No other explanation made sense.

“Zanac, I know you’ve had little time, but how much have you investigated?”

“We’ve actually managed to pin down the culprit.”

The ministers looked surprised.

“.....However, that only complicated things. The fact that we identified him so easily gave us pause—perhaps that was the plan all along. We’re hoping to dig into it further if more time can be had.”

“Of course, we must investigate thoroughly. But for now, we need all the information we can get. Tell us what you know—and are certain of.”

“Yes, Father. What we can say at the moment is that the robber is a man named Baron Phillip Didon Rile Mocharath, and he carried out the attack accompanied by residents of his domain.”

“Mocharath?” “Ever heard of him?” “A baron and his peasants?” “Revenge for the war dead?” “Without a thought for the consequences?” “Human emotions can lead to the irrational.”

A stir of mutters ran round the room.

Eventually, the justice minister took the lead, looking extremely displeased.

“Your Majesty, this *must* be a Nation of Darkness scheme. I cannot imagine a kingdom noble would voluntarily be involved with something like this.”

“True. The Nation of Darkness has no qualms about using Charm Person in their courts. It stands to reason they’d do the unthinkable and use it against their enemies. Perhaps they ensorcelled this baron and forced him to act.”

Several voices agreed with this theory. But the next suggestion left Zanac cursing his inadequacies.

“Then we must secure this baron’s personage at once. I’m no expert, but I believe once Charm Person is lifted, they still remember what they did under the spell’s influence. They may intend to silence him even as we speak.”

Zanac had no such knowledge of magic. What a basic blunder.

“Have that baron brought here at once. Ensure his safety and get to the bottom of this.”

“—Father,” Zanac started, reluctant to speak but unable to leave it unsaid. “Once the

truth is uncovered, this baron's head may ease negotiations with the Nation of Darkness."

"What are you implying?" His father's gaze was like daggers. Even this dried-up husk of a man had not been sitting idly on the throne all this time. Zanac had to applaud the intensity he could still muster.

He did not imagine he would ever manage to project this much gravitas. But he could ill afford to back down now.

Even if this *was* the Nation of Darkness's plot, there was no value in fighting on their opponent's terms. As long as they were bickering about whether this was a scheme or not, the risk of war would always be looming. It was far better to simply turn over the culprit's head and attempt to settle the matter peacefully.

After the show of force in that war, it would be the height of folly to fight this foe head-on. If they did, the feudal lords who'd seen that tragedy firsthand would refuse to supply them with any troops.

And if they did, it would be because the threat was at their gates.

"Father, I do not believe we should fight the Nation of Darkness."

"And for that, you would sacrifice an innocent nobleman? Are these the words of the next king, my son? Think before you speak."

Zanac licked his lips before venturing to say, "Call me what you will, my answer is the same. When countless lives are on the line, we must choose the lesser of two evils."

"Then each time the Nation of Darkness schemes and plots, must we offer them another man's head? You realize the implications?"

"I do. And unlike me, you witnessed the Katze Plain tragedy with your own eyes. Do you intend to take us on a path that will lead back to war even so?"

His father let out a grunt, pursing his lips.

"I'm against that," Zanac insisted. "I believe we have no choice but to do everything in our power to avoid war with such an enemy. Even at the cost of an innocent noble's life."

Perhaps he was disgracing himself, proving himself unfit for the throne. Perhaps they would claim him spineless, and he'd lose the confidence of the ministers. But Zanac firmly believed this was the only path to survival that his kingdom had.

"...Your Majesty, I agree with His Highness," said the domestic affairs minister before taking it one step further. "Like yourself, Your Majesty, I want nothing more than to protect our citizens. Perhaps we should consider... becoming a client state."

This provoked an outcry. "Madness!" "Have you no pride?" But the minister himself paid them no heed, keeping his gaze locked on the king's eyes.

It was a statement that could easily invite accusations of treason, yet Ramposa III merely laughed.

"That we can never do," he said. "It would betray all those who believed in the kingdom and died in its name. How would we face them? I'm grateful for the suggestion, Count, but I'm afraid I cannot agree."

"Your will is my command."

To Zanac's eyes, far more passed between them than the content of their words.

Would he ever have a man that loyal?

His father was a benevolent man but little more than that. Yet, perhaps that was *why* he'd been blessed with good counsel. He had a knack for gathering those better than himself. Gazef Stronoff, the captain of the Royal Select, had been a prime example.

Zanac had long believed he would be a better king than his elder brother. Barbro would have ruled at the behest of the Eight Fingers and the noble faction. There was no future where that would have ended well. That was why he'd worked closely with Marquis Raeven, preparing to take the crown or at least obtain power second only to the throne.

But what did he have now? Neither his sister's wisdom nor his father's magnetism. He was no longer sure his reign would bring about any lasting change.

To do so, he would have to transform himself. However, at his age, there was little chance that he could remake his personality nor did he plan to. He would be the man he was until he died.

“—Military Affairs. For our reference, is it even remotely possible to win a war against the Nation of Darkness?”

“Would we be allying ourselves with anyone else or fighting all on our lonesome?”

Zanac, Ramposa III, and the foreign affairs minister exchanged glances. The prince spoke for them all.

“Negotiations with the council state are not going well. To begin with, we only approached them after that war, so there was little hope of securing an alliance on favorable terms. If they learn our relations with the Nation of Darkness are souring, odds are they’ll leave the table for good.”

“I see. Then, Your Highness, I’m afraid we must begin by defining what we mean by victory. Clash once and drive them back? Or must we kill or humble the King of Darkness himself? If the latter is required, I have no clue where we would even begin.”

“Minister, let’s take that off the table and assume we simply need to make them withdraw.”

“In that case...” The military affairs minister paused to consider the question. “First, we would need a considerable amount of luck on our side. For instance, while the Nation of Darkness is advancing on the capital, if we could skirt their forces and seize E-Rantel behind them, perhaps the outcome would change.”

“But that would require overcoming the three concentric walls.”

“Yes, Your Highness. And moving forces capable of doing so past the Nation of Darkness’s scouts undetected... would be impossible without fortune’s favor. Naturally, even if we somehow managed that, if the King of Darkness and his horrifying magic remain in E-Rantel, the entire ploy will be for naught.”

Essentially, he was saying there was no path to victory without absurd luck. Was his father getting that?

“And if the Nation of Darkness chooses not to formally declare war, we’re doomed. A surprise invasion will not give us nearly enough time to muster our forces.”

Formal declarations were an international convention but little more than a gentlemen’s agreement. Essentially just... good manners between states.

Formal declarations of war simply demonstrated that a country valued these niceties. Failing to do so would incur the scorn of upstanding states and place the perpetrator at a diplomatic disadvantage in the future.

When racial differences were involved, these conventions were often abandoned entirely. Yet, even between countries of different races, the weight placed on history or connections to neighbors could prove an influential factor in politics.

Would a land ruled by an undead king care about such things? Would a being who despised the living on principle worry about declaring war?

“Father, as I suspected, we stand little chance of victory if it comes to war. We should do all we can to minimize the sacrifices we must make.”

“Sacrifices...”

“Yes, Father. Let us summon this baron and interrogate him. Regardless of the result, we’ll pin the blame on his shoulders and offer up his head.”

“No, Zanac. You may bring him in for questioning. But if he is innocent or caught up in circumstances beyond his control, we must not debase ourselves. I have another idea.”

“You... do? May I ask what?”

His father said nothing and merely shook his head.

Zanac took that to mean he had no plan at all. Why else would he not share it? The fact that he stayed silent at this juncture had to mean he could not explain the value in preserving this baron’s life and was simply trying to cover that up.

Disappointed, Zanac considered his next move.

*All signs point to a dim future for the kingdom. I may have to take drastic action.*

At the very least, they had to blame the baron.

While the odds might be low, there was still a chance this noble actually *was* responsible. And if that proved to be the case, all their problems went away.

He couldn’t think of a good way to *frame* him, though. Kill him on his way to the capital

and insist he was to blame afterward? That might force his father to go along with his plan.

*Otherwise...*

He'd just have to force his way past his father's objections. When he first heard the news, he'd thought that might be in the cards. He'd considered how he should play it and had his answer.

Usurping the crown was a grave crime.

He had been so close to gaining the throne legitimately. There was no end of downsides to this approach. The one upside was that he would be able to steer them through this current crisis.

Taking the throne by force was the act of a rash fool, but if he didn't, what future did the kingdom have?

He at least needed to get the present ministers on his side. To do so, he'd have to ask his sister to loan him that man—Brain Unglaus. With that man by his side, he had nothing to fear if it came down to force of arms.

*Argh, how infuriating. Why do I have to plot like this? If only it weren't for the Nation of Darkness and that ludicrously powerful undead!*

If the Nation of Darkness hadn't shown up and thrown in with the Empire during that war, his brother would most likely be first in line for the throne, but the kingdom also wouldn't be dangling on a precipice like this.

Zanac swore silently.

Then there was a knock at the door.

His heart sank.

The only reason to interrupt an important meeting was an emergency, and the knock sounded suitably urgent.

Any news like that was likely—*definitely* bad. He braced himself.

Speaking for the group, Zanac gave permission to enter, and a knight came rushing in.

"Herald from the Nation of Darkness! Prime Minister Albedo will reach the capital in little more than an hour!"

On her last visit, she'd been announced as the captain of the floor guardians, a rather confusing title. This time she was coming in a more familiar capacity. But if she was coming, his hunch was right.

*Or worse.*

This wasn't just bad news. It was the *worst* news.

*But what brings her here?*

The envoy who'd brought the official, seal-covered missive was not present in the palace itself. They would have preferred to put them up in one of the palace wings, but they were undead, and nobody had that kind of courage. They'd wound up housing them in a home within the noble quarters.

To ensure the envoy's safety, they had guards placed around their quarters. Not even a slime could slip past them. But that envoy had made no attempt to contact the Nation of Darkness.

Had they used some magical means? Or had this visit been planned whether the envoy returned or not?

And dispatching a herald not from the border but as she neared the capital itself was very unorthodox. What was their goal?

*At the very least, this is unlikely to be an immediate declaration of war.*

Once hostilities formally began, anything could happen. Even the Nation of Darkness would not risk sending someone so high-ranking deep into enemy territory.

Perhaps they were optimistic enough to assume the kingdom would not harm an envoy, but this Albedo had not struck him as someone who moved without carefully considering the risks involved.

"We shall meet her," the king said. "Prepare the throne room."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" The knight went running out.

Foreign dignitaries were not normally granted an audience on the day of their arrival. But with tensions running so high, they could not risk making the Nation of Darkness's prime minister wait.

"Gentlemen, if you could make haste and change into your best attire," the king suggested.

All ministers, Zanac included, bowed their heads.

•

Out of the various throne rooms, the one used to welcome envoys was not especially large, but it still took quite some time to prepare it for a reception. By leisurely guiding Prime Minister Albedo to it—not quite to the point of deliberately stalling—they managed to buy enough time to prepare the chamber and for the ministers to change into their formal ceremonial garb.

The smell of fresh-cut flowers filled the room.

Zanac found it rather pungent, but when he'd said as much, Renner had accused him of having a stuffy nose.

Everyone here was wearing perfume, so what need was there for flowers? Still, even he had to admit there was a beauty to using them as decoration. He just would have preferred if they were not real. The only thing stopping that was precedent. After all, an envoy greeted with fake flowers might take that the wrong way and assume they weren't welcome.

Each race had different standards of etiquette, and the same action could provoke wildly different responses. The council state was home to many nonhuman races, and Zanac found himself wondering how they handled such issues.

These musings were prompted by the sight of the horns and wings on the Nation of Darkness's prime minister as she made her entrance.

She had an unearthly beauty to her, like a veil of darkness. It had not faded one whit in the time since their last meeting. This alone was enough to make one inclined to forget she represented their mortal enemies. He had no idea if she was spoken for, but

her beauty was the kind that men would eagerly fight over.

That was his impression of Albedo, the Nation of Darkness's prime minister.

He heard gasps go up around the room. He could tell these were accompanied by looks of rapt admiration.

Beauty that could capture the hearts of a crowd in an instant. She smiled like a devoted mother, an expression far more captivating than any a mere human could muster.

Zanac's sister was herself beautiful, but he was certain Albedo outclassed her.

But her dress was another matter.

She wore a dark-pink gown—perfect for a ball but hardly fit for this occasion.

Clearly, she had not worn this on accident. The choice was intentional. But what signal did it send?

Zanac had no clue what significance women's gowns carried. Perhaps his sister read volumes into it, but she was far removed from the typical court lady. He liked that about her—that distinct lack of interest in fancy dress meant she was highly affordable.

He stole a glance at Renner.

She had changed from her usual dress to a ceremonial one. He was fairly certain it was the same one she'd worn on Albedo's prior visit.

He felt an urge to scold her for it. What would people *think*? But it was still a better choice than Albedo's.

Judging by the faces of the ministers around Renner, several of them were well aware she was wearing the exact same dress and found it embarrassing.

"It has been far too long, Lady Albedo," Ramposa intoned.

Many a nobleman started at the sound of his voice, tearing their eyes away from the prime minister's beauty.

"I entirely agree, Your Majesty."

A voice as beautiful as the woman herself. She kept her back bolt upright and her head perfectly still; her voice was soft, but her demeanor made it clear she would never deign to bow her head to a mere human.

“I’m glad to find you well.”

“Likewise, Your Majesty.”

The way each smiled looked positively cordial.

“We have little time, so let’s get down to business. May I ask what brings you here today?”

“Certainly. I’m here to discuss the matter of the provisions dispatched from our country, intended as aid for the Sacred Kingdom, that were stolen by a subject of your realm.”

That was not a topic discussed with a pleasant smile, yet her expression remained entirely unchanged.

In response, Zanac’s father rose from the throne.

“A matter that concerns us all. First, allow me to apologize on behalf of my subject.”

The king bowed low. Regal recognition of her complaint. As negotiation tactics went, this was less than ideal. In the cutthroat world of state diplomacy, there was no benefit to ever admitting fault.

And a royal apology was especially dangerous. This was an admission that the entire country was to blame.

Now they would need to agree to any demands the Nation of Darkness made. Worse—

*Perhaps this would help avoid outright war. But if the Nation of Darkness demands this baron’s head, will he give it up?*

Given his father’s earlier speech, he highly doubted that. And if he rejected the Nation of Darkness’s request after this—well, then Zanac should have apologized in his father’s stead. There was a big difference between the words of a king and those of a prince.

But before he could consider the matter further, the king spoke again.

"Will my head be enough to forgive this matter?"

The entire room froze.

When the surprise faded, Zanac was utterly mortified.

This was clearly his father's plan all along.

For an incident of this scale, an official apology and the head of the king would *have* to be enough to settle the matter. Anyone demanding more than that would only invite ridicule.

And his father did not hesitate to offer up his life. Not because he yearned for death but because a king's life was always subject to the needs of his kingdom.

His father was a true king.

Zanac had seen only weakness. He had failed to see the true measure of his father.

"Naturally, the kingdom will replace the lost provisions twice over. Will you accept my head, Lady Albedo?"

"Hmm." Albedo's smile broadened. A beautiful smile yet nonetheless uncanny. "Heh-heh-heh. Well, that's not... quite what we expected, Ramposa III."

It seemed like her eyes flitted over to his sister.

"Because you lost your confidant? Or perhaps..." Her gaze turned to Zanac. "Because you recognize your children's talent? Is that what changed you?"

"I don't believe I've changed..."

"You have. This is not a choice you would have made before. Perhaps it was all those reasons together. But your core has not really changed at all, has it? No matter. My answer remains the same."

This shift in Albedo's manner had been so sudden it took him a moment to realize she had dropped all pretense of honoring a king. Yet, somehow, for the first time, it felt like

he was seeing reality. As if the pretense that they were a king and a prime minister had always been a lie.

One was human, the other a demon.

This was how they should interact.

Perhaps that was the cause. Albedo had a palpable *something* to her, one that brooked no protests.

This passed in time. The demon put her mask back on and became a mere envoy once more.

Albedo scanned the row of ministers and raised her voice slightly.

“The Nation of Darkness declares war on your kingdom. Our troops will move out at noon one month from today! But maybe you can forestall that if your armies can reach E-Rantel or push deeper into our lands before then.”

“Wait!”

“I will not. I have done all I came to do. And so, Your Majesty—”

“All your schemes were to bring this to pass?!?” a minister roared.

Albedo’s eyes narrowed. Was that anger?

“My words are the words of the King of Darkness. You dare interrupt them, human? Are you so eager for death you cannot even wait a month?”

The minister in question was turning visibly pale. Albedo had not raised her voice or even taken a step toward him. This was a man who would not have blanched even in the face of a threat from a feudal lord backed by an army, yet a single glare from a beautiful woman had transformed him.

She sighed. “Let me finish relaying my king’s words. He has no intention of using any magic on the same scale as the previous war. Let’s all try to *enjoy* this one. That is all.”

At this point, a look of confusion crossed her brow.

"I'm not sure what schemes you refer to. Honestly, this entire affair caught us off guard. I would also very much like to know how we found ourselves at this impasse."

Her voice and expression seemed so genuine, he could not detect even the hint of a lie. Though Zanac knew full well this might all be part of the performance.

"...If you wish to conclude that we have manipulated you into this position, feel free to do so. History is written by the victors, after all. We need merely crush your accusations beneath our feet."

The Nation of Darkness's stance was clear.

The very notion of avoiding war had never once been feasible.

The Nation of Darkness's goal was not to start a battle and claim a few parcels of land. They intended to shatter the kingdom and leave nothing behind. There was no backing out of this. A month from now, the armies of the undead would be upon them.

"No need to see me out. I shall take up no more of your valuable time."

As if there was nothing more to be said, Albedo turned on her heel and swept out of the room.

Was there any benefit to just... letting her leave?

Killing their prime minister would at least disrupt the Nation of Darkness's affairs, perhaps delaying the start of the war.

But she moved with such confidence that none dared make a move.

While Zanac hesitated, Albedo reached the doors and was gone.

As they closed behind her, Zanac turned to his father.

"What now? Do we give chase, or...?"

"There's no point. If we stoop to killing an envoy, the blame will be inarguably ours. No country in the world would aid us."

His father was rubbing his temples, his voice suddenly weak. He seemed to have

noticeably aged over the last few minutes.

"Your Majesty, we should at least send word to all other countries, informing them that you attempted to offer your head as apology."

"...Mm, please do so, Minister. If the worst comes to pass..."

"Let us not discuss *that*. We need merely focus on beating back the Nation of Darkness's armies."

"Mm, mm. Quite right."

His father brightened visibly at this. But the smile was rather forlorn.

"Zanac, Renner, we must talk. Join me in my chambers. Gentlemen, I do apologize, but we must gather again an hour from now and discuss plans for next month."

The ministers bowed their heads.

The grand chamberlain led his father out. Zanac joined Renner, and they left together.

Her guards, Brain and Climb, were standing by outside, but she told them to wait in her room and left them behind.

They moved down the hall together.

"Well, Sister, what do you imagine our father wishes to speak to us about?"

"I imagine you know just as well as I do."

"Yes. He wishes to share the delicacies Lady Albedo brought with her!"

"Exactly! How right you are. I can't imagine anything else!"

He narrowed his eyes as he regarded her, and she didn't bat an eye. She never did.

"What will you do?"

"Hmm."

She put a finger to her chin, head tilting just so. Zanac sighed heavily.

"Acting all adorable does you no good with me," he said. "Save that for Climb. He's still easily deceived."

"How rude, Brother! I'll definitely be doing that later. I have no intention of running, but... will you?"

"I wish I could. But that's not an option, is it? The Nation of Darkness will just chase me down."

"That applies to me as well, you know."

Fine talk for a woman who'd conspired with him all for the love of a commoner. He'd half expected her to cling to life and make ready to quit the palace on the morrow. Perhaps knowing there was no escaping the Nation of Darkness had convinced her to abandon such hopes.

He glanced sideways but could read no emotions on her face.

They reached their father's chambers, and his first words were precisely what they'd expected.

"Zanac, Renner, you must flee these lands. You are a prince and a princess. As long as you two live so does this kingdom."

They glanced at each other and answered as one.

They would not.

Their father looked pleased yet also unspeakably sad.

"Very well," he said. "But there is still time. Let me know if you change your minds."

Zanac did not think he would, but... emotions were unpredictable.

He gave his father a nod.

At his side, Renner did the same.

When Brain got home, the children came running over.

“Pops, welcome home!”

“Pops! Pops!”

A crowd of ten kids flocked around him. Nine boys and one girl. They’d all been orphans once. He’d taken home anyone who showed potential and was teaching them how to use a sword.

They’d been through enough bad times to know the value of violence and devoted themselves to practicing day in and day out. But they were still hatchlings, none of them anywhere close to where Brain wanted them. If they kept training, they would probably manage to reach Climb’s level before long.

They all reeked of sweat. He didn’t mind. Training left him the same, and he saw it as proof of the work they’d put in.

“All right, you rascals. Everyone finished with sword practice?”

“On break—”

“We’re so—”

“Our arms—”

They were all talking at once, and it was difficult to tell what any of them was saying. He gathered they had finished practice for the day.

“Then give me some space and sit your butts down. Rest is part of practice, remember?”

That drew a chorus of *yeahs*.

“I’ll train you myself in a bit. And I don’t wanna hear that you’re too tired!”

Another round of *okays*.

"Good! Make sure you hydrate. And with that sweat, you'll need salt!"

Some of the kids were exasperatedly grumbling, "We know, Pops—give it a rest," but the others were happily following his advice.

"Then get outta here. Oh, where are—?"

Before he could finish, the eldest boy said, "Backyard."

Brain nodded and left the pack, making his way there.

The kids ran on inside. The elderly couple would have drinks and food ready, and the kids would probably fall asleep right after.

Exercise, food, and sleep—that was the best way to build a strong body.

Brain looked pleased. As he reached the backyard, a woman's voice called out.

"There you are."

"Sorry," he said. "Was with the princess, making the rounds to see the nobles and merchants. Work ran pretty late."

There was a man with the woman. The two of them had been training the children.

She had her hair up in a topknot. A southern hairstyle apparently.

Her features were even but with a sharpness that evoked cold steel more than it did beauty. She was not especially tall, just under average compared to her peers.

Her companion was a taciturn man.

He never smiled and always looked to be in a bad mood, but he was not—he had a hand up, greeting Brain.

This man simply wasn't comfortable speaking. Brain had heard his voice only a few times, each so quiet it could be mistaken for an insect's buzz.

He was not simply short; his *legs* were short—especially compared to the rest of his burly build. It was no surprise people assumed he had dwarf blood in him.

Both were among the six great disciples trained by a swordsman named Vesture Kloff Di Laufen.

Brain personally had some reservations about their approach to training. He preferred real combat experience to hours on the exercise grounds. If you had time to practice a few hundred swings, you were better off actually fighting, even with a wooden sword. Once a fighter reached a baseline physique, nothing mattered more than actual experience.

But the disciples claimed that cultivating fighting techniques and building strong foundations made it far less likely for trainees to die once they got in a real fight.

Maybe neither of them was objectively right.

Their respective approaches to strength reflected the lives they'd led.

And Brain didn't want these kids dying before they had a chance to bloom, so he let the disciples do their thing and gave them chances to put that experience to use. That did make the kids' training one notch harder.

"You found a place for the kids?"

"Yeah, at long last. Putting them on a caravan bound northwest to a city near the council state."

The woman frowned.

"Two weeks till the war begins. We've heard no word of military movements in the Nation of Darkness. Rumor has it they're just making threats to force the kingdom into giving up concessions and have no intention of actually fighting. If that's true, what you're doing is a waste, Unglaus."

"That ain't how the Nation of Darkness operates."

If he hadn't seen their king with his own eyes, maybe he'd have bought the story about saber-rattling. But he'd participated in that nightmarish war and had his own thoughts on what the King of Darkness was really after. Perhaps all this was just an excuse to use that spell again.

She must have picked up on his nerves because she lowered her voice, asking, "I heard

you came face-to-face with their king?"

"Not only that, I stood there watching him duel Gazef. Still got no clue what happened or how Gazef lost."

Her eyes glanced at his hip.

There, he carried Razor Edge, one of the kingdom's treasures.

It had come into his possession during the chaotic preparation for the impending war, and that fact weighed heavily on him. In his mind, he was merely taking care of it and had no intention of ever drawing the blade.

He would have loved to find someone more deserving of it, but Brain also wasn't about to give it to anyone who wasn't Gazef Stronoff's equal.

"A duel with Stronoff himself. I'd—"

She choked back those words.

It was most likely because she had been about to say she wished she had gotten a chance to see the fight herself. Brain didn't blame her. Any warrior would want to see Gazef in action.

Hell, he almost wished she *had* been there. Like he'd said, he had no clue what had actually happened. If there was someone around who could explain it, he'd love to hear from them.

"I'm dead sure the King of Darkness is up to something. I just dunno what. I'll admit this feeling isn't based on much. My instincts are just screaming that something bad is coming. And I trust them."

"The instincts of a warrior like yourself should not easily be dismissed."

"I dunno about *that*, but either way, I'm getting these kids outta here. Even if I die, the sword skill I taught—well, it ain't *that* grand or nothing, but at least it'll live on."

"...Our master said much the same thing, Unglaus. He believed the forces of darkness are making moves behind the scenes, and when the children leave"—her eyes turned to her silent partner—"would you allow him to accompany them?"

"Hmm? Really?"

He glanced at the man and got a nod in return. He looked dead set against the idea but probably wasn't.

This fellow was actually surprisingly good with the kids.

All six of the disciples had spent time here, but he was the one the kids liked best.

"Yes. Our master said that even if worse comes to worst, as long as he still lives, our swordcraft will survive."

Exactly what Brain had been thinking.

He had to agree, then.

"If you're down, so count me in. I should be thanking you, really. I'll pass word on to the merchants."

A very tiny voice whispered, "Please." Probably.

Brain raised a hand in acknowledgment, and the man bowed low.

"All righty, then. Once the kids have napped a bit, I'll train with 'em a spell. Thanks for teaching 'em while I was out."

That gratitude was heartfelt. They were looking after these kids for a pittance.

Those warm feelings didn't extend to their master, Vesture. The moment he'd realized how strong Brain was, he wasted no time introducing his disciples, but that was clearly just an attempt to win him over. Brain had easily taken all the disciples down—but when they heard he'd found potential in some kids, they'd looked interested. Seeing the value in teaching orphans skills that would help them make their way through life, they'd voluntarily stepped up to help.

Since he'd started acting like the princess's guard, Brain had met his share of scummy aristocrats, and that only made the disciples' strength of character shine all the brighter.

"Unglaus, your kindness humbles us all. Taking in these children and teaching them

how to fight, how to fend for themselves..."

Brain winced.

This wasn't anything that deserved such admiring eyes.

"Spare me the compliments. I ain't a good guy. Sure, I picked these kids up from the slums. But I did so with a goal in mind. I saw a lot of little ones, but I didn't say shit to the ones with no talent. Some of 'em looked ready to die, but I just walked right on by. Save the praise for those doing actual good deeds—like that princess."

He caught a strange gleam in the woman's eyes but had no clue what emotion provoked it.

"Princess Renner? I've heard about the orphanage she's funding. What she's doing is commendable. But, Unglaus, no one else is doing what *you* are, and I think you deserve your share of praise."

"We're gonna hafta agree to disagree. You're free to think what you like, but don't let me hear it. It just fans the flames of guilt."

"That is a shame."

"Don't worry about it—I'm kidding. I'm way too far gone to even know what guilt is."

She didn't look convinced, but Brain tore his eyes away and stared up at his home—which had once been Gazef's.

His mind was on the kids eating dinner or already fast asleep in bed.

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A room on the Great Tomb of Nazarick's ninth level, a month into the war.

Ainz and the floor guardians were gathered in a spare room that had originally been prepared back in the day in case they needed more space for additional guild members. Sitting at tables arranged along three sides of a square, everyone was poring over the meeting documents.

The floor guardians were not the only occupants. There was a regular maid behind

each of them. Pestonia stood behind Ainz. They were here to take care of odd jobs and didn't speak a word.

Ainz was not clear why they remained absolutely silent but gathered it was supposed to signify they were only here to serve. Respecting their wishes, he was steadfastly ignoring them.

"Hmm..." Ainz was diligently reading some documents. Having Pestonia standing behind him was a bit distracting, but he was doing his best to focus.

They were going to be discussing these momentarily. He was worried he might be the only one who would embarrass himself.

But these documents weren't like the incomprehensible political, economic, and legal briefs Albedo often had him review; this was actually material he could follow.

Ainz had a mind that was thoroughly average, and that was being generous. It was a mistake to expect him to shine in politics. But that didn't make him lazy. He was decidedly the studious type, always ready to apply himself to a task. And since he stood at the head of Nazarick and all the NPCs mistakenly believed him far more brilliant than them, he could not exactly afford to slack off.

At first, he'd believed he was trying to maintain their loyalty, but now it felt more like a father desperately trying not to disappoint his children.

That's why he was reading self-help and business books. And giving it his best effort to improve his combat techniques, which were as close to a forte as he had.

It would be far safer to just dump everything on Albedo's lap, but his followers were constantly seeking Ainz's opinion. Nearly every time, he said something stupid, and they'd act on it because *Lord Ainz said so*. This could be leading to some incalculable losses. And the only solution he could think of was simply to better himself.

And that was why he was reading these documents with genuine interest and commitment.

When he was done, he checked that an appropriate time had passed and spoke.

"Well, guardians. Is everyone finished?"

"Yes, Lord Ainz," Albedo said, her eyes quickly scanning the room.

"Very good. Then—oh, first, we began the war with the kingdom a month ago, but it seems they have not yet noticed our invasion. They seem to believe we're holed up in E-Rantel twiddling our thumbs. Well done, Demiurge. Your success in preventing leaks is a testament to your skill."

"Thank you."

"On a related note, threatening specific kingdom nobility and turning them to our side was a masterstroke on Albedo's part."

"Thank you, Lord Ainz."

Both of them bowed their heads low.

"Mm, this matter is of the utmost importance. We'll have to discuss it in more detail later," Ainz said, tapping a page nestled between several documents. When they agreed, he gave them his most regal nod and turned to the rest of the guardians. The maids were all looking at him, too, every bit as serious, but with some effort, he managed to put that out of his mind.

"With that, let's begin the exchange of views. First, I am deeply satisfied that we were able to conquer cities with this approach. Cocytus, well done."

"THANK YOU. HOWEVER, THIS SUCCESS IS ALL DUE TO THE UNDEAD TROOPS YOU PROVIDED, LORD AINZ. THIS VICTORY IS YOURS, AND I CAN SAFELY CLAIM TO HAVE DONE LITTLE TO NOTHING MYSELF!"

"Cocytus is right—," Albedo began, but Ainz raised a hand, stopping her.

"—I require no flattery. Cocytus, accept praise when it is offered. The work you've done deserves it—as I said."

"YES, LORD AINZ! THANK YOU!"

"Very good. Now, so far we have taken several kingdom cities without incident."

When the Ainz Ooal Gown Nation of Darkness declared war on the kingdom, they had invaded the eastern border territories and then moved steadily north. The capital lay

to the west, and they had made no moves in that direction.

The primary purpose of this approach was to prevent other countries from dispatching military assistance—at least, until they had full control of the border with the council state and could hold on to it.

That had been Cocytus's strategy and one Ainz heartily approved of.

"That itself is a magnificent achievement. Demiurge, Albedo, about the information control. The document says odds are high this will continue to go well, but what potential failures have you foreseen? Demiurge, you may speak."

"Yes, my lord! We have more than enough eyes on the roads and have taken the further precaution of sending shadow demons to neighboring towns. However, if there are hermits or druids who have left civilization behind and live in isolation deep in the wilderness, it is difficult for our surveillance to catch them, so there is a chance information might leak that way."

"Then work with Albedo to strengthen our surveillance network until we can reliably detect these individuals."

"Yes, sir."

"Next." Ainz paged through the document. And kept paging. "Hmm... we've destroyed... quite a lot of cities..."

These pages were all about what strategies had been employed to completely annihilate certain cities. The most recent city had been demolished by Cocytus himself.

"Despite the challenge posed by attacking with such small numbers, Cocytus demolished the city and killed all inhabitants successfully. I see each of you is employing all your talent and intellect on this campaign, taking out cities and towns with ease. I am very impressed."

The Nation of Darkness was taking a particularly vicious approach, wiping out whole settlements, sparing no one. They advanced in silence, leaving only abandoned ruins and heaps of rubble in their wake.

Ainz could already imagine the kind of glare this was earning him from the person standing behind him, and that left him extremely uncomfortable.

They were not taking such a vicious approach for pleasure but with a specific purpose in mind. He rather hoped Pestonia understood that, at least.

"Thank you, Lord Ainz," Albedo said, bowing her head. Each guardian followed suit.  
"We will continue to work body and soul to fulfill your expectations."

"Uh, mm-hmm. I appreciate your resolve and loyalty. Now, then..."

The time had finally come.

Ainz cleared his throat and continued.

"But the absence of any failures concerns me," he said. Before anyone could look puzzled, he added, "Cocytus, you tasted defeat with the lizardmen, and I believe you learned much from the experience."

**"AS YOU SAY. THE LESSONS I LEARNED STAY WITH ME TO THIS DAY."**

"Excellent. We can all learn much from failure. I believe there are things we can *only* learn from it."

He certainly had in *Yggdrasil*. Losing had forced him to *think*.

Reworking his build, loadout, and strategy. Yet, when he just *won*, he had been convinced he was on the right path and made no effort to improve.

*That never stopped Touch Me, though.*

Barely ever tasting the bitterness of defeat, Touch Me had only grown stronger and stronger, driven by an insatiable greed for class combination efficiency. But that was not a feat any ordinary man could imitate.

But exceptions proved the rule, and Ainz was certain there were many things that could only be learned from defeat.

He wanted a city conquest to fail.

Defeat did not matter here. They could always fix that later. But somewhere, sometime, and somehow, there would be a fight where failure would mean the end of everything. And to avoid a loss then, they needed more experience with it now.

They were taking the lives of others. In which case, it had to be for the benefit of Nazarick. They needed to put those deaths to the best use possible.

And Ainz had received a plea from a pair of minions that led to him casting his die here.

*This is the tricky part.*

“Wise men...” No further words came to mind. He’d totally forgotten the rest. He had to cover hastily. “...may have no need, but fools learn from their own mistakes. I would never mistake you for fools, but experience teaches us all.”

Ainz was disappointed in himself.

Why couldn’t he remember something this important? Why was he so bad at this?

People who had a way with words could pivot at the drop of a hat, reciting poignant words they’d heard once on the fly. They never got stuck trying to remember what they meant to say. Why couldn’t he?

The answer was all too clear. His brain just wasn’t up to the task.

“.....*Sigh.....* In any case, our goals here are to destroy kingdom cities and slaughter their inhabitants. That poses no challenge at all to the might of Nazarick. But this is an opportunity to gain some vital experience. Experience that will benefit us in the future when we face a much more challenging threat.”

During guild wars, Ainz often invaded enemy strongholds. He’d taken part in campaigns of conquest. But that was in *Yggdrasil*. He needed to take his game knowledge and learn how to apply those lessons to reality.

In that sense, conquering a variety of cities with a mixture of methods would definitely be of use someday.

The Great Tomb of Nazarick had to become stronger. It was absurd to assume Ainz Ooal Gown was the only guild in this world and Nazarick the only guild stronghold. He was sure there was another player guild out there—or would be one day.

And he needed his people ready for that eventuality.

Experience would be the cornerstone.

Ainz glanced at the rapt, attentive faces of his guardians.

“Currently, the burden I’m placing on each of you is growing. But it is also true that there are few I trust as much as you.”

The floor guardians, with the exception of Victim, were all level 100, every bit as strong as Ainz himself. The others—domain guardians and the like—were much weaker. Taking the domain guardians out into the world, where powerful foes might be lurking, was nerve-racking, and he often gave in and relied on the floor guardians instead.

“But allowing that situation to continue will cause problems. As the holdings of the Ainz Ooal Gown Nation of Darkness continue to grow, we will need to have the domain guardians take on more responsibilities. Perhaps even place them in charge of wars.”

“And for those who lack experience, we must prepare history,” Demiurge said.

Ainz didn’t really get it, but it *sounded* like he was on the right track, which was pretty cool.

“—Yes, exactly, Demiurge.”

He beamed, well aware it might not show because of his face. He was doing his best “magnificent overlord” voice, too.

Generally speaking, listening to recordings of his voice still gave him conniptions, but Ainz no longer dwelled on that. Thinking too hard about how he might sound would likely result in his emotions being forcibly stabilized.

But Demiurge’s “history” idea seemed appealing.

If they drew up a book about the various military stratagems employed in the kingdom invasion and distributed that among the domain guardians and other Nazarick denizens, that would effectively share their learned experience with all of them.

Naturally, seeing was believing, and experiencing things firsthand would be far more beneficial. But there were not many opportunities this enticing.

"Floor guardians, from this point forward I want to see conquest plans we have not used before. Demiurge, Albedo, you two are far too skilled. For now, we'll have you stay silent and simply listen to the others' plans. Personally, from the plans we've used so far, I found Shalltear's particularly interesting."

"Th-the one where I had frost dragons bombard the town?"

"Exactly. You arrived at that idea precisely because you are in charge of freight transport. We could easily use that strategy as a springboard to create a, hmm... I guess it would be an airborne division?"

Rather than use Dragon Breath and fly off, Shalltear's plan had involved dropping soul eaters from five hundred yards up. The soul eaters quickly recovered from the fall, deployed their auras, and then massacred whoever they encountered.

Naturally, a fall from that height would damage the soul eaters. Air resistance did not seem to significantly affect falling speed in this world, so there was no cap on acceleration. Perhaps there was a terminal velocity and they simply had not reached it, but they had not put time and labor into experimenting with the limits of speed, and the details escaped Ainz.

But by deploying their auras and gobbling up souls, the soul eaters healed themselves. That completely made up for any damage caused by the fall.

"You could say that plan *was* a failure, but only in the sense that it showed us where we have room for improvement. Like the ones that hit rooftops."

Having read the report on the outcome, Aura laughed. Ainz was laughing on the inside as well. They were not mocking Shalltear's plan. It was simply an amusing outcome. One of those *yup, that'll happen* things.

Some of the falling soul eaters had struck pointed roofs, bounced in unexpected directions, and taken much more damage than expected. That alone was no real issue. Some had crashed right through the roofs they struck, making very dramatic entrances. But one had gotten itself wedged in tight and took quite some time to free itself.

Of the four roof crashes, only one soul eater was immobilized; an awfully high incidence rate but admittedly drawn from a very small sample size.

"That seems like an experiment worth repeating. We can get some good airborne data, Shalltear."

"Yes, sir!"

"I'll leave that up to you. Experiment with a few more towns."

"Absolutely. I'll start work on a plan and put it into action right away."

The other plans that caught his interest included one where three hundred elder liches had carpet-bombed a city with Fireball and an assault that started with the assassination of the city leaders, causing chaos within.

Records of these varied approaches to conquest would be most educational not only to the domain guardians but also when drawing up plans to fend off potential attacks on Nazarick itself.

Ainz suppressed a sigh.

Perhaps some of his guardians thought he was being too cautious.

If Nazarick was genuinely impenetrable, perhaps there was no need for any of this. But he could not be sure of that.

There was always a weakness.

"Someday, we will have to fight a guild as good as ours," Ainz intoned.

Every guardian acknowledged this.

"And our next siege is not far off," he said, glancing at Albedo.

Ainz had no eyeballs, so his glances often went unnoticed, forcing him to move his head. But Albedo was pretty good about catching these looks of his and was already nodding.

"LORD AINZ, OUR FORCES FOR THIS BATTLE SEEM RATHER LACKING. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THAT?"

Ainz locked up.

This was an obvious question, but no answer came to mind. He'd expected to push right past it. Neither Demiurge nor Albedo had questioned it at all. He'd thought Cocytus and the other floor guardians would do the same.

*Right, Cocytus lost the battle with the lizardmen, and I told him to think for himself!*

And now that was coming back to haunt him. Why had he said anything? No, it was the right move at the time, and he was certain it was a decision that had made Nazarick stronger. That had led directly to Cocytus's own growth.

Why was Ainz sending in forces below the threshold needed for a guaranteed victory? The reason was anything but complex. But it was also not something the floor guardians needed to hear. Doing so might lead directly to the collapse of Nazarick.

Ainz swallowed—not that he had anything to swallow.

The silence was clearly getting too long. He needed to say something, anything. It didn't matter what, just whatever sounded even remotely convincing.

"Come to think of it, when we dropped the town nearby, you deliberately let some people escape this way. Was there a reason for that?"

"Cocytus, Aura—good questions from the both of you. I'm sure several of you were wondering the same things," Ainz said, glancing around the room. Several guardians were nodding. "Aha. Then I suggest you watch this battle carefully. I'll explain after."

He was just buying time. This was future Ainz's problem.

•

E-Naeurl faced the Lind Sea at the north of the kingdom.

The largest city in Count Naeura's domain, E-Naeurl was a bustling port enriched by the sea's bounty.

While it might be *his* largest city, just over the border lay the famous military port, Re-Uroval. That city was far larger, and far more ships graced its harbor; E-Naeurl was only ahead in number of fish caught. From a strategy standpoint, it was far from a vital target.

If anyone was asked about the true value of E-Naeurl, the answer would be culinary. Count Naeura's family had spent decades striving to be the epitome of the kingdom's seafood. They had a marinade with a soy sauce base and a honey top that took skill not to ruin, but the finished product was known as Naeurl Fry.

Even after the war began, the town had remained optimistic—at least, until a few days ago. Fishing boats had gone out and cast their nets; the markets had bustled with those seeking fresh fish. There were less merchants on the road, but life went on.

They had no reason to change a thing.

A messenger from the capital had arrived a month ago, warning of the war with the Nation of Darkness, but they were all the way up north. Why would the Nation of Darkness come here? The capital itself would fall long before the war reached them, and that would surely be the end of that.

There were larger cities in the domains around them, and even in this county, there were a number of towns and villages between them and the Nation of Darkness.

If anything happened, those towns would inevitably send requests for aid. That was why they never bothered to shore up their defenses. They simply prepared to dispatch troops if need ever arose.

That had all changed abruptly.

A baron from a neighboring domain had come rushing into E-Naeurl with a handful of guards and his family in tow.

His reason was simple: "The undead arrived and killed everyone in my domain."

Undead *could* spawn naturally. And if an especially powerful one showed up, there was a chance they could wipe out a town.

But it took a lot of time for an undead that strong to appear. Outside of places like the Katze Plain, it was unlikely weaker undead would be left in place long enough for a threat to spawn.

If a domain was properly managed, it was easy enough to dispatch minor undead before things got out of hand.

Truly menacing undead didn't just appear out of thin air. Generally, there were only two causes.

Either a malicious caster was controlling the undead, or the undead had wandered in from distant lands.

Either explanation pointed to the same person.

Ainz Ooal Gown, the King of Darkness.

The townsfolk knew their countries were at war. If these undead were the hordes of darkness, that made perfect sense. But that begged further questions.

What had happened to the towns around them?

How many undead were there and what kind?

What were the bums in the capital doing?

Count Naeura's head spun when he tried to wrap his head around all these questions, but there were things that had to be done before answers could be sought. Piecing together the details of the baron's story, it was clear these undead were headed to E-Naeurl next.

He sent swift horses to all the nearby villages and towns, ordering them evacuated.

He had no clue what would bring the Nation of Darkness's armies to this remote port. The Nation of Darkness was an inland nation, so perhaps an urgent need for sea access made them target somewhere relatively undefended; perhaps this would simply be a stepping-stone on their way to attacking Re-Uroval.

Either way, bringing refugees into the city was a risk, but very few stood any chance of successfully fleeing to other domains with the Nation of Darkness's armies hot on their heels. In the end, almost everyone wound up behind the slim defenses E-Naeurl offered.

Five days after the evacuations completed, soldiers in the watchtowers on the walls of E-Naeurl spotted the undead approaching.

Three more days passed, and a man stood at the top of one such watchtower at noon.

He was well into his forties. Tanned, well-built, but more like a sailor than a warrior. Very much a salty sea dog.

He had few hairs left at the front or top, but the sides and back displayed vestiges of the luxurious locks he'd once boasted. He did his best to arrange these in a manner that could hide the bare skin up top.

He looked every part a mariner, but the clothes he wore were top tier, proving he was of high birth.

"Damn, that sure is a *lot*."

The way he spoke suggested otherwise. But this ill-mannered ruffian was, in fact, Count Naeura, ruler of this land.

His eyes were locked on a swarm of zombies. They easily doubled the number of forces guarding E-Naeurl. They'd paused their advance to wait for their forces to gather, but fewer and fewer stragglers were catching up; this was probably close to their total. It was safe to assume that battle would soon be upon them.

"Still, they're just zombies," asserted the woman next to him. "Not that big a deal."

The wind played with her white hair.

It was not white from age—she had dyed it that color.

Her hair had originally been the golden hue so typical of kingdom nobility, and until a year before, she had dyed it black.

This wasn't for fashion or style. She was an adventurer, and a striking appearance helped promote her party. Plenty of other adventurers took the same approach—one even famously sported *pink* hair.

And Scarma Herbelot had good reason to change up her dye of choice.

Specifically, the kingdom's adamantite adventurers had added a black team to the existing blue and red. In their business, anyone who said "black" meant Momon. Hardly anyone had even seen Momon's face, so she'd considered sticking with black and benefiting by association, but then she'd heard Momon's partner was a raven-haired beauty and promptly abandoned the idea.

That was why they'd changed their team color from black to white, and she was secretly relieved they'd never added a color to their name. Her crew kept it basic: the Four Armaments.

"They're clearly not natural spawns. I'm seeing a lot of farmer clothes out there, so the Nation of Darkness clearly didn't march 'em all this way, either. They've been hitting villages and turning their victims into undead. Makes me sick," Scarma spat.

There were a few zombies with slightly better gear, usually leather armor or mail. Those had probably been guards once. But the vast majority were just wearing ordinary clothes of simple make.

"They can do that?"

"I dunno about this quantity, but there are spells that create undead, so... probably?"

"Holy," Count Naeura said, clearly impressed.

The total lack of tension in his tone, despite the dire circumstances, would definitely have rubbed some people the wrong way, but Scarma didn't bat an eye.

"So we could rustle up our own undead forces and throw those at 'em?"

"If we had a dozen high-level mages who'd gone out of their way to specialize in necromancy instead of literally any other type of magic, sure. Sadly, we don't."

There was a reason she was so certain.

Count Naeura had called upon every caster in the city—from the guild wizards to temple priests and adventurers or whatever else—to aid in the city's defenses, and they'd all been gathered in one unit.

The vast majority of these casters were adventurers, and since they had the most combat experience, the highest-ranking adventurer team—Scarma's Four Armaments—had been put in charge. That meant she was intimately familiar with what magic their side could cast.

"Oh yeah. So, uh... is this gonna work out? For one hundred twenty years—since the first village was founded here—we've never been besieged. Honestly, I got no clue what I'm doing."

Definitely not what the man in charge was supposed to say.

But once again, Scarma showed no signs of frustration. Nor did her tone show any respect.

"Not really a matter of working out or not, Count. If we don't *make* it work, we'll all wind up worse than dead. Gotta admit that does seem to have everyone pretty motivated."

"It sure does. Man, why did this have to happen on my watch? Another five years and I'd have foisted it off on my oldest!"

"Just rotten luck. But well, that applies to all of us. Why'd this have to happen while we were in town? We would've probably moved on in a month or two—gone somewhere bigger!"

"Oy, d-don't talk like that! Our town needs you!"

"If you're gonna run, better do it now! I mean... look!"

Scarma pointed at a pair of undead at the head of the zombie army.

They were both two heads higher than the average zombie, which was already plenty noteworthy, but they were radiating power in a way that made your very skin crawl. It was clear these were a major threat.

And there was a flag fluttering next to them.

"The Nation of Darkness."

"Yeah... You weren't at the Katze Plain battle?"

"Mm? I gave a trusted aide some troops and sent him, but my family and I weren't directly involved. And no one I sent came back."

"Well... let's hope they're resting peacefully with the gods. That King of Darkness slaughtered two hundred thousand, and he just sent us two *obviously* special undead—you think they're gonna be pushovers?"

"I don't. This is gonna be a nightmare."

"Exactly. They basically decided these two could take this city on their own. That don't piss you off at all?"

"Not really, no. I'm more worried about how to get out of this alive."

Not exactly what you wanted in a leader but also a sign he fully understood the gravity of the situation.

"I'd send a messenger offering to surrender, but I don't think they'll say yes."

"You could always hop on a ship. You've got one ready, yeah?"

Everyone in the meeting earlier had been thinking this and left it unsaid.

The count winced but didn't say a word. Less trying to hide things than decipher what Scarma meant by the question.

The two of them weren't particularly close, but they had worked together several times. She knew he was no fool.

Sadly, the count's son was... passable. Hardly a match for his father. Though there were plenty of people who thought he might surpass that legacy with a bit more experience.

"Hmm, of course? But we don't have enough boats for everyone. We could ferry 'em to a nearby shore with the boats going back and forth, but then how do we eat? Where do we go?"

"You and yours could probably work something out."

He gave that another moment's thought.

"True. But that's a last resort. 'Good people, evacuate to the safety of these walls! While my people get the heck outta here.' That would feel a mite shitty!"

Generally, sacking a city invariably led to the killing of the ruling class or forcing them to obey. The regular populace was usually left mostly unharmed—minus a bit of pillaging—since killing all the inhabitants meant strangling the golden goose.

Unless there was a specific advantage to leveling the city, nobody would let it happen.

However—

“This is the King of Darkness. You heard what that baron and the survivors from my villages said, right? Didn’t give me much hope.”

“You think more oughtta have made it out?”

The count nodded.

Those who ran early had made it here. But it was a fraction of the people who lived in the area. What had happened to anyone who didn’t flee in time? Who got left behind?

Maybe the Nation of Darkness’s rule was so merciful and flawless, nobody even wanted to flee. It was also possible the surveillance was so airtight nobody could leave even if they wanted to. Or perhaps they’d all simply been hauled off to the Nation of Darkness proper. If you were trying to be optimistic, you might go with one of those three choices.

But since a great deal of villagers had clearly been turned into zombies, it was hard to believe the Nation of Darkness was treating anyone *well*.

“He might be ruling E-Rantel all right, but he’s still a monster. Ain’t gonna have much mercy for humans or anything else living.”

“And the goal might be turning their victims, expanding their undead armies. They don’t need supply trains or rest, feel no fear, and obey all orders without question. And who among us has mercy for our enemies?”

“Enemies, sure. But if you were planning on occupying a city and making the people work for you, that wouldn’t make any sense! At this rate, they might seriously be planning on killing every last human in the kingdom. In which case, there ain’t nowhere we can run that’ll be safe.”

Did he want sympathy? Agreement?

Probably both.

She was the top adventurer in town. If she fled, they’d lose their one shot at winning. Good enough reason to suggest escape was not an option.

Scarma was about to say something when a commotion broke out around them.

They hadn't exactly been speaking in private—it had merely been a brief respite, as everyone else was off preparing defenses.

The rest of Scarma's team came running up to her. Like the name suggested, the Four Armaments had four members and was made up of two men and two women. Scarma was the warrior, and they had a thief, priest, and an arcane magic caster. A well-balanced party.

They were followed by the group of mages they'd recruited from all over town.

The total number was less than fifty. But that was a good number of casters for any army.

They'd only hit this number by neatly skirting the guild's unwritten rules against getting involved in wars.

If the Nation of Darkness had brought in human troops, this would never have been possible. But against undead hordes—and ones clearly made from slain civilians—exceptions were made.

They were acting like an undead army just *happened* to be carrying Nation of Darkness flags.

And that facade had worked because everyone knew deep down they couldn't exactly stay out of a fight with someone turning innocents into undead fodder, knocking at their gates.

With this many mages working together, if they all cast something like Magic Arrow (not every caster could use that spell, of course), they could theoretically down a dragon.

Unlike actual arrows, Magic Arrow would hit its target unerringly. Moreover, the number of shots and the power of those shots went up with each tier available to the caster. But the force between each hit wasn't that great, so it was rare for them to lay anything low in one shot.

And the damage done didn't vary by where it hit—which could be seen as an upside or a downside.

The consensus was that the spell was fairly useful, and if a whole army could cast it together, the results would be damned impressive. Yet, historically speaking, no such force had ever existed.

This was because learning even a basic first-tier spell required aptitude, and training to become a caster was extremely time-consuming. A hundred archers could be trained and start making themselves useful in the time it took for a single mage to be ready for battle.

If there was a race of beings out there that naturally acquired Magic Arrow, they could well assemble an intimidating magical host, but otherwise—well, a company of casters was little more than a pipe dream.

Standing behind that pipe dream was a group of the count's soldiers and adventurers who had a knack for bows or other projectile weapons.

Those gathered on the city walls would be the first to take aim at the Nation of Darkness's armies.

Count Naeura turned toward them, yelling, "Well met, good people. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated."

All trace of the frivolous tone he'd used with Scarma was gone; he was projecting the resolute confidence a leader *should* have.

He sounded like a born nobleman, and Scarma was impressed despite herself.

"We take tips!" said the Four Armaments caster, rubbing his fingers together. That got a laugh. The count took his comment in stride, grinning broadly.

"You got it! While everyone's watching, I'll place a purse in your hand so large everyone you know'll be like, 'You're picking up the tab, right?'"

That drew a shudder.

"The same goes for my own men. The purses may not be as large as whatever these adventurers get, but you'll have enough to make your wives and kids worry." Then he winked at them. "I sincerely hope that doesn't go to your heads."

His soldiers had arrived looking very tense indeed, but it seemed their nerves were

somewhat calmer now.

"I'd rather claim a different reward," said a woman so sexy you could almost *smell* it. "Count, your family heirlooms include some magic items, don't they? Your house has history?"

No robe could hope to fully contain those breasts, and the way she dangled the earth god's sigil between them was downright blasphemous.

This was Lilynette Piani, another of Scarma's companions. Absolutely not a courtesan dressing in holy vestments at the behest of a client.

"Oh-ho. After my precious treasures, are you? Bold! That's right. My family has passed a magic item down through the generations. Many have heard the name: the Five-Hue Holy Sword."

This was a long sword inhabited by the powers of flame, lightning, acid, sound, and frost. Striking with it would do damage in each of those five elements.

But this "sword" had no edge, much like a practice weapon. It could only deal blunt damage. No one knew why it had been made this way. And if you were being really nitpicky, you might ask why it was called a holy sword when it didn't do holy damage, but on that point, everyone agreed that some idiot must have changed the name way back when.

"I would love to own that!"

A weapon of that caliber was far too grand a prize for any adventure.

"Would you now? Well, I'd consider it—on one condition." The count waited for the murmur to die down. "Become my son's concubine."

Scarma made a face. The count was making a huge mistake.

Half the adventurers gathered were glaring at him now—all of them people who nursed a flame for Lilynette. As for the woman herself, her eyes looked like a hawk that had found its prey.

Count Naeura decided he'd taken the joke a hair too far and made to offer an apology, but before he could—

"You have four children, Count," Lilynette said. "Your wife bore your eldest boy and your third son. Your concubine, a second son and your eldest girl. I assume she's not on the table, so which one are we talking about?"

Her whole attitude had shifted. Her famous alluring growl had been replaced with the pointed tones of a true adventurer. The real Lilynette.

*She wasn't joking around.*

Scarma's scowl deepened. She glanced at the men in her party for help, but they were busy avoiding her gaze.

*Useless.*

"...My third son."

"Him? He's still *twelve*. His next birthday's not that far off, but still... you want to pair me with *him*?"

The count almost nodded, then stopped short.

"...Yes, but why do you know my sons' ages? Who makes it a priority to know the ages of a regional lord's younger children? Is this a top-tier adventurer practice?"

"Nope." "Definitely not." The other adventurers were all shaking their heads.

Lilynette ignored them, running a hand through her hair.

"Well, fine. I'll do it. You've left me no choice. For the Five-Hue Holy Sword, I'll become that child's concubine."

The count gave her a long, searching look, then turned to Scarma. Like he had a burning question on his mind.

She knew what that question would be. All too well.

"I know it was my idea, but, um... Is she visibly drooling? Has she been after my boy the whole time? Or just my magic item?"

"The first one," Scarma said—but even as the words left her mouth, a mighty roar

drowned them out.

“Fools! There’s no fruit more tantalizing than an unripened one!”

A silence settled over the crowd, and when it sank in just *who* had spoken, many an adventurer sank to the ground. Their illusions had been shattered, leaving only the harsh reality remaining.

Scarma felt nothing but pity for them.

Inside, she was apologizing profusely. But at least the men who’d been after her now knew why she’d never accepted any of their advances.

They were too old.

“...I figured you’d say, *Why a concubine?*” Count Naeura murmured.

“Nay, Father.” Apparently, she was already calling him her in-law. “He may be a third son, but he is of noble birth and the son of your first bride. Pull the right strings, and you should be able to secure him a small domain and a baron’s title. But an adventurer bride would get in the way of that, no matter how talented she was. True, I do have some temple connections that might be attractive, but those wouldn’t be enough. And you know you planned to dangle that over my head if this fight goes well—and take the sword off the table if I looked remotely tempted. The third son’s wife owning the family treasure could only lead to endless infighting.”

“I... clearly underestimated you. If you’d arrived earlier, I could have hitched you to my eldest.”

“Oh, if he’s over fif—seventeen, I wouldn’t be tempted, Father.”

The count was looking hard at Scarma again, but she pointedly ignored him. This seemed to come as a blow. His eyes were begging for pity, but she had none.

“Um. This is important so—you realize my youngest will, in time, reach that age?”

“That *is* a shame. Perhaps I should go for one of those long-lived races? But that would mean only I age—so I’ll make do!”

“Not only are you weirdly proud of that, but it’s also by far the most enthusiastic thing

you've said yet!"

"Come now, Father. You're ruining your carefully cultivated image."

"...And you aren't?!"

Personally, Scarma thought Lilynette had her heart in the right place and knew how to look after people. This kid could definitely do worse for a partner. She was not going to voice her support for this, though.

Letting this go on much longer would only bring shame on her whole team and possibly ruin their reputations. She didn't want her white hair associated with any of *this*.

"Well, Count, laughter can certainly ease the stress of battle, but we do have actual preparations to make. What say you go back to the command tent?"

With no combat skills himself, there was not much he could do here. His talents were needed elsewhere. Her suggestion left Count Naeura nodding vigorously, only too glad to escape Lilynette's clutches.

"Excellent point!" he said. "Brave souls, I leave this post in your capable hands."

•

Seen from the wall, the enemy forces had formed no ranks or files. It was simply an unorganized mass of zombies clumped together. Scarma's team were mythril rank—they could easily deal with this rabble. Were it not for the *real* monsters.

"Looks like they ain't budging. Also, anyone know what kinda undead we're dealing with?"

Scarma pointed at the pair in question.

One carried a giant shield and a giant sword. The other had a sword in each hand.

The casters around her all shook their heads. Scarma looked at Lilynette.

Priests knew more about undead than anyone else. They were familiar with all the usual types and a bunch of ones you would never expect to encounter. But even she

was forced to shrug here.

That left two possibilities.

They were an extremely rare type of undead. Or they were a *new* type—if that was the right phrase for it.

Either possibility was extremely bad news, and if this were an adventure, she'd be seriously considering retreat.

Everyone feared skills that could kill in a single hit, but ordinary attacks could prove just as fatal.

Especially when they had *no* information to go on.

For example, ghouls were a low-ranking undead. But they had claws laced with a paralytic poison—a single scratch could do you in.

If you went up against them unaware of that, the first hit would down a fully grown man—and that could quickly spiral into a party wipe. What would happen if they didn't know wraiths drained life force from their victims? Or that werewolves resisted the attacks of nearly all weapons unless they were made from specific types of metal? There were even some monsters that regenerated indefinitely unless hit with fire or acid.

Knowledge like that was both a weapon and a shield. And that just proved how dangerous it was to fight without it.

“...We could be in real trouble. We'll just have to keep trying till we find something effective. Unless anyone's got a better idea?”

No one suggested anything.

“Right, then. Specialists, time to confer. Work out who's gonna hit 'em with what kinda magic and when. Let's start by discussing what abilities their appearance suggests they might have. At the least, they both look like undead that prefer to go at it in close combat.”

The look of a monster was not often all that deceptive. There certainly were tricksters out there, but Scarma had never seen one.

These might be some new breed created by the Nation of Darkness, but they didn't look like they'd hang out in the rear and sling spells.

"They've clearly got high defense, so closing in is too risky. Theoretically, we're better off trying to down them with ranged attacks—but I bet regular missiles are just gonna bounce off. This fight's gonna boil down to how much damage we can do before they can reach us and force us into close combat. Keep enough strength on hand to cast support spells on the front lines for when they do breach the walls. And keep casting offensive spells even after that."

It would never do to be *too* conservative, either.

"If no one's got anything to add, let's get started."

The casters formed groups, brainstorming ideas.

Scarma moved a few steps back, with two of her party in tow.

"So, leader. What do *we* do?" the thief asked.

"What do you mean?"

He knew the battle was about to start and should've already known what their plan was. He was clearly talking about something *else*.

But the question was far too broad.

"How far do we push ourselves for this city? These zombies haven't exactly got the city surrounded. If we wanna run, we could easily slip away. Stealing a ship ain't the worst idea, is it? I've got some food ready, just like you said."

"Listen, brainiac." Lilynette sighed. "We're up against the undead! They might have troops stationed underwater for all we know."

Since the city was a port, it was bordered on one side by the water—there were no walls on that side. If their enemy had an ounce of intelligence, these troops would be a decoy, and the real forces would be closing in from the waterfront.

"Oh, right. That's, uh... bad. Did you tell the count that?"

"Nope. There ain't a damn thing he could do about it even if he knew. Make barricades? Too much ground to cover. All it would do is plunge the city into chaos. And maybe they haven't surrounded us on purpose. Classic trap. Leave one hole open, and when you run that way—they getcha."

"So what do we do?"

"If we run, we go through them," Scarma said, pointing at the horde. "It's all zombies, so breaking through should be easy enough. Worse comes to worst, we punch a hole in their formation. But before we try that, we'll need to use Fly and make sure there aren't more enemies behind 'em."

"Good idea. You really thought this through."

*No, you just haven't thought enough.*

Both women thought the same thing, but the thief didn't notice.

"So if we do run, how far? The next city? The capital?"

"We leave the kingdom."

"What the hell?"

"Keep your voice down." Scarma quickly glanced around. "But yeah, I mean it."

She couldn't see them leading happy lives under a nation that purposefully turned that many people into undead, enemies or not.

The only question was *where* to run.

A team of adventurers could easily run for the hills, but she was the leader and had to plan for every eventuality.

Since the Nation of Darkness was not an option, that left them with three neighboring countries. The council state, the Sacred Kingdom, and the Empire.

Simple process of elimination suggested the first was their only option. The Sacred Kingdom was friendly with the Nation of Darkness, and the Empire was a vassal state. The council state's proximity was also a plus. If not there, they'd have to aim for the

Theocracy or the city-state alliance. She'd heard unsavory rumors about the Dragon Kingdom, and everywhere else humans were a minority. Admittedly, that was also true in the council state and the city-state alliance.

Given the diminished human population, maybe the council state was a bad choice. She'd heard humans made up less than 10 percent of the citizens there.

Ignoring distance, the city-state alliance might be best. They had cities that were at least half human.

"Uh, are we running, Scarma? For the sake of my future happiness, we should at least try."

"...None of that was an act, huh?"

Scarma was entirely unsure if she wanted to help Lilynette or not on that front. But before she had to choose, the casters finished conferring among themselves.

"Leader, we're ready!"

"Cool! Let's go. Stick to the plan. If it doesn't work... we jump off this wall and kick the zombies out of our way."

Scarma was wearing armor, and a fall from the city walls would normally hurt quite a bit, but her team's caster would take care of that. He could use Falling Control.

The Four Armaments took their post, waiting for the enemy to move.

Fortunately—probably—the enemy didn't wait for night.

The battle began without warning.

No arrows flew, and no messages were exchanged. The horde of zombies simply started shuffling toward the walls. That was certainly one way to do things.

Perhaps ordinary folk would be scared if a shambling corpse approached them. But these were just jokes to adventurers. If they'd had nonhuman zombies mixed in—giants, dragons, and so on—perhaps they'd have been slightly alarmed, but the only adventurers afraid of human zombies hadn't even joined the guild yet. There was no way zombies could ever get through these walls.

Zombies might have more strength, endurance, and durability than the average human, but it didn't take much for an adventurer to outclass them—and zombies had *no* brains at all.

The archers had their bows slung, but everyone else was focused on the real threat.

The pair of powerful undead didn't move. Were they waiting for something? Or just planning to watch?

Eventually, once Scarma was sure the zombies were just inside range—the soldiers let loose a flurry of arrows.

Ordinarily, they'd have waited a bit longer to be sure everything hit. But since these were zombies, quantity mattered more than accuracy.

These soldiers were well trained, and most of them hit their targets even from this range. Maybe two out of ten missed. A very respectable hit rate.

But few zombies went down from a single arrow. Still, each hit was definitely chipping away at their false imitation of life.

A second and third volley went out, and the swarm's numbers started thinning.

Zombie after zombie hit the dirt, but neither adventurers nor soldiers cheered. All this was expected—the routine stage of the battle.

The real threat was the two in back.

A single powerful monster could turn the tide.

“—Incoming!”

The undead with the sword and shield charged forward, running right through the zombie horde and toward the gates. Shield held in front of it, knocking away any zombies in its path.

Bowled over by the sheer speed, Scarma yelled, “Attack!”

Spells came flying from every caster.

The most destructive of these was definitely the Fireball cast by her party's mage.

It hit right at the mysterious undead. Flames billowed out, searing any nearby zombies. Even with a shield preventing a direct hit, the flames reached around and burned everything they touched.

A wide variety of other spells followed, peppering the shield bearer.

Yet, it charged on undaunted, as if it had taken no damage at all. The soldiers shuddered.

"Stand fast!" an adventurer yelled.

Every adventurer knew perfectly well damage didn't give the undead pause. No matter how many wounds they sustained, injuries that would put a living thing on the brink of death wouldn't stop an undead until the last dregs of their false life faded away.

And Fireball might be famous, but it was hardly all-powerful. An adventurer of any decent skill level could take one or two no problem. A strong specimen could endure several hits.

Anyone who actually thought that would be enough to take down the shield bearer had no business being an adventurer.

There was just one problem.

They had no way to tell if it was actually taking damage or not.

That's why Scarma was watching it so closely.

The effects of normal magic couldn't be reduced by evasion, defending, or physical armor. Magic completely ignored armor—or thick hides—because it was pure energy. But some types of monsters had natural resistance against magic or particular elements.

To choose an undead example, the infamously dangerous skeletal dragon completely resisted all magic. Other monsters resisted fire or were even healed by it.

There was no guarantee this undead wasn't one of those special cases.

If magic attacks weren't effective, they'd have to change the whole battle plan.

"Don't worry! It's working!" shouted the mage who'd cast Fireball.

His instincts told him this. Caster after caster chimed in. "It's working!" "It's doing damage!"

"Scarma! Nearly all kinds of magic work on it!"

That was the best news she'd heard all day. Maybe they had a chance after all. Hope welled up within her.

"Got it! All right, then—keep it up!"

Their foe's astonishing speed hadn't decreased even slightly. Ideally, they'd defeat it before it reached the gates. If an undead with no resistances made it through their bombardment, that would just prove how dangerous it really was.

*And I don't want to fight that thing up close!*

As if in agreement, another salvo of spells flew forth.

Scores of zombies died, but the shield bearer kept advancing.

Dozens of spells hit it again and again. Any ordinary undead would have gone down by now.

Cold sweat ran down Scarma's back.

*Tougher than I imagined... This thing's too strong. Do we stand any chance?*

And the shield bearer wasn't their only foe. There was another undead behind it, probably just as bad. She wasn't sure why it hadn't started moving yet...

*Are these the Nation of Darkness's finest? Is that why there's only two? Or do they think two is all it'll take to topple this city?*

A shudder ran down her spine.

What if the Nation of Darkness had intel on the town's adventurers, the Four

Armaments included? What if it had only sent enough forces to beat them? And if those troops weren't the zombie hordes, but this shield bearer...

Desperate for proof her fears were unwarranted, Scarma nearly yelled, *Hurry!* She just barely stopped herself in time.

Everyone was taking this seriously, giving it all they had. She was the top-ranking adventurer here, and it would be shameful to lose her head.

Yelling in a panic wouldn't help anyone.

She bit her lip and said a prayer to the god of fire, but her god did not smile on her today.

The shield bearer reached the gate.

It was out of their sight. Spells couldn't reach it anymore.

Scarma's mind raced through the possibilities. Was it time to jump off these walls and run?

But then her eyes caught the second undead still standing there, and she thought better of it.

Assuming that thing was as fast as the shield bearer, it would easily catch them.

That didn't mean escape was impossible. She'd had a mage investigate with Fly, and they'd seen no signs of anything behind the force currently sieging the city.

They could combine Fly and Floating Board to outmaneuver them or draw their foe deeper into the city, giving them time to get away. Without reinforcements, there'd be nothing to cut off their retreat.

But if she went with the second option, they'd still have to find a way to bait them inside, and abandoning the city after that would likely leave her with a lifetime of guilt.

As Scarma ground her teeth, she heard a huge *boom* come from the gates. It sounded like a battering ram.

She was out of time.

Scarma made up her mind.

She looked at her party.

"Let's go!" she said. Then she turned to the archers and mages. "You all keep one eye on the undead at the rear and the other below the walls. We'll be leading them around, so attack whenever you have line of sight!"

Then she ran toward the stairs. Her friend flew up beside her.

"That thing is insanely sturdy. But we've hurt it a lot!"

*Really? Is that just wishful thinking? Still...*

Scarma winced.

Given how many spells that undead had already weathered, she couldn't imagine them fending off its blows long enough for the mages above to finish the job.

But if they wanted to survive, they had to try.

The gate was a single swinging door, a simple thing fashioned from logs. The kind of rustic gate a fishing village should have but definitely doing them very little good now.

A hit from a battering ram would quickly bust the hinges, and there was nothing to replace it, so all they'd been able to do was hammer more planks across it, sealing the entrance tight. As a result, the gate was twice as thick as usual.

And she could hear the thud of thunderous blows raining down on the other side.

"How strong—?"

There was a *crack*. It was the sound of wood splintering.

Given the time between the blows, she deduced the shield bearer was backing off a bit before tackling the gate again.

"What next? Lightning should pass through the gate and hurt it. Worth a shot?"

Structures like this gate could probably weather a lightning attack or two, but it wasn't

impervious.

She had to weigh the beating the gate might take against the damage they might deal to the undead. And the mana cost of casting Lightning now versus the spells they could use once it broke through—trying to figure which was more efficient.

Was there any point?

Their best bet was to avoid any contact with it. Downing it without ever getting close.

Scarma nodded, and her friend started casting.

“Lightning!”

A bolt shot through the gate and struck the shield bearer.

It roared. Had they irritated it? The sheer volume of its bellow made her forget to breathe.

A bead of sweat ran down her brow.

That wasn’t even a howl skill, but it had left her shaking. This was simply the gap in their strengths at work. Her instincts were screaming that she was no match for this foe.

*We’re screwed. Totally screwed. No point even thinking about how we can win or if. The King of Darkness controls this thing. That’s right. The monster who slaughtered hundreds of thousands at once!*

She doubted that he controlled many undead this strong. This was likely the most powerful undead the Nation of Darkness could field.

Did this city have anything valuable enough to justify that?

Why did they have to be in the worst possible place? Scarma cursed their luck.

Another *thud* shook the gates, and several more planks snapped.

“Lightning!”

Another burst of jagged white light shot forth, but the blunt impacts continued unabated.

Only the gate was changing. The logs were splintering. The reinforcing planks bent harrowingly. In some places, only nails were left.

“Enough magic. Buff me?”

“...Sure.”

She took a step back, dodging a shower of wood chips. Two of her companions started casting fortifying faith and arcane spells on her.

They used tier-one Evil Protection; tier-two Lesser Strength, Lesser Agility, and Negative Energy Protection; tier-three Haste; and so on—they were less wary about defending against specific abilities and focused more on general physical enhancements, trying to make up the difference.

Just as most of the buffs were done, the gate reached its limit and fell inward with a crash.

Massive plumes of dust rose from the ground. A pair of red eyes gleamed from within. Seeing those two ominous orbs staring out at her sent a wave of fear washing over her.

Her teeth chattered. Her hands shook. It took a dizzying amount of courage to get that under control before anyone noticed.

When she had been on the wall, it wasn’t as obvious. This was a fear that came with proximity.

“Whoa,” a companion muttered. “A single undead smashing through that fortified gate... and this thing’s under the control of the King of Darkness?”

Scarma swallowed hard and managed, “Sure makes you think that going up against him was a big mistake.”

She’d heard he’d slaughtered hundreds of thousands with a single spell, but that had not been concrete enough to inspire true fear. Seeing this thing right here, in front of her—that was more than enough to make her terrified of anything that could *control* an undead this powerful.

She desperately wanted to do anything but fight this creature. She wanted to turn around and run away.

But this undead's loathing for all living things was palpable, and she didn't see it *letting* her run.

The only chance she had of surviving was doing something about it.

Death personified shook the dust off its shield and stepped over the shattered remnants of the gate.

It was inside the city walls.

No zombies followed. They must have been too focused on the living atop the walls to notice the gate was open.

The shield bearer had sent all zombies in its path flying, which was a small consolation, but Scarma didn't see that lasting long, either.

She raised her weapon—a tomahawk. The way her foe moved, she must have already been in its range.

Activating the tomahawk's ability made a translucent copy of the weapon appear beside it. This was a weapon-specific ability—Doppel. An extra weapon floating near the wielder, automatically attacking her foes with speed and dexterity that matched her own movements.

Physical blows alone could not destroy this translucent weapon—it required a weapon break skill and might even outlast Scarma herself.

It was really an ability with no drawbacks—although strictly speaking, its damage output was only half what the actual weapon could do.

“Grahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

A bellow shook the air.

A roar of delight at the carnage to ensue maybe? The undead raised its shield high, then smashed it down on the wreckage of the gate.

Bits of wood shot out in all directions. They were fast, but not so fast that Scarma couldn't bat them aside with her tomahawk.

But doing so caught the shield bearer's attention. For the first time, it registered her as an enemy.

Its shield turned toward her, flamberge out to one side.

*I am so screwed... All that magic aimed at this thing, and it's still not dead? That's just cheating!*

In no way had she *easily* batted aside those fast-flying splinters of wood. She had only barely managed it with the aid of all these buffs currently boosting her physical abilities.

"Okay, keep it—"

The shield bearer charged. The distance between them was *gone*. It was like a wall had hurtled toward her. The shield was about to flatten her.

Still—

She didn't know Impenetrable Fortress, but she used Staunch Fortress, catching the shield with her tomahawk. The shield bearer twisted the shield, deflecting the tomahawk and trying to knock Scarma off-balance. That motion was so smooth, it felt like her weapon had gotten stuck to the shield itself. Unable to resist, she rolled with it, using the momentum to right herself.

The translucent tomahawk attacked from above, but the enemy parried that with its flamberge before continuing to charge at Scarma.

Without a single moment to catch her breath, she found herself on the defensive once again. This time she managed to deflect the following attack before trying to slip past the shield and get in close.

With bigger foes, sometimes it was best to be right up against them.

"Sunlight!"

A burst of blinding light appeared behind her.

A tier-three faith spell.

It generated a bright light, blinding foes and doing damage to the undead. The same tier had a spell called Holy Light, which did damage to all foes with the evil attribute. But since that had no blind effect, this spell choice was less for damage than support.

Her party's caster was now floating above the fray and shot off Magic Arrow—three bolts of light hit the undead.

But even with both of them aiding her, the towering shield barred her way, refusing to let her pass. She struck it with her tomahawk, but it was easily parried.

*Tch! This thing's got skills. It wasn't nearly this good with the sword—but it sure knows how to use a shield. Is it primarily a defender? Really? When it attacks that hard? That can't be true.*

Her own thoughts were spooking her. Scarma started backing away. Her ultimate goal was to get this thing back in sight of the casters on the wall. But if she backed off too much and left it wide open, it might forget her and charge deeper into the city. She would prefer to avoid *that*. Given its speed, once it charged off, they'd never catch up.

And that would mean a *lot* of defenseless civilian deaths.

As a precaution, the Four Armaments thief was staying out of the fight and on standby so he could give chase if it came to it.

If the shield bearer tried to break away, he was supposed to stop it—but given the massive differences in physical ability, it would likely swat him down.

Paying close attention to each move the undead made, Scarma slowly egged it on. Keeping close enough that it wouldn't realize.

She almost had it in the casters' line of sight when a shriek went up from her flying companion.

“Shit! The other one's charging in! Everyone on the wall's pounding away at it!”

The meaning of that sank in. *Ah, crap*, she thought. *We're doomed.*

If the shield bearer and dual wielder were even slightly comparable, there was no way

her team could take them both on at once. Even getting close would prove fatal.

"Scarma, what do we do?"

"...Finish this one!"

The panic in her comrade's voice actually cleared her head a bit. If they didn't defeat this undead, they stood no chance of getting away. With all the spells that had hit it already, she had to believe its life was like a candle in the wind.

Scarma stopped backing away and closed the distance until she was right up next to the shield bearer.

The shield easily caught her tomahawk. And the translucent one. Her attacks weren't enough to pierce this thing's defenses.

She'd expected it to block both blows. Hoped it would.

The real damage would come from Magic Arrow—and Shock Wave.

Two attack spells struck—and at the same time, the party's thief threw a bottle that landed at the shield bearer's feet.

As the bottle shattered, its contents were released—an adhesive made by an alchemist. A strategy they could use here on paving stones.

However skilled a defender the shield bearer might be, it was hard to dodge a bottle thrown at your feet.

And the adhesive left its soles glued to the stones.

That might not keep its feet pinned down for long, but it gave them a momentary advantage. A key tactic when fighting a stronger foe.

Scarma stepped away from its shield hand toward the flamberge, attacking with everything she had.

But it swung that big blade, parrying every strike. Even with its feet stuck fast to the ground, even with her using every martial art she knew combined together, not one strike got through.

*This thing's a brick wall!*

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw it tear a foot free. Two more spells landed, but it refused to go down.

*Is it immortal?! Or one of those monsters that heal over time?!*

Hydras and trolls were notorious for their regenerative powers. Minor wounds did absolutely nothing to them. Nothing short of a fatal blow would work—something that would do massive, irrevocable damage in a single strike.

Scarma was starting to panic. Attacking like this was useless.

She wasn't even hitting it in the first place.

*Damn it!*

“—It's here!”

The thief's cry made her look. The other undead was at the gate.

The dual wielder.

Her stomach heaved. The sheer tension made her want to hurl.

*Is this where we die?!*

The thief had been flanking the shield bearer but faltered and moved around to stand beside Scarma. The dual wielder was already headed their way, ready to join forces.

“...Not attacking yet, which means... nothing good. They're *thinking*.”

She thought she saw a smile on the dual wielder's face. Perhaps the reason the shield bearer's offensive capabilities were no match for its defensive skills was tactical—when the dual wielder caught up, the defenders would lose that much more hope.

Their foes had joined forces. A good target for wide area-of-effect spells. But no spells were being cast. Who would dare?

Scarma didn't need to ask why. The spells would likely do some damage—but it would

also start the fight.

And that would seal their fates.

If they made no move, eventually the undead would. But no one here was brave enough to voluntarily shorten their own life.

Scarma bit her lip, then made up her mind.

"You two run!" she said, slapping the thief's butt. "I'll buy you time."

"Er, you mean that? Me too? No, me at all?" the thief yelped.

She ignored him. She had two foes. She could buy a *little*—

There was a strange noise.

"—Huh?"

It looked like a long needle had pierced the shield bearer's head.

But that was no needle.

It was thicker and shorter, like an index finger. Shot right through the undead's head and stuck itself in the paving stones.

And the bolt had been going so fast even Scarma's eyes couldn't make it out—she'd only seen the streak it left behind and mistaken it for an impossibly long needle.

The shield bearer staggered. But it got its feet under it and managed to stay upright. Only an undead could keep going with a hole in its head.

Scarma couldn't stop herself. She tore her eyes off the foe and toward the source of the attack, exposing herself to the undead—but they were both turned the same way.

Another shot pierced the shield bearer's head—and this time it crumpled to the ground.

Just two hits. Maybe a feat only possible after all the magic damage it had sustained, but—who had done it?

Her eyes found a figure on the skyline.

"Wh-what the—?"

Who'd said that?

Was that her voice? One of her party members'? The shock was too great for her to even be sure.

Above them was an armored giant.

Well over three yards tall and a startling shade of crimson. In the giant's hands was a long pipelike object, held like a crossbow. The fingerlike thing must have been fired from that somehow.

If it was attacking the undead, then... it might not be on their side, but she could at least *hope* it wasn't an enemy.

Scarma's team began slowly backing away from the dual wielder. Getting stuck at the center of this fight definitely seemed like it would prove fatal.

The surviving undead had clearly lost all interest in them. If nothing else, it seemed well aware the flying armor demanded its full attention. It made no effort to cut off their retreat.

And then the fight began.

The dual wielder moved first—by throwing its swords.

It was a hard throw. Scarma could never have dodged the swords, and blocking them wrong probably would have killed her. But the armor didn't dodge at all. It let the blows land. It wasn't clear if it couldn't dodge or just didn't feel the need.

With a loud *clang*, the swords bounced off and dissolved into thin air. When she looked back at the dual wielder, it was still holding swords. But not the same ones.

It had generated *new* weapons.

The flying armor swiftly turned the pipe toward the dual wielder. Like the thrown swords had not injured the occupant at *all*.

That long pipe spit fire and light again.

The previous shots had been one at a time, but now it fired too fast to count. A violent, mechanical *rat-a-tat* echoed over the city.

The dual wielder swung its swords at the projectiles, and everyone heard a *schiing* of metal on metal. This did not last.

Two swords were simply not enough to block dozens—hundreds?—of projectiles. Those tiny things riddled the enemy with holes at terrifying speeds. The dual wielder's body shook and then, like the shield bearer before it, went down.

No trace of either undead had been left behind.

Scarma was literally struck speechless.

She could not *begin* to grasp what had happened.

One thing for sure—that armor was incredibly strong. Stronger than anyone she'd ever seen.

She was left blinking up at it.

It didn't seem real. The armor has saved her, but she couldn't process that fact. The desperation still had its teeth sunk in her, and her brain couldn't let it go.

“Wh-what is that thing?”

“...Uh, is that an Adventurers Guild tag?” the thief asked.

“Mm?”

Scarma squinted. Dangling—somewhat awkwardly—from the armor's chest was a necklace with an embedded plate. The same size as the tags they carried, but the armor was so massive that it looked tiny. Anyone else would have overlooked it, but their thief had sharp eyes.

But the plate was an unusual color.

She'd seen orichalcum before. That left only one other option.

"An adamantite adventurer?"

There were three teams with that rank within the kingdom—and the armor's hue told her which.

"That makes this someone from the Drops of Red team, right?" Lilynette asked.

"Probably," Scarma answered. If they were on the Blue Roses or the Dark Hero's team, you'd want to know why they dyed their armor this color.

The armor turned away.

"W-wait!"

It glanced back their way.

Then it raised a hand, index and middle fingers extended—and tapped them to its helmet. As if that was good-bye, it flew away.

It was soon out of sight.

Everyone stood gaping after it.

"...What even *was* that?" the thief asked.

"Beats the hell outta me..."

She genuinely had no clue. All she'd gathered was that the Drops of Red had saved them.

"But, uh... I guess I can say this. If they're that strong—the Nation of Darkness won't get much farther. At least—if the guild keeps breaking their rules and joining in the war."

### 3

He thought someone let out a little gasp of surprise. It might well have been Ainz himself—the sight they just witnessed was certainly that shocking.

A death knight and a death warrior. Both undead easily defeated by a foe wearing a

power suit from *Yggdrasil*.

Two threads stretched far into the distance—he'd made far too many, so they got a bit muddled—had snapped, and that was enough to tell Ainz what had happened was real.

A silence settled over the room.

He could feel every guardian—and probably the maids—looking at him.

Ainz himself had planned this siege, so you could easily say this loss was *his*.

This had been deeply unexpected, but he had deliberately sent a small force, not caring if they lost or not—so he hoped his minions would not come down *too* hard on him.

But if he said here that he didn't care about the defeat, it would make him sound like a sore loser. Someone who made excuses after the fact.

And this uncomfortable silence would only become grimmer.

This forced Ainz to keep up his usual act. A performance he'd rehearsed in the mirrors when the regular maids weren't watching.

"Hmm. Just as I expected."

Like it was all in the palm of his hand.

He spoke with all the confident aplomb of an evil mastermind swirling a glass of wine—red wine, of course.

The key here was not to speak too loud. Yelling and shouting didn't sound *cool*. It was vital that he sound like he was talking to himself.

The result of his desperate performance was a buzz that rippled across the room.

Ainz swallowed spit he didn't have.

The success of this gambit would be determined once Demiurge spoke.

"AHA! I GET IT NOW!"

*What?! Cocytaus?!*

Before Ainz could recover from his shock, Shalltear squealed, “Ooh! Ooh! Ooh!” She had both hands up, like she was doing the wave. She was openly crying out for attention. Once all eyes were on her, she smirked. “I’ve figured it out! Lord Ainz predicted that thing would appear! That’s why he only sent a paltry force!”

This was not how things usually played out.

Ainz was unsure if that counted as a success or not. He gave Demiurge a sidelong glance.

The demon nodded, smiling.

“Well done. Both of you,” he said, sounding effusive.

Cocytaus and Shalltear looked extremely proud of themselves. Demiurge had likely arrived at the same conclusion and allowed them to speak first.

That was a relief.

Ainz had pulled it off again.

“Sebas, Demiurge, and our collaborator in the capital,” Albedo said. “From each source, we learned that the Drops of Red were operating in the kingdom’s northern region. This mission’s parameters were designed to lure them out. A force the individual stationed there could easily defeat but one which would raze the city to the ground if left unchecked. Brilliant, Lord Ainz.”

“A FISH TAKES THE BAIT. NOW THEY ARE HOOKED.”

*Mm? That was the Drops of Red? Can I take that as confirmed intel? What are the odds of that being a player?*

If a *Yggdrasil* power suit was flying around the battlefield, player involvement seemed rather likely.

Or did their info make it clear this had to be that adventurer? If that was true, why hadn’t that information come his way?

No—it was far more likely it had, and he'd overlooked it. Ainz settled for letting out a low chuckle, as if this had all been his intent.

He had also practiced laughing like this over and over.

"Heh. Truth is, I didn't favor the odds of drawing them out. I'm surprised it actually worked. I thought they might stay above the fray until the capital itself was threatened."

"You're always thinking so far ahead, Lord Ainz!" Aura exclaimed.

He heard Mare whisper, "Amazing!"

Both of them gave him looks of such unabashed respect that his heart shattered like a fragile glass.

*I'm not!*

But he couldn't admit the truth.

This was not something he'd ever expected. But it was also true that he had no interest in whether the battle ended in defeat or victory. He'd been after something else entirely.

The reason he'd taken command of this siege—was a conversation he'd had the other day.

•

"Yes, Sebas? What brings you here?"

Ainz had returned to Nazarick to find Sebas waiting for him. Since the butler was posted to E-Rantel, this seemed a natural question.

He had no memory of summoning Sebas, nor of giving him any recent orders that might require his direct involvement. His presence here was likely of his own volition—which was no problem at all, of course.

Wherever his post might be, Sebas was given reasonable freedoms and was allowed to return to Nazarick whenever the urge struck him.

But he could easily have asked for an audience with Ainz back in E-Rantel. Did that mean this was something critical or urgent?

"I do apologize, Lord Ainz. Could I beg a moment—? No, this may take longer than that."

Not liking the sound of that one bit, Ainz glanced at the regular maid, the one on Ainz duty, and asked to be left alone with Sebas. She and the maid on room duty bowed and promptly left together.

He looked up at the eight-edged assassins on the ceiling.

"You too."

Without a word, they scuttled off as if gravity did not exist.

If Ainz ordered them to keep this secret, they would likely die before telling anyone, but this was a world of magic. It was possible to rob them of free will and pry the information out of them. Naturally, Ainz would never allow it to come to that if it was within his power, but one could never be too careful.

"My thanks, Lord Ainz."

Had Sebas suggested this himself, it would have sounded like he did not trust the maids—his own colleagues.

Ainz had foreseen that issue and decisively sidestepped it entirely, which was why Sebas seemed so grateful.

But Ainz shook this off and once again voiced the question on his mind.

"So what's this about? It seems important. Urgent?"

"Yes, sir. Well... the importance is not for me to determine. But certain individuals wished to speak to you in private and asked me to arrange it."

"...And we're going to them? They don't wish to visit my room, then?" This was rather unusual within Nazarick, where Ainz was owed the greatest deference. "...Is this that human?"

"No, not Tsuare. These individuals have not been given permission to leave their domains, so while begging your utmost pardon, they must ask you to trouble yourself."

Sebas looked genuinely apologetic. He awaited his master's response.

"Ah, that explains it," Ainz said.

This was not unheard of with domain guardians.

Naturally, if Ainz ordered them to come to him, they would likely leave their posts to do so. There were a few who would insist their creators—the NPCs called them the Forty-One Supreme Beings—had ordered them to remain put and refuse to budge, but the majority would do as Ainz said.

But some of them really *shouldn't*.

Crimson—a domain guardian on the seventh level—was a prime example.

The aura it possessed was always active and simply moving about the ninth level would do untold amounts of damage. Carpets catching fire in its presence was one thing, but if it even approached a regular maid, they would sustain serious damage.

In light of that, it was occasionally best if Ainz went to meet them. His butt wasn't rooted to his throne. And he had nothing on his plate right now that he couldn't put off until later—at least, in his mind.

"Very well. Then I shall go to them. But who exactly is calling for me?"

"Mistress Nigredo and Pestonia."

Sebas generally used titles with everyone, so Pestonia must count as one of his people.

"Ah..." Ainz said, struggling to conceal his hesitation. His bony face showed little emotion, but he felt a number of guardians could always *tell*. Albedo certainly could. Demiurge tended to wildly misinterpret his responses.

Possibly on purpose.

But despite his efforts to conceal it, his voice must have betrayed a hint of reluctance. Sebas looked even more apologetic.

*Poor man. But honestly, I'd rather not.*

Nothing good could come of this.

He was absolutely sure of that.

It was just like work. If someone came over to you looking sorrowful and said, "The so-and-so department wants to speak to you. Not on the phone. In person," it would be nothing but trouble.

But Ainz had little choice here. If he neglected the problem, it could snowball into bigger problems, and he would ultimately bear the blame regardless.

Ainz was Nazarick's supreme ruler but not foolish enough to think he could sit around doing nothing.

And the Nazarick NPCs were like children to him. He would rather be on their good side if at all possible.

"...Let's go. My schedule..."

He took out his planner and checked it over. Ainz was definitely in favor of putting unpleasant things off. But another side of him knew it was best to get them over with sooner than later.

"...appears to be open at the moment. Do you mind if we go now?"

Nigredo and Pestonia. Both were domain guardians, but in light of Sebas's earlier comments, he could imagine which domain they were headed to. Though he had omitted the question, Sebas understood his intent.

"I'll tell Pestonia to head there. Can we meet in one hour?"

"...Fair enough. Bringing Albedo and Demiurge... is probably a bad idea."

"Indeed. I do beg your pardon, but this is best handled on your own."

Ainz stifled a sigh and nodded.

"What about the doll?"

"Pestonia will prepare one, so please don't concern yourself."

"Good. Then an hour from now—mm? Sebas, will you be joining us?"

"Yes, sir, I thought I should. If you approve?"

Ainz granted his permission, and Sebas bowed his white head low.

An hour later, Ainz used the ring's power to move to the fifth level, outside the Ice Prison.

He brought no retinue with him. He'd left the regular maid behind, simply telling her he had urgent business and that she should tell no one.

She'd said, "I'd like to come. I'll see nothing, and you can treat me as if I'm not there." And he knew that every word she said was true. In fact, the maids seemed all too pleased to be treated that way.

Apparently, being treated like props made them feel like they were fulfilling their duties as maids, and they found the prospect immensely appealing. Or at least... that was what he had heard from exactly *one* of them, so perhaps she just *happened* to have that kind of interest, but he couldn't rule it out.

But regardless of the maid's feelings, Ainz wanted to eliminate even the tiniest chance of future trouble, so he'd insisted on leaving her behind.

*But once I get back, I should do something to please her. Give her a hard or demanding task? I'm still not convinced that would actually make anyone happy...*

There were far too many denizens like that in Nazarick, which was why his efforts to implement paid time off or sabbaticals weren't going well. At this rate, those policies would be little more than empty dreams.

Ainz pushed open the frozen doors of a two-story building that appeared to have been snatched right out of a fairy tale. A gust of cold air rushed out. Ainz was undead and had complete immunity to cold, so this did nothing to him.

He strode alone down the dark and silent corridor. On the way, he glanced upward once, ensuring there were no holes in the rafters, but otherwise his pace remained steady until he reached a wall covered in a large fresco with a door at the center.

As always, the fresco itself was peeling in many places and generally looked quite dilapidated.

He gave the door a push, and it swung open without a sound. He found three minions waiting for him within.

The room's occupant, Nigredo.

The canine-headed maid, Pestonia.

And Sebas himself.

"Thank you for coming, Lord Ainz," Nigredo said. All three rose to their feet, and she bade him to take a seat at the table.

On his last visit, this room had contained nothing but cradles; now it contained none. There was only a table and four chairs.

She must have brought them here from some other Ice Prison room. The floors aboveground were all Nigredo's domain—everything below the surface was guarded by Neuronist.

When Ainz was seated, Pestonia swiftly began readying tea. A steaming cup was placed before him, and the scent of it caught him by surprise. Sebas slid some cookies across the table.

Naturally, Ainz could neither eat nor drink, but he appreciated the hospitality. He waved a hand, urging them to join him at the table.

The cookies in front of Ainz were not quite square shaped and their presentation less than flawless—a rare sight within the walls of Nazarick.

Was someone experimenting with baking? He looked at Sebas, who quickly picked up on the unspoken question.

"These are not made within Nazarick. I purchased them back in E-Rantel. Cheap, fresh ingredients are flowing into the city now, and the culinary arts are blossoming. These cookies are but one such example. They were once quite... crunchy, but chewy cookies like these are growing increasingly common."

“I sampled one myself and believe they meet our standards, woof.”

“Hmm.”

Ainz picked up a cookie and bit into it. It was definitely on the soft side.

It broke apart easily, and he caught the inside half as it fell, placing it on his saucer.

This body could identify textures but not flavors—a real shame.

But Ainz soon reconsidered that perspective. This body’s lack of lusts, appetites, or need for sleep was what allowed him to rule Nazarick.

If any of those biological functions existed, he’d have long since destroyed himself.

“Lord Ainz, if you lend out more of your undead to work the fields, I’m sure they’ll breed better crops and advance the state of our cuisine even further. Perhaps one day they’ll even rival the foodstuffs we enjoy within these halls.”

“That would be splendid. Given the nature of my body, I haven’t done much research into the buffs provided by local foods. Perhaps greater emphasis upon it will make Nazarick even stronger. But—would that not lead to those without the cook class being unable to cook?”

“That is a concern. Perhaps best we ensure the original strains are not entirely abandoned,” Nigredo said.

Ainz nodded. He remembered hearing stories about how choosing which strains should be preserved by European archeologists had led to all manner of disputes. Not a subject he’d had any interest in at the time, but Blue Planet had been quite worked up about it.

Enough that he’d remembered—and it seemed wise to be mindful that this practice could lead to conflict here, as well.

“Yes, best we do that. We’ll have to form a team to manage such matters.” He’d have to run that idea by Albedo later. “But for now, let’s get down to business. What have you called me here to discuss?”

Nigredo took the lead.

"Certainly, Lord Ainz. We are here to implore you to stop any further slaughter of the kingdom's populace."

"That's a no," Ainz said. "For one thing, this proposal should not be coming to me. It should be addressed to the floor guardian immediately above you."

Those within Nazarick—including the domain guardians—were aware of what Ainz and the floor guardians were after. Documents summarizing their intentions had been circulated to all.

If they had opinions on the subject, they were welcome to discuss them with the floor guardian they reported to. The goal was to collect a variety of viewpoints and ensure the will of all Nazarick was represented, as well as to stimulate the curiosity and interest of all its denizens.

Nigredo forming her own opinions like this was exactly what he'd been after, but she reported to the fifth-level guardian, Cocytus. If Ainz accepted her proposal directly, it could be interpreted as a lack of respect for Cocytus's authority.

And that simply wasn't how adults did things.

If their superior could not be convinced, there was certainly the option of going over their head and making their case to the leader of another division while fully aware of the potential consequences.

You could argue that excused the attempt at going straight to the top—Ainz was in charge, after all—but he was not interested in presiding over an organization where his employees were constantly at one another's throats.

Now, if she was a domain guardian on the fourth level, Ainz wouldn't have minded acting in Gargantua's stead.

"Lord Ainz, we are well aware of your position, woof. That is why I have joined her in making this request, woof."

One could argue that Sebas was Pestonia's direct supervisor.

If they were to officially designate floor guardians for the ninth and tenth levels, Sebas would likely be in charge of the former and Albedo the latter.

And since Sebas had brought him here, they were technically following chain of command.

“—Point taken. I understand your feelings on this matter. But let me ask something in return. This strategy includes a phase of experimentation designed to strengthen our home—the Great Tomb of Nazarick. We cannot alter these plans simply out of mercy. Do you speak while acknowledging that?”

It was a critical point. The Great Tomb of Nazarick and the Ainz Ooal Gown Nation of Darkness were hardly invincible. If other guilds had been transported here, base and all, someone capable of defeating them could be out there right now.

And Ainz was not optimistic enough to believe they were alone.

They had already run across what he believed to be a confirmed World Item. It seemed likely another guild was already active in this world.

To ensure victory once that fight began, it was his responsibility to help Nazarick grow even stronger.

“What if it’s not *just* mercy, woof?”

“Oh? In what way? If you have a clear merit in mind, let’s hear it. But I should remind you that you’ll get nowhere arguing that the more we save, the more likely talented individuals will emerge in the future. Kingdom history has never once produced anyone stronger than an adamantite adventurer. We can conclude that that is the upper limit for human abilities—at least, as far as pure strength goes. We are better off prioritizing stronger species like dragons.”

“Babies *do* have potential, Lord Ainz.”

Pestonia shot Nigredo what was probably a baleful glare.

“Not *just* babies, woof”

Nigredo had a soft spot for infants. Possibly an even greater one than Pestonia’s. But this side of her applied *only* to babies. The moment they turned two, her love *died*. They simply became more meat in need of processing.

Thus, the babies saved during the attack on the capital were taken away from her at

that age and given to Pestonia.

They were now in the orphanage Yuri was managing.

"Yes, fair enough. But... that must also be true for dragons."

"Earlier, we mentioned the potential for breeding better strains of stable crops. Could we not breed a better strain of human? Strengthening them with the resources available at Nazarick could result in more powerful variants. And strength alone is not the only value a species can provide. Humans are known for ingenuity and innovating new things. Cultural advancements, if you will. I believe those could be beneficial, but if we thin their numbers too much, that could potentially impact Nazarick's growth."

Was this why they'd brought the cookies? In that case, things were going exactly as they'd planned. Which was fine. If they managed to convince him, Ainz was more than happy to let them do what they wanted.

"An angle worth considering. However, I do not wish to see many of this world's residents grow *too* powerful, and I can already foresee potential dangers in allowing civilization itself to advance too far." Ainz clenched a fist. "We are strong but cannot get stronger. Yet, those who are now weak may one day outclass us. We must ensure they cannot surpass our power. If we see the potential for that to happen, then we must prevent it no matter the cost. For the future of Nazarick. Understood?"

Both fell silent. Ainz turned his gaze to Sebas.

Sebas had yet to say a word.

"Lord Ainz, I am grateful for your presence here and your willingness to hear their words. That is all that I asked for, and I have no intention of asking for more."

"Hmm."

Ainz stroked his chin, turning back to the others.

"But I suppose there are also major downsides to forcing humans to the brink. The more trouble they're in, the harder they'll try to improve. But in that case, we need merely kill everyone with the experience and know-how. And treasure anyone with no such experience—and, more importantly, no desire to get stronger." He looked each of them over in turn. "Are we done? Then I'll be going."

"Not just yet, woof!"

Pestonia's voice was a bit too loud, and she blushed. "My apologies," she said, bowing her head.

"No offense taken. Let me hear what you think."

"Certainly. Lord Ainz... the goal here is the carrot and the stick. Demonstrating the difference in how we treat our vassal state, the Empire, and our enemy, the kingdom. I'm told that is the ultimate goal behind this slaughter, woof." When Ainz nodded, she continued. "In which case, the more people who barely manage to flee with their lives intact, the more people learn the folly of going against your wishes—and the Nation of Darkness. Uh, woof."

"So you suggest we *allow* more survivors to escape?"

"That's correct, woof."

That certainly sounded like a valid reason to let some refugees go.

On the other hand...

He was certain Albedo and Demiurge had considered that. They had made their plans after doing so. That would mean he was implementing a plan they had already discarded.

Both were inexplicably certain that Ainz was brilliant. How would they react?

Just thinking about it made his stomach hurt.

No, he'd already established that he planned to intentionally make mistakes. Maybe he could get away with this much. The real problem lay further ahead—with the people who would claim black was white if Ainz so much as implied it.

*If this plan was abandoned because of a fatal flaw, then my proposing it will cause untold losses.*

Nobody could stop the boss's pet project even if it was clearly a disaster.

*And I lack the skill to help recover from those losses. If I can't fix my own mistakes, I can't*

*afford to take risks.*

Did that mean he should reject the idea? That would require him to point out the flaw in it—which escaped him.

Could he really dismiss something on that flimsy a basis?

*Maybe I should have insisted Albedo and Demiurge join us. Still...*

That had never been an option. Frankly, the moment he'd heard who asked for this meeting, Ainz had known it would be something like this.

That was the problem.

He had already imprisoned these two once before. Albedo had even proposed they be eliminated permanently. If anything similar happened again, she would be even more insistent, and he feared the schism would widen beyond repair.

Cultures resistant to the outside world were sometimes shattered from within.

It was his responsibility to prevent that.

So where did that leave him?

Rejecting their idea seemed the most sensible response. But that left him concerned about the future.

Only a small number of outsiders were ever likely to enter the Great Tomb of Nazarick, but there were already quite a few in the Ainz Ooal Gown Nation of Darkness. They were not placed in any important positions, but that might yet change.

And if outsiders filled vital roles within the state apparatus, they would bring a wider variety of opinions to the table. Some likely merciful enough that Albedo would deem them weak.

It might well fall to these two to manage those perspectives.

Which meant it would set poor precedent to discard their proposal out of hand here.

Their opinions might be the minority within Nazarick, but that actually made them all

the more valuable.

And—

*I've paid the debt I owed Touch Me. It's high time I did right by Ankoro and Tabula. If I look at it that way, the decision is simple.*

“...I believe you’re fully aware, but let me clarify. Our plans do not include the wholesale slaughter of all humans in the kingdom. We’ve already recruited several nobles to our side. We only plan to kill... ninety percent.”

“But those chosen survivors will lead lives under Nazarick’s control, woof. From a propaganda perspective, those *not* chosen and forced to flee will be far more effective in spreading the word, woof.”

Pestonia made it clear her goal was to save *them*.

“I understand your perspective. You speak not just of mercy but for the future good of Nazarick. In light of which, I will bear it in mind. It may not be many, but I will consider ways to let a few escape.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you, woof.”

Sebas bowed his head in silence.

But despite what he’d said, Ainz was uncertain about what he should actually do.

Clearly, he had to do something. Save a few hundred people and demonstrate that he had granted their request.

•

Surprises aside, he *had* spared quite a lot of that city’s populace. If they chose to flee, Nigredo and Pestonia’s goal would be accomplished. But this didn’t exactly count as a *narrow escape*.

Perhaps he should send in some stronger undead.

No, he should check first.

"Ahem. So, Albedo. You mentioned the Drops of Red before. Can I assume this is verified intel?"

"My apologies, Lord Ainz," Albedo said, rising to her feet and bowing low. "That information is not properly vetted. That was hasty conjecture based on the adamantite plate and the color of the armor itself."

"Raise your head. I merely wondered if you had information I was not privy to. I am not upset."

Her loyalty pleased him, but getting this response every time was not very amusing. Ainz made mistakes all the time, so he could ill afford to be upset about something like this.

"Thank you, Lord Ainz."

"Hmm. So was that the Drops of Red or merely someone who wants us to make that assumption? What do we think? Opinions, floor guardians?"

A quick poll showed most were in the former camp. Ainz agreed.

"Then next... let me ask if anyone has intel on the specs of that power suit. If not, I'll share what I know"

Once he'd confirmed his guardians were not well versed in their capabilities, he proceeded to explain everything he remembered.

*Yggdrasil* had not launched with power suits. They'd been added later in an attempt to boost player counts by attracting new users.

And with the hopes of adding to the player base, robot battles had become the hot new trend.

And for *some* reason, the power suits were incredibly high spec.

First—as they'd just seen demonstrated—they could zip around the skies faster than the Fly spell. They could also last over an hour underwater without significant performance degradation, and they shut out nearly all environmental damage.

The right and left shoulders and the torso—depending on the power suit type, the legs or arms as well—had attack spells built in that could be activated at will by the operator.

Since they had humanlike hands, they could hold weapons. Unless the hands had been outright replaced with swords, of course.

Owners were free to change up these magical loadouts in the power suit settings, but the data crystals required had to be obtained with either real money or very extensive adventuring. These modifications could be done anytime outside of battle, but there were limits.

The spells attached to the power suit could range all the way up to tier ten in strength, but there was a set number of uses per hour, and the stronger the spell, the fewer uses that were allowed. While these limits did recover over time, you could only change out an attack spell if the stock was fully recovered.

The armor's physical and magical stats were not dependent on the operator's and were generally quite high level. Same went for defense and evasion.

This armor could instantly make a weak player strong.

That said, these suits had two minor drawbacks.

First, since the power suits were classified as full plate, you couldn't wear any other armor with them. Necklaces or other accessories were fine.

Second, the spells equipped on the suit could not be boosted by skills. But they *could* be boosted by your accessories, so this barely counted as a disadvantage.

However—there was one *major* flaw for weaker players.

HP and MP.

While the attack stats themselves would override the operator's, those two crucial stats stayed the same.

If a weak player wore the suit, they'd have high defense but still be a glass cannon. Naturally, that assumed they were hit by attacks strong enough to punch *through* that defense stat, and this was hardly a weakness against anyone else.

But for Nazarick, the power suits would not pose much threat to floor guardians.

NPCs who weren't that strong—the Pleiades, for instance—could be in trouble, and retreat was likely their best option if they encountered someone in a suit.

At this point, they transitioned to a Q and A.

Albedo was first.

"So this poses no threat to us?"

"Yes, the best power suits were the equivalent of a level eighty. But that's assuming my knowledge is accurate. That might not apply to a unique model or an artifact of some kind. Those could potentially have higher specs."

"And we can't tell that just by looking at them?"

"Hmm, sorry, Aura. I'm not exactly an expert on them myself. Based on looks alone, I can't say what to expect. If I recall correctly, you could make *some* adjustments to the appearance but nothing dramatic."

Power suits had specs that were highly appealing to low-level players but not that useful for anyone near the level cap.

At higher levels, even if you didn't have god-tier armor, you'd still be better off wearing legendary full plate that matched your build. Ainz had already been level 100 when the power suits were added to the game, so he'd never taken much interest in them.

And since they were classified as full plate, wearing one would have stopped him from using the bulk of his spells.

"I believe we have two or three power suits stored in Nazarick somewhere. Let's swing by the Treasury later. Perhaps trying them out will teach us a few things."

He remembered Amanomahitotsu grabbing some after hearing they let even crafter classes fight. He was also playing an aerial combat game at the time and had seemed pretty confident, but during his mock battle with Peroroncino, he had been easily shot down. Those suits had never seen the light of day again after that.

NishikiEnrai had summed it up nicely by saying, "Go back to *Aberage*."

This brief trip down memory lane brought a realization back with it.

If the Drops of Red had a *Yggdrasil* power suit—then that black blade wielded by the Blue Roses leader might have a similar history. They were both adamantite teams, after all.

Their kingdom collaborator had told them that weapon had the power to level an entire city. The source had marked that information “dubious,” but it had come directly from a member of the Blue Roses.

Ainz had believed the Blue Roses leader was lying to her own teammates or possibly just bluffing.

But in light of this new development, perhaps that claim was true.

He'd heard the leaders of the two teams were relatives.

That connection made it more likely they possessed equivalent gear.

Naturally, Ainz did not for a moment believe that they were capable of taking out a floor guardian in a single blow, but neither could he rule out the possibility. This world could contain unique weapons so good they could slip past even a guardian's defense.

And he didn't fancy finding out how much it would hurt if the leader of the Blue Roses sacrificed herself to unleash that sword's full strength.

If they had to face the Blue Roses, he would summon monsters to throw at them, hopefully tricking her into releasing that power prematurely, and then finish her off afterward.

Assuming it had a cooldown.

This was definitely a “let sleeping dogs lie” scenario.

Their goal was to destroy the kingdom, not slaughter the Blue Roses. They would only die if they attempted to frustrate Nazarick's plan. It was best they kept their distance until they were sure what her sword could do. He'd have to convince Entoma and apologize.

Ainz shook these thoughts off, back to the point at hand.

He had bigger fish to fry.

“Anything else?”

He looked around, but no further questions emerged.

“Then that’s enough about the power suits. Demiurge, how shall we handle this city? It has served *my* purpose.”

“We don’t want them believing they have defeated the Nation of Darkness. We should send in stronger enemies and burn the city to the ground.”

“Hmm. Very well.”

Not great.

If they did that, he’d have to find another city to keep his promise *and* find a way to save some people. He’d managed to avoid getting caught this time, but each additional attempt would only become riskier.

Pestonia was right behind him, listening. For her sake, he wanted to save this city’s populace and keep his word.

“No, Demiurge. Let’s not. What happened here will lay the groundwork for similar efforts in the future. Let us first fell the capital and draw curtains on the kingdom’s demise. We can always raze the remaining cities afterward. What say you?”

This would give the cities’ residents ample time to flee. If they did not, then even his most merciful minions would not object to their deaths.

“If you say so, Lord Ainz. I am at your command.”

This sounded sarcastic, but... Demiurge would never speak to him like that.

Assuming the worst behind a speaker’s intent was proof you had guilt in your heart. As Ainz did now.

“Now, now, Demiurge. I am always open to good ideas.”

“Excellent, Lord Ainz. Your generosity never fails to humble us all.”

Demiurge bowed low, and Ainz felt even more uncomfortable.

He had simply been stating the obvious—it was hardly worth flattery.

He enjoyed a compliment as much as the next person, but getting one for nothing made him feel like he was being coddled.

But of course, that feeling stemmed from his own inadequacies.

“...Any other guardians have an opinion?” Certain no one did, he turned to Shalltear. “Then use a Gate and order that the undead retreat. We’ll have all forces assemble at E-Rantel and march on the capital.”

“It shall be done.”

“BY ‘ALL FORCES,’ DO WE MEAN THOSE STATIONED WITHIN THE GREAT TOMB OF NAZARICK AS WELL?”

“Some of the Nazarick Old Guards, yes. They aren’t terribly strong, but they *look* impressive enough.”

“UNDERSTOOD.”

“Good. Conquer the cities in our path, then finish the war at the capital. After that, we can destroy any unneeded cities and citizens. Teach the world what becomes of a city that defies Nazarick.”

His guardians cheered, and Ainz nodded.

“Excellent. Guardians—,” he began. But mindful of the future, he thought better of it. “No, some of you remain here. Let’s see what you can do.”

# INTERMISSION

Bebard was one of many cities in the Karsanas City-State Alliance.

The residence of the mayor was once again brightly lit.

The woman herself, Re-Kista Cabelia, was poring over the documents at hand.

The Karsanas Alliance was composed of the following:

Karksahnas.

Pepo Alo.

East Gaitsch.

West Gaitsch.

Veneria.

Great Ristaran.

Oakneis.

New Oakneis.

Granvitz.

Lee.

Franklin.

And Bebard itself.

These twelve cities worked together, and the average city (or territory) was home to about four hundred thousand, with the largest city topping out at six hundred thousand residents.

Bebard aside, none of the cities was dominated by any one race—never more than 40 percent of the population. An array of multiracial cities—that was the essence of the Karsanas Alliance. But a few hundred years back, it had all been one massive country.

When that realm disintegrated, fourteen smaller states remained, each centered on a single city. Much blood was shed among them in countless conflicts. Many merged only to split, again and again. Then their representatives gathered for what was now known as the Great Debate. From that emerged an alliance of twelve smaller countries, bound to share one another's fate.

Did that stop them from breathing down one another's throats? Not really. For short-lived races it was ancient history, but for those that lived hundreds of years, it had only just transpired the other day.

So every five years they held a sports tournament—a chance to vent those pent-up feelings of discontent and channel their rivalries.

And it was Bebard's turn to host the next one.

It was four years away, so arguably she still had plenty of time. Put another way, she only had four years left.

There were sixteen events in this tournament, but one stood head and shoulders above the others.

The Connelier—a proxy war. Really, it was a big old-fashioned brawl.

Each city picked ten of their best, and they fought to protect a magic item known as the Banner of Peace.

The resulting spectacle was extremely popular, and even people who cared nothing for the other events would turn out to see it. And that meant the host could not afford the slightest mistake when overseeing this legendary event.

That was not even an exaggeration. When the tournament was held in Oakneis, they had failed to take the appropriate precautions to ensure safety at the games; violence had broken out and resulted in several deaths. Forty years later, *Oakneis management* was still bandied as a synonym for incompetence.

Failures in handling any of the sports were a black mark, but messing up the Connelier

sealed your fate.

But the leadership in each city knew Oakneis had actually done their jobs correctly. They'd merely failed to watch out for shades.

The very existence of shades had previously been in doubt; that event was the first formally recognized public sighting, but that simple oversight did lasting damage.

Kista finished reading the documents before her and frowned.

Fifty years had passed since Bebard last hosted. Almost no one involved in that administration was left.

She'd been advised to approach it like they were starting from scratch, but the pressure was getting to her.

She kept waking up in the middle of the night, fearing failure.

A grimace came unbidden.

Four years off, and she was already a mess. By the time it was actually upon her, she'd be at her wit's end.

And she was not looking forward to *that*.

Reading records and writing out whatever thoughts her research inspired was the only way to keep her anxieties at bay.

Kista reached for the next document but was interrupted by a knock.

She got up and flung open the door. It was exactly who she'd hoped it was—her grandfather, the former mayor, Re-Bern Cabelia.

A great man who had kept the peace for a very long time—including presiding over the previous Bebard tournament.

“Grandpa.” Kista smiled. “You came all the way here? I could have gone to you.”

“Nah, I can use the exercise. My legs aren’t what they used to be, but staying cooped up in my chambers is just making ’em wither further. Were you working, Kista? I could

come back another time.”

“Now is perfect, Grandpa. Please come in.”

Bern came in, a pot in his hands. A fragrant scent rose from it. Herbal tea?

Kista led him to a couch and took a seat across from him.

She pulled out two cups, and he poured tea into both. The scent of the pale-green liquid wafted through the room.

“Kista, the maids told me you’re burning the midnight oil.”

She didn’t want to worry him, but there was no use hiding it.

“Yeah... I keep thinking about how I’ve only got four years and... can’t sleep.”

Worrying about something that far off would normally provoke a laugh, but Bern was not amused. He’d been mayor long enough to know exactly how stressful it could be.

“You’ll wear yourself out like that, Kista. The herbs in this tea soothe a troubled mind. Drink up and get some rest. The secret to a long reign is not doing more work but learning how to assign that work to the right people. You and I can only do so much by our lonesome.”

“Thank you. But... I’ve got a big job on my plate.”

“Trouble in the cities around us? No signs of the Steed King taking action.”

The Steed King ruled the plains to the east and was the primary external foe the alliance had. Bebard wasn’t on the border, so if he attacked, she would simply dispatch reinforcements.

“...You’ve heard how the Empire became a vassal state, right? I’m trying to figure out just how worried we need to be.”

“The Nation of Darkness...”

Bern scratched his head.

A nation of a single city—yet an Empire had bent the knee. And rumor had it they'd acquired some formidable assassins.

All kinds of stories flowed like wine, and both of them wished they could tell which were true.

Kista's thoughts were on one man.

Emperor Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix.

He was still young, but his subjects already called him the Fresh Blood Emperor. She'd had an audience with him once, as an ambassador to the Empire, and spoken briefly with him at the banquet that followed.

He was a man of immense cunning and magnetism. Would someone like that serve as a vassal willingly? Or... was he up to something?

"Grandpa, can your connections help us gather intel on the Nation of Darkness?"

Bern had been mayor far longer than she had and knew that many more people. Naturally, when she'd taken over, he'd made introductions—but a request from him would definitely get many of them moving faster.

"Of course, Kista. Not even my people—we've got some skilled adventurers in the area who recently left the Empire behind. Fancy speaking to them?"

"Please. And thank you, Grandpa."

Kista bowed her head. They might be relatives, but he'd been almost eighty when he retired, and she had not forgotten the days when their neighbors feared the might of Bebard's Old Crow.

"I don't need—no, I will demand payment, Kista. Promise me you'll start turning in on time."

"...I promise, Grandpa. And thanks again."





# **CHAPTER 3**

## **THE LAST KING**

# 1

There was a mountain of paperwork in the office and a number of very pale ministers.

Their complexions were a direct result of workloads that left them physically drained and the mental torment of knowing exactly how much danger the kingdom faced.

Zanac had signed far too many things, and his wrist ached. He gave it a shake, then rolled his shoulder, seeking some measure of relief. He could hear popping noises coming from all over.

Like everyone else here, his body was screaming for rest.

But as much as he'd love to take one, the work kept piling up, and no amount of effort seemed to get them anywhere.

Possibly enlisting more help or foisting the work off on others was the wiser choice, but unfortunately there was no one capable around. Only other members of the royal family could do what he was doing.

And Zanac had no intention of asking his father or Renner for help.

Failing to do so might be a mistake, but he also knew he had no choice.

Zanac picked up his pen once more, reading the next page on the pile. He signed and stamped it.

On his eighth round of this, there was a hammering at the door.

Several ministers sighed loudly. More paperwork?

A corpulent domestic minister let out a dramatic-sounding "pheew" and heaved himself upright before going to the door. Taking his time, as if every second he delayed would reduce the work bound to come.

A knight was waiting outside.

"Apologies for interrupting. Princess Renner would like to meet with you, Your Highness."

Not what he'd expected but no less aggravating.

"Tell her I'm too busy. I'll hear what she has to say at dinner this evening."

Since their older brother's disappearance, they'd been making an effort to dine together. It had been days since they last managed it—Renner had likely been eating alone.

However, he could not imagine her feeling lonely. They might have less maids than before, but Climb and Brain were constantly with her. She should have been enjoying herself immensely. Far more than she would dining with Zanac or their father.

"Understood."

The knight closed the doors. But Zanac had a sinking feeling Renner was not about to take no for an answer.

He put away his pen. Seeing the minister take a step away from the door, he gestured for him to remain put.

It took less than a minute. There was another knock, and once more the knight's face appeared.

"I do beg your pardon, Your Highness. The princess, um... says that if you do not wish to hear unfounded recriminations, then you had better agree to her request."

A threat? Zanac made a face. This hardly seemed like her, but if this was how they were playing it, he had little choice. If she started yelling, it would only add to his workload.

"Fine. She may enter. But only Renner—not another soul. Those two can wait outside."

"Understood."

The knight knew who he was talking about. She *had* brought them with her.

Brain was the finest warrior in the kingdom. Climb himself was far stronger than your average man. Renner hardly ever left the palace, so it seemed rather a waste of talent to leave them guarding her.

But they were not in the employ of the crown; they were *her* men, and their wages

were paid from her allowance. Zanac had no right to order them about.

As the knight closed the door, Zanac turned to the assembled ministers.

"My sister's here to thwart our efforts. Shame. Rejoice, for you may now rest. I'll give you three hours. Make the most of them and come back refreshed."

They all managed weary smiles and then shuffled out like so many zombies.

Renner took their place, her smile as bright as theirs were not.

"Brother, I'm sure you're aware our ministers work better when they're given adequate time to rest. If you work them to the bone like this, the mistakes will only pile up. Besides, you don't look so good yourself."

Zanac rubbed his unshaven bristles. He'd been working as long as they had and likely looked just as weary. He knew he craved rest, too. But there was so much the man in charge had to decide.

"We should have hired someone who looked just like me so *he* could sign things."

"If our father's signature will do, we know just the man. Perhaps you should ask him?"

Renner gave him a long look. He knew what she meant but thought it best to be sure.

"—What?"

"...Is he still alive?"

Zanac made a face.

"Come, now. You think I'd have him killed? With this crisis hanging over us? He is, however, extremely unwell. He's convalescing in his chambers. Any reminders of his duties will disrupt the rest he needs. I cannot let anyone see him—even the princess. I am sorry."

Renner's smile matched his. This was the smile she used when she saw right through him.

"Brother, there should be no lies between us. Without Marquis Raeven's soldiers, you

can only keep our father imprisoned because the military and domestic ministers have chosen to back your play. What do you have planned for him?"

"He attempted to resolve things by negotiating with the Nation of Darkness."

And that was why Zanac found himself handling all royal duties in the king's stead.

Since he was the one keeping his father locked up, all the work that entailed landed on his plate. If he went crying to his father now, he would be the most pathetic man alive.

"Not like I don't know *why*. He was there when two hundred thousand fell in the blink of an eye."

Worse, he'd lost both a son and Gazef Stronoff that day. But this Zanac left unsaid.

"I appreciate the urge to negotiate in the hopes that doing so would minimize the casualties. But we are long past the stage where that's an option."

Zanac pulled out a large sheet of paper, spreading it on the desk before him.

This was no cheap material but pure-white paper that came at a steep cost. They'd used Trace to map the entire kingdom.

"Observe. This is the number of cities we believe the Nation of Darkness has sacked."

The entire eastern borderlands and half the north were covered in X's. Anyone with any knowledge of geography would know these marked cities with sizable populations. And a wise observer would realize that if they included smaller towns and settlements, there would be a lot more crossed-out spots on the map.

Zanac ran his fingers across it.

"When the war began, we thought the Nation of Darkness lay idle. But they were actually advancing north."

His finger drew Renner's attention to one country.

"They've closed our border with the council state," she said. "We have no hope of reinforcements from them."

“Exactly. Since they didn’t move, our father thought the declaration was merely a threat and continued to negotiate. But while he wasted his time with that... this was happening. Cities toppled; entire populations put to the sword.”

Zanac’s teeth gnashed audibly.

“...An unpardonable travesty.”

No king worth their name would stand for it.

“If the Nation of Darkness has no intent of engaging in diplomacy, then we have no choice but to resort to other tactics. Am I right?”

“You are indeed. And you mean—force.”

Zanac nodded.

“Sister, take that dazzling brilliance and tell me—how did we not notice their invasion? Until they hit E-Naeurl all the way up here, why did *no* information reach us?”

When the Nation of Darkness attacked a city, the slaughter was horrific, leaving none alive. But that was a far cry from preventing any escape. And even during wartime, merchants and travelers didn’t quit the roads.

How had they all been silenced?

What magic had the Nation of Darkness used?

“Hmm. I think you’ve already guessed? The Nation of Darkness could not have managed this through mere containment.”

“Yes... I thought as much. And that means the *X*’s we have here may not paint an accurate picture.”

If this was not the Nation of Darkness’s power alone, then the explanation was painfully obvious. They had collaborators within the kingdom.

Possibly ministers within the palace had turned traitor, filing false reports. Or members of the landed gentry had pledged allegiance to the Nation of Darkness, and that was where the lies had come from them.

Zanac ran a finger down the map. In this vast expanse of land, who could betray them to achieve the desired effect?

His finger stopped on a city name and pulled away.

“.....Sister, do you already know? Which nobles betrayed us?”

“Ruling out the palace insiders already?”

She was clearly ahead of him. Once that would have proven unsettling, but now it was a comfort.

“Not many people could act as such a substantial block on information even if they wished to. Perhaps the war minister... but he could do nothing about the merchants. Word spreads within the capital beyond anyone’s control.”

“If you’ve gotten that far, then you’ve already reached the answer. Marquis Raeven.”

“—Absolutely not.” Zanac shook his head. Forgetting that his own finger had stopped on E-Raebel.

“Do you really think that? Marquis Raeven absolutely doted on that boy of his. If they were to take him hostage...”

“.....It would force his hand. Those curs!”

“But I think it’s just as likely he simply concluded we have no future.”

Zanac was loath to believe his old confidant had betrayed them. But if a noble of his influence said the word, they might well manage to keep all information from getting out. And any citizens fleeing the slaughter would head for the largest city. E-Raebel was the perfect destination.

Is that what had drawn the Nation of Darkness to the marquis?

“...What do you make of the King of Darkness?”

“His intelligence is terrifying. A strategic genius with a knack for international geopolitics. And most frightening of all is that despite his power, he does not rely upon it—his plans are *cunning*. You could call him a monster without arrogance.”

Something smelled off. Zanac gave her a searching look. Renner had the same expression she always had, but... there was more emotion in her voice than normal. Awe. Respect. He'd caught a glimpse of both.

"We're looking at a spider's web, but how many years has he spent weaving it? Are we but moths caught in his trap?"

"I'd rather be a butterfly."

"Either one is but a meal for him. But if you'd rather be a butterfly, suit yourself. Either way... even if we manage to wriggle ourselves free, all we will find is another web waiting beyond. It scares me. That we share a world with someone capable of this. Perhaps he predicted all my actions, too."

"He's worse than you?"

Renner smiled but did not answer.

"Back to the original point. You're considering sending a party to investigate Marquis Raeven's manor, but... you'll find nothing."

"I thought not. But I can't just... sit here and do nothing."

If they *knew* the marquis had most likely turned traitor, then Zanac's hand was forced. And he was clinging to a faint hope that he *would* find something.

"So what move would you make here, Sister?"

"I should ask you this first, Brother. If the Nation of Darkness keeps moving like this, they'll be coming for the capital next. I have no idea if this is the best place to station your armies, but... do you have any?"

"We've received positive responses from the local nobility."

But no responses at all from anyone distant. They'd received the requests and were simply observing the situation. Most likely planning on prostrating themselves before the Nation of Darkness the moment the royal family fell. Perhaps simply afraid if they cooperated with a royal request, it would earn them the Nation of Darkness's ire.

Either stance was laughable.

Any notion that they might be saved only proved they were fools.

Yet, he could not laugh that off. No one could dare take such a risky position fully knowing what the Nation of Darkness was capable of. They, too, were victims of the Nation of Darkness's information control.

Once the capital fell, the Nation of Darkness would raze their cities to the ground. If they did not join the war effort here and now, they would simply perish alone later.

"Do you think we can win?"

Zanac's smile wavered. That was easier asked than answered.

"It's not a matter of can or can't. We have no choice. The Nation of Darkness is here to burn our cities and slaughter our citizens. To survive, we must gather every soldier we can and stake everything on one great battle."

His fist tightened.

"..... Brother... you've become king."

"What? What do you mean? Arrogant?"

".....Well, if we lose this battle, then the kingdom itself is doomed, right? No matter where the capital's citizens flee, it's hopeless. Staking everything on one great battle is the *right* choice. Oh, maybe the marquis knew you'd do this, and that's why he switched sides."

"Oh... so the people have somewhere to go."

"But the Nation of Darkness may not allow it. They might order the marquis to slaughter anyone who comes begging for amnesty. To prove his loyalty."

Why had Marquis Raeven betrayed them? Had he really betrayed them at all? Or was he just caught in a Nation of Darkness plot to sow distrust along with Renner?

Zanac knew the marquis had tried to make the kingdom a better place.

Perhaps he should send the man a letter and ask to meet so they could speak their minds. But that might just put him on the spot.

A letter to a traitor from a former confidant. That would be enough for the Nation of Darkness to suspect disloyalty.

That might be an effective move for his side but one that should be kept in reserve until Marquis Raeven marched his troops to war flying the Nation of Darkness's flags.

If he was only aiding the Nation of Darkness because his son was held hostage, then Zanac could not hold it against him.

He'd long since known of the man's unnatural devotion to his boy.

The thought almost made him smile, but he soon forced his attention back to his sister.

"Refugees, hmm? Not quite the same thing, but Father wanted to send you—or rather, us—as envoys to the city-state alliance. Before I had him sequestered. What do you think? If you'd like to go, you should probably leave the capital now."

Zanac was mustering every soldier he could find for a final last stand, but the odds of victory were overwhelmingly slim. And defeat meant the King of Darkness would raze not just the capital but every city behind it.

Nowhere in the kingdom would be safe. His father's proposal had been based on the assumption that exile was the only route to survival.

There were two uses for ex-royalty.

First, marriage—adding their royal blood to your family. Second, death—and with their deaths, the ending of their line.

The Nation of Darkness would almost certainly opt for the latter.

He could tell they wished to condemn his kingdom to the pages of history.

"*It is* a good idea. Are you going?"

"Too late for all that. If our brother was still around, I gladly would have. But forget me—what will you do? The King of Darkness is undead and will not take pity on the fairer sex. Execution is likely inevitable."

"Not to mention the indignities I'll suffer at the hands of those who blame us for this

fate."

Renner had no compunctions about saying that out loud. Zanac grimaced. He supposed he should admire her clarity of foresight.

Renner's beauty was renowned. There was no guarantee these desperate times would not drive men to crazed acts.

"Keep Climb and Unglaus at your side."

"Certainly. I'm not letting Climb go anywhere."

"It's just me here and the situation *is* dire, but you really should say 'them.'"

Why was Brain Unglaus serving this woman?

He'd said something about liking the cut of Climb's jib, but was he interested in him romantically? He'd had it looked into, and they had discovered that Brain had some history with various women but no confirmed children.

Zanac left this unspoken, fearing how his sister would take it. And if it somehow reached their ears... well, what could be worse?

"Either way, I have no intention of fleeing. I shall die a proud princess."

He raised a brow at that.

For some time now, he'd assumed she would happily run, as long as she could take Climb with her. Or was she simply saying this to his face and preparing to flee in secret?

*That does sound like her.*

"The King of Darkness will happily put your corpse to good use."

"Possibly. But you plan to lead your armies into battle against him?"

"Apparently so. I may be of little practical use. But having royalty serve as the high commander is symbolic—someone needs to do it."

Zanac glared at the rafters.

"Like you said, I am the next king. The title brings an onus. If I die, Father will end it all. You can run whenever you like."

She might be unsettling, but she *was* his sister. It couldn't hurt to act like a proper brother once in a while. Perhaps it would earn him a kind word from the gods once he was dead.

"Very well. If it comes to that, I shall."

When his gaze turned back to her, he found her smile looked exactly like it always did.

## 2

The Nation of Darkness was marching west, leveling every city and town between them and the capital. Yet, their forces were not making good time—the advance was most accurately described as a crawl.

The larger the army, the slower it moved. Evileye had mentioned that wisdom didn't apply when all the soldiers were undead, which Lakyus took to mean the Nation of Darkness was intentionally taking its time to intimidate the capital's citizens.

The slow, inexorable advance *had* already caused one riot, which only ended after considerable bloodshed. This had forced the population to make one of two choices.

They could leave the capital to flee the Nation of Darkness's advance—moving farther west to get as far away as possible.

Or they could remain at home, shut their doors tight, and hope for it to blow over.

The latter choice had proven far more popular. Refugees had to worry about supporting themselves on the road or somewhere far from home; this option was limited to those with money, connections, or a viable trade they could bring with them.

Thus, 95 percent of the capital's population had remained in place.

Until yesterday.

The royals had put out a decree.

A call went out to all able-bodied citizens to take a stand and protect the city from the armies of darkness. In other words, a draft.

Many were too scared to fight and remained holed up. But far more sensed that if they lacked the courage to fight, they would be leaving their loved ones to be slaughtered.

A mad fervor infected the city, riling everyone up. The streets were teeming with mobs of people preparing for war, and groceries were a booming business as everyone tried to ensure their sons and husbands went off to battle well-fed.

That feverish mood only intensified when word got out that the crown had ordered all merchants to lower the prices on food.

The Blue Roses were currently pushing their way through those crowds.

Their destination was an inn on the other side of town.

Lakyus was at the fore, speaking over her shoulder.

"I can handle this alone. Our client didn't specify who should come, and an offer like this hardly needs the whole party. You've all got enough work as is. Let's split up."

"What's got into you, Lakyus?" Evileye asked. "There a reason you don't want us coming?"

Lakyus forced her lips into a smile. Inside, she was cursing her friend's sharp instincts, but she couldn't let that show. Tia and Tina were almost as bad as Evileye, and she was glad she had her back to them.

"Of course not. I just thought it would be a shame to waste your time."

"I get where this is coming from." Gagaran grunted. "Azuth'll be there, right?"

Lakyus felt her heart skip a beat.

Exactly. Her uncle, Azuth Aindra, leader of the Drops of Red adamantite adventurer team. He'd been called in at the same time as the Blue Roses.

“You’re family so you want a chance to catch up. I know the feeling.”

Whew, at least she was wrong about *that*.

Lakyus pounced on the convenient excuse.

“Well, yes. You see, everyone? He’s in the capital but hasn’t come to see me. So—”

“Puzzling.”

“A mystery.”

“Hmm?”

Lakyus blinked at the twins.

“You’re related, both adamantite team leaders, yet we didn’t get any word he’d be returning to the capital. Where’d this client hear about it?”

“If they’re connected to the Drops of Red, they’d use the name, but the client didn’t say a single thing about it.”

Last night, a thoroughly plain-looking man had shown up at the Blue Roses’ lodgings, said someone wanted to hire them, and told them where to meet. A direct hire, no guild involved—Lakyus thought it smelled fishy and was ready to decline. Then he said Azuth would be there, and she felt obligated to show.

“Yeah, it’s goes right past fishy into an obvious plot. Lying to draw us out?”

“Right. And if this is a trap—you’re strong, Lakyus, but you can’t do everything alone. If they mean us harm, we shouldn’t let them come after us one by one.”

“Still...”

She appreciated their concern. But—

“And who wouldn’t want to meet a hero?”

“I hear his name all the time, but our paths have never crossed. Since you’re related, you should have introduced us.”

Lakyus felt a knot in her stomach.

Her uncle wasn't a *bad* person, but he wasn't a good one, either. He was the kind of man most accurately described as a terrible influence on children.

When she'd met him in her tender years, he must have hidden that side of himself—he'd been normal enough then. Perhaps adventuring had gradually loosened his screws.

Lakyus could only offer up a silent prayer to powers unknown—it was hardly a matter to bother the gods with.

When he first met someone, her uncle usually played it right. Like being a hero meant acting the part in front of his admirers.

She'd have to bet on that facade.

They reached their destination.

It was a run-down inn. No one would claim business was flourishing here, even as flattery.

But the doors were sturdy. There was a real weight to them.

The twins' hands both found her back.

A warning. Something bothered them.

There was a bar inside, but it didn't look like the owners were running a tavern.

Terrible location, no booze, just lodgings...?

Everything about it felt wrong. Lakyus refocused. She could sense her comrades bracing for combat, ready for anything.

She spoke to the nondescript man behind the counter.

"We're the Blue Roses. Our client should be waiting for us."

"Room 301. Aindra of the Drops of Red is already here."

Was he really? They'd find out soon enough.

Lakyus thanked him and headed up the stairs.

The place was quiet. They passed no one on the stairs and didn't hear a sound that didn't come from them. Either this place had very good soundproofing or there was no one else here.

The third floor had far fewer rooms. Half what the floor below had. Each room must be that much larger.

They found a door with a plate engraved with 301 and knocked.

"Uncle, it's Lakyus!"

Listening closely, she could just barely make out a man's voice saying, "Come in." It was too soft to identify the speaker.

Tia and Tina tried to step in front of her, but she stopped them and slowly pushed the door open.

It was a different world within.

The fixings were subdued but sumptuous. Possibly even fancier than their own lodgings. That alone was unnatural. This inn clearly wasn't on the up-and-up.

Before Lakyus could finish taking it in, a voice called out.

"Oh, Laky! Been too long."

That was definitely her uncle's voice.

"Unc—," she began, turning toward him.

Mid-word, she slammed the door.

"....."

"Wh-what's wrong, Lakyus?" Gagaran asked.

They'd all heard his voice. It was hard to just insist there was nothing wrong.

"...I'd better see him alone."

"We've come too far for *that*," Evileye growled.

True enough. Lakyus looked around, and everyone clearly agreed.

*In that case...*

"Um, so. I should mention... my uncle tends to do questionable things."

"...The leader of the Drops of Red does?" Tina asked.

Lakyus nodded gravely, then scanned their faces again. There were lots of frowns, but they'd worked with her long enough to know she wouldn't lie about this. Once she was sure they'd prepared themselves mentally, she opened the door again.

There was a long couch in the room, with a distinctive velvet sheen.

On it sat a man—unmistakably Azuth Aindra.

He was naked from the waist up, giving them a full view of his taut stomach and chiseled pectorals. Not appropriate attire for meeting a client. But this was not why Lakyus had tried to avoid introducing him to her party.

Azuth was flanked by a pair of half-naked women, each leaning up against him.

Calling them clothed at all was being generous. They had no tops on, everything spilling out suggestively. They did have undergarments below, but these were little more than strings that didn't cover much of anything.

Each had fairly charming features. They were likely high-class courtesans.

The heaps of saucy clothing on the floor were likely what they'd worn on their way here.

Azuth had an arm around each shoulder, his hands openly toying with their breasts.

"Uncle... if you knew the client called your niece here, you could have tried a little

harder to be presentable."

Even while she talked, his hands never stopped groping away. They were moaning provocatively, not even trying to push him off.

That attitude only made this whole scene even worse. If their client had brought the girls here, she would make them pay.

"I figured you'd arrive a little later. But hey, not like we were still in bed, am I right? No big deal."

"It's a very big deal!"

She was too scared to look at her friends.

"...It is?" Azuth looked genuinely baffled. At no point did he stop playing with his companions' nipples. "You're *so* uptight. All men want to bed good women! And my kids'll all be born with some talent. Best if I'm free with my seed."

"Hmph. So he quit the aristocracy but can't stop himself thinking like them?" Evileye asked.

Azuth made a face, glaring at her. That would have intimidated most people, but the Blue Roses were made of sterner stuff. It washed over Evileye like a gentle breeze.

"Ha, that look proves I'm right. They call him a hero, but he's a man-child. Maybe that's exactly why he cast off his title so easily and went out adventuring. But clearly he's in no state to meet a client. Get these floozies outta here."

"—What's with this kid?" the woman on the right said, scowling.

"Ugh, what a hassle. Aindra, that room empty?" She pointed at a door in back.

"Yeah, it's the bedroom. We already scoped it out."

"Then have them wait in there."

"Seriously, what is her problem?" the girl on the left said. "Won't even show us her face but acts like she's a big shot."

“...*Sigh.* Charm Person. Go.”

“Ah, of course. Right away.”

The girl on the left got to her feet, and the girl on the right looked shocked. She opened her mouth—

“You too. Don’t forget the clothes on the floor.”

The spell activated again before she could speak. The girls obeyed their orders and left the room.

Azuth had his own brow cocked the whole time. Then he shrugged. Most adventurers would probably react like Evileye had drawn a sword, but he clearly had no argument. Lakyus was loath to admit liking anything about him right now, but this was as close as she got.

“Nice one, Evileye,” Tina said, throwing out a thumbs-up. “But the courage to bed potential assassins certainly is very adamantite adventurer.”

“Is it?”

“We’re trained for this sort of thing. If you don’t have the skills or the magic, you make sex your weapon. Gagaran, this will never apply to you, but the basic technique is—”

Ignoring Tia’s explanation, Evileye turned to Lakyus.

“Figured any other approach would just be a headache. But I’ll hold my peace now. Talk all you want.”

“Thanks, Evileye. So, um... *sigh.*” They hadn’t even started, and she was already tired. “Uncle, this client seems seriously fishy. Who are they?”

“Mm? Wait, you don’t even know? They got a proper outfit backing them up, I think.”

“You think? So you don’t know them, either?”

“Not personally. If they’ve got any manners, they’ll introduce themselves soon enough. If they hide, well.” He grinned. “That just means they’re bad news after all. What’s your plan?”

“Plan? For what...?”

“You wanna run? I can hook you up.”

“We’re not going anywhere.”

Lakyus felt all eyes on her back.

“...Tch, knock it off with the act already. The Nation of Darkness’s killing everyone in their path, leaving nothing but corpses and rubble in their wake. If you think the capital’s gonna be any different, you’re a fool.”

“So fight with us.”

“Hell no. I ain’t seen the King of Darkness personally, so I can’t be totally sure, but from the stories? I—we don’t stand a chance against him. Only monsters can beat monsters. Ain’t no place for a human in this fight.”

Azuth let out a weary sigh. She’d never seen him like this.

“.....That’s why I left the others behind,” he said. “And told my brothers to start running.”

“And... they didn’t, right?”

“Nope. Dumbasses. They did turn over their kids, though. My party’s taking ‘em to the council state.”

While Lakyus tried to think of a response, Tia hissed, “Boss.”

A moment later, a male voice called to them from the hall. “Right on time.”

Tia, Tina, and Gagaran had been standing in the doorway, and it was like they were shoved into the room by an invisible force. A new man and woman entered.

He was young.

Each of his ten fingers had a ring on it, and there was a pleasant smile plastered to his face.

The woman behind him looked half asleep. Her clothes were baggy, and walking seemed to take a lot out of her. She wore an unnaturally large hat, and the brim hung down, obscuring half her face.

Lakyus was instantly on guard. Her party comfortably stood in the highest tier of strength among all things living, but both these visitors had something about them that made her think even they were outclassed.

But then one last person entered, and the very air changed.

He was so big he had to turn himself sideways to get through the door. He was dressed like a barbarian, with a massive ax on his back, and the aura he radiated was so powerful it felt like the space around him warped.

The first two were strong.

But this man was in a whole other league.

Her throat clamped up.

Lakyus was an adamantite adventurer. She'd fought any number of powerful monsters and subhumans. But nothing like him. This man was even stronger than the skull-faced demon she'd seen during Jaldabaoth's rampage.

Was he guarding the first two?

If any outfit had someone this good, she should've at least heard stories. Whatever organization they worked for had to be powerful enough to hide their very existence—it couldn't be anything less than a country.

“...Glad I brought my whole kit.”

“...Each is better than us combined.”

“I have no memories of anyone like this in the kingdom.”

“Come oooooon!” Azuth said. “You roll in late all menacing and shit? Is that how your boss told you to play this? Unbelievable.”

“Says the man who brought whores with him.” The woman sneered. “This ain’t that

type of establishment.”

“Ha!” he said, throwing back his head. “You make me visit a place like this, I’m gonna show a little spite.”

The woman clicked her tongue.

That seemed to confirm what he’d implied—this inn was *theirs*. Only two countries seemed likely to be running something on this level. Either the council state or the Theocracy.

And the latter was much more likely.

“Now, now, I think that’s quite enough,” the pleasant-looking man said.

“Quai... Sigh. You’re the leader this time, so whatever you say.”

She didn’t seem pleased with it but assented nonetheless.

“Your ire is valid, Mr. Aindra. Here you are sparing us a moment of your valuable time, and we arrive last. I do beg your pardon.”

“Ha!” Azuth laughed this off, but the man showed no sign of dismay.

“I do hate to skip the pleasantries, but let’s get right down to business. Mr. Azuth Aindra and all members of the Drops of Red not present.”

Lakyus narrowed her eyes.

Her uncle had cast aside his title, but he was still an honorary knight, so addressing him formally required the inclusion of a *Day* before the surname.

Azuth detested that custom, and polite strangers often tripped themselves up on it.

This man had deftly dodged that trap, which meant he’d clearly done his homework. Or his superiors had.

“Lady Lakyus Alvein Dale Aindra. Miss Evileye. Miss Tia. Miss Tina. And Miss Gagaran. We are here to recruit all of you for a job. Perhaps you would prefer to fight until death arrives. But we believe you should turn your gaze toward the future.”

“Hmph. No manners. Where you from?”

“What does it matter? Don’t—”

A hand reached out from behind the woman, covering her mouth.

“What?”

“No!”

Tia and Tina both jumped, drawing their weapons.

An outlandish-looking man was standing just behind the woman. His garb covered not just his body but his face and hands—and all of it was strengthened with what looked like metal plates.

“Crap, an assassin better than us!”

“Crap, a lot better than us.”

Lakyus knew of no assassins better—and more dangerous—than these two. But they openly admitted this person was better?

“Please do not be alarmed. You may put your weapons away. If he intended to kill you, there would be no reason to reveal himself like this.”

That made sense. If he’d entered the room without any adamantite adventurers noticing, he must have been hidden via some power. Revealing his presence in such a ridiculous fashion was actually an assurance he was not here to assassinate them.

Or was that *why* he’d revealed himself that way? To drive home the point that if they refused this offer, a deadly assassin would silence them?

“Please forgive my companion’s lack of manne—”

“—Oh, come off it. What’s the point of hiding it? You’re Theocracy, right?”

“Is that true? They were hiding people this good?” Evileye gulped.

Lakyus was just as shocked.

Long ago, she'd fought a band of theirs that had been burning down subhuman villages. They'd been *good*. Their commander had been better than she was, at the time. But nobody of this caliber had been with them.

"News to you? I thought the stories would have gotten around by now. The Theocracy's own line of heroes. The Black Scripture. Although I hear one's not exactly a *hero*."

He was looking at the barbarian as he said that.

The hulk of a man returned a carnivorous grin.

"Heh-heh-heh... you're well informed. But you've got one here yourselves. Like me or even higher up." He pointed at Evileye. "Evileye of the Blue Roses. You'd give me a run for my money."

Even with that declaration, he didn't look like he planned to lose if it came down to a fight. This was a man with a plan in mind.

".....Hmm, not many things stronger than me. Demons aside... if we're talking humans and subhumans alone, there's just Lord Momon."

"Only Momon, hmm?" the barbarian murmured. But he said nothing else.

"Well, Theocracy secret forces. Care to team up with us and fight this King of Darkness?"

Evileye was still muttering to herself—"And that woman... no, she's..."—but Azuth talked right over her.

And the pleasant man's smile never wavered.

"The invitation is a great honor, but our mission is to recruit those with talent. I'm afraid we must refuse. An army that joins wars of their own volition is a detriment to any society."

"Hiding behind your orders, huh? I'm asking what you think as individuals."

"Ridiculous," the woman scoffed. "They tell us what to do, and we do it. Keeps things nice and simple."

At this, the pleasant man's smile finally wavered. "You're simply too lazy to think for yourself," he said biting.

"Fair. But as long as I'm obeying orders, any fault lies with those above me. I *really* hate getting blamed for things. I'm great at pinning it on others, though. Everyone says so."

"They don't mean it as a compliment," the barbarian muttered.

"Heh-heh. So I take it we have your answer, Mr. Aindra? What do the Blue Roses say?"

"Can we ask a question first? How would we even get away?"

"That you'll learn when we're on the same team. I *can* say we have already scouted several other adventurer parties and successfully guided them to safety."

"...Yeah? This wasn't by force or threats, was it? You forcing people to go along?"

Gagaran had a point. An offer from anyone this strong could be hard to refuse.

"We have done no such thing. Those who join us unwillingly would be a liability in the future. They must join us of their own free will, so that we may work together for the future—for humankind."

The man spoke earnestly without a trace of deception. His ability to do so was likely why he'd been chosen to recruit them.

"...I'm out," Gagaran said before he could even prompt a response. "But it ain't even up to me. We're all doing what our leader says."

The whole team nodded.

"Ah. Well, little point trying to persuade you. I see your minds are made up."

He seemed to fold a bit too easily. Lakyus lowered her center of gravity in case he planned to resort to a more violent approach.

The man spotted this and flashed her an awkward smile.

"Please, Lady Lakyus. I have no intention of using force. I pray you all manage to give the King of Darkness what he deserves. The receptionist is holding the payment for

coming here, so please accept it on your way out. With that, we must take our leave.”

At his wave, the Theocracy contingent began moving out. Things appeared to be ending without incident, but just as Lakyus started to relax, Azuth called out.

“Hey, almost forgot... uh, what’s his name, Rufus? Rufas? How’s he doing?”

“Ru...? I do beg your pardon. The Theocracy is a big place, and I’m afraid I have no idea who you mean. Perhaps with more det—”

“Oh, right. At your level, you wouldn’t know the name. What do you usually call that undead? The gentleman?”

All members of the Black Scripture looked blank... and then their faces twisted up in masks of absolute fury. The hostility was so intense it seemed certain few would leave here alive. But the pleasant man acted first.

He held both hands out, restraining them all.

“Quai, what is this? We can’t kill him?” the woman asked. Her eyes glared daggers at Azuth all the while.

“It’s a bluff. You will not take action here. That’s an order.” The hostility dissipated as swiftly as it had arrived. The man turned back to Azuth, his eyes very cold. “...That said, I’m very curious how much you actually know. I shall have to report this. Move out!”

Their guard never dropped. Every member of the Black Scripture made it clear if anyone moved, they’d respond without mercy. One by one, they left the room.

Once she was certain the coast was clear, Lakyus hissed, “Uncle! You’re the weakest one here, so why are you trying to wind them up?!”

“Mm? Yeah, that was a close one. Didn’t think they’d be quite that mad. If the man with the fake smile wasn’t here, I’d be dead. I assumed they wouldn’t do shit—they’re banking on us hurting the King of Darkness for ‘em, after all. Guess I was wrong!”

He let out a chuckle, and Lakyus heaved a sigh.

Was that really the case?

Her uncle had made a show of possessing vital info on the Theocracy, but it seemed highly likely they'd want to silence him to prevent even the remote possibility of it leaking to the King of Darkness. Or at least snatch him up and torture the information out of him.

Why had he even tried to make that claim? Without it, the whole meeting would have ended without incident.

Why set your own house on fire?

Azuth wasn't *that* impulsive. There must be some factor she couldn't see.

This line of thought wasn't getting her anywhere. She decided it was pointless and gave up.

"Augh. So what are your plans, Uncle?"

"Mm? Gonna hang out in the capital till the King of Darkness gets here. A few days from now, the kingdom's forces are gonna fully mobilize and form up nearby. They won't win. He *will* reach the city. And none of you stand a chance against the King of Darkness. You should run."

Harsh words.

"But I can't just abandon the capital and... Uncle..."

If anyone could beat the King of Darkness, it would not be a warrior's blow but an assassin's strike. That was why Lakyus was biting her lips and watching the troops march off to stand in his path.

"If you're asking me to fight with you, then hell no. I've got my own business to take care of."

"You do?"

"Yeah, something only I can do. You do what you can. But you are my niece, so lemme say it one last time. You really oughtta run. You will all be helpless before the King of Darkness."

".....Hmm, what's that supposed to mean? You think you stand a chance?" Evileye

asked.

Azuth made a face.

"I can't beat the king, no. I ain't all that. But even if he's got the capital surrounded, I'm pretty sure I can break through it on my own."

He stood up.

"I'm gonna go next door and give my hips a workout. Anyone wanna join me?"

Lakyus caught his drift and grimaced.

"We'll be leaving, then. We have many preparations to make."

They said their good-byes, stayed vigilant on their way downstairs, took their reward, and promptly left the inn.

No signs of any ambush.

### 3

Reports arrived that the Nation of Darkness's armies had been spotted not three days' journey from the capital. All armies under Zanac's command set out to intercept.

Half a day's march to the nearby plains. There, they'd been building simple defenses since learning of the Nation of Darkness's westward advance. They planned to face the armies of darkness here.

Their forces were positioned on the main road, so if the Nation of Darkness's armies continued a direct march to the capital, the plan should prove effective. If the Nation of Darkness chose a different path, they would have to quickly reposition themselves. That was a concern, but reports from their scouts suggested the enemy was staying the course, so these concerns would likely prove groundless.

Yet, none took that as glad tidings.

The kingdom's forces were conscripted from neighboring domains, capital citizens, and able-bodied refugees. The fate of the very country rested on their shoulders.

Their number: just over four hundred thousand.

Much as Zanac wanted to pat himself on the back for managing to assemble that many, they were a hastily cobbled army, with no real weaponry to speak of. Far too many were carrying handmade clubs.

Morale was relatively high—but that was little better than the final thrashings of a cornered rat. Those aware of the Nation of Darkness's unspeakable cruelty had simply taken up arms, desperate to protect those they loved. The moment cracks appeared in that courage, the kingdom's armies would crumble.

Numbers were a weapon, and the many rows of soldiers lined up were genuinely intimidating. Yet the Nation of Darkness kept marching directly at them—to what end?

If their enemies had any knowledge of strategy, they would never come straight at a force this large. The best thing the Nation of Darkness could do—strategically—was *nothing*. Their undead armies needed no supplies, while four hundred thousand human soldiers required an absolutely insane amount of supplies to stay fed. Surrounding them and making threats alone would be enough to starve them out or incite a panic.

But the Nation of Darkness's march was inexorable, trampling everything in their path. It was like their commanders weren't thinking at all.

Were they that certain of victory?

In that case, the Nation of Darkness was not being foolhardy at all. They had spells that could wipe out two hundred thousand troops in one fell swoop, so perhaps they simply assumed they could cast something like that twice and immediately end the battle.

As commander in chief, Zanac rather hoped otherwise, but he knew several of the nobility were convinced that was what fate had in store for them.

They'd suggested splitting their forces to avoid a repeat. The logic was sound. It put them at risk of being picked off and getting defeated in detail, but it would also prevent them from being wiped out by a single big spell.

Unfortunately, Zanac could not afford to do that.

Between the previous defeat and this invasion, they had lost far too many nobles, knights, and ranking officers capable of commanding large forces. Dividing his forces would make it that much harder for each army to stand their ground. That would no longer be the final defensive line—it would merely be a crowd of four hundred thousand people.

Having a force this size, standing *together*—that was what gave them the courage and cohesion to stand in the Nation of Darkness's path.

It had been two days since their arrival here.

Given the sheer size of their forces, that was how long it took for them to prepare for the impending battle. Once all the troops were finally in position, the Nation of Darkness's armies finally showed themselves—as if to say, *You've had more than enough time.*

The army of darkness was perhaps ten thousand strong. It seemed to consist of three or four main types of undead. From numbers alone, it seemed like they would scatter like dust in the wind, but the strength of each individual soldier put the balance of power squarely on the enemy's side.

“Your Highness.”

“I know.”

Zanac waved off his war minister.

The minister was struggling with his new armor—it was downright comical. But Zanac was painfully aware he was little better.

He currently wore the armor Gazef had once used—a royal treasure. But it did not look *nearly* as good on him.

Still, he was grateful to have magic armor.

The stress of the job had led him to gluttony, and his waistline had taken the brunt of the burden. Without magic armor, he'd have been forced to ask a smith to make alterations.

“My horse!”

At his order, a knight led a horse to the front of his tent.

The horse gave him a baleful glare, but with some difficulty, he managed to mount it. Leaving his retinue behind, he left the camp, trotting toward the Nation of Darkness's forces.

He could have brought guards, but what use would they be if the Nation of Darkness planned to kill him here? They would not even give the undead pause.

Thus, it seemed best to go alone. Demonstrate his own dauntlessness. And if it did result in death, that, too, would serve as proof of how vindictive the King of Darkness could be.

*Re-Estize still has heroes.*

Zanac reached the midpoint between the two armies without incident. He activated the magic item he'd brought, his voice booming.

"I am Zanac Valléon Igana Ryle Vaiself of the Re-Estize Kingdom! I would like to speak with the King of Darkness one-on-one."

He knew this would not be a battle of wits. The time for that had long since passed.

Zanac simply wished to know. What was the King of Darkness thinking, and why had he started all this?

•

Ainz was seated beneath a tent with tarp hung on three sides only, watching his forces assemble through the open side. The Nation of Darkness's armies were almost all undead and needed virtually no supplies, so the camp itself was quite modestly sized considering the number of troops it contained.

Fundamentally, they didn't strictly need to make a camp at all, but this, too, was valuable experience.

In fact, after pitching camp several times, the results had become far sturdier.

Ordinarily, they would use Mare's magic to create defenses, but for good reason, Mare was silently standing next to Ainz, watching the undead go about their tasks.

By his side, Aura was also watching the armies at work, but her eyes were focused on her own minions.

Whether tents or camp defenses, magic offered easy solutions. But by the same logic as above, they had physically carried in a tent, pitched it, and made camp around it.

*Perhaps we could put Mare in charge of all the Nation of Darkness's construction.*

Ainz glanced at the boy's profile, standing by his sister, intently watching the undead set to work.

The Nation of Darkness had subhumans and grotesque races that were good at digging. Perhaps those races could be placed under Mare's command. He had a feeling Albedo was already working on that—in which case the paperwork would come his way eventually—but it couldn't hurt to float the idea past her.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Albedo came striding across the camp. She'd been supervising construction, with Cocyte serving as her guard.

"Lord Ainz, it seems the human armies have dispatched an envoy. Your orders?"

"A parlay before the start of battle? Prepare a reception—refreshments, too."

As Albedo got a table and chairs ready, Ainz spotted a man in full plate riding toward them.

Ainz had seen that armor before.

*Wasn't that what Gazef Stronoff wore? I think it was. Is this his replacement? That's not what I'd heard...*

But as the envoy reached the center of the field, a booming voice rang out.

"I am Zanac Valléon Igana Ryle Vaiself of the Re-Estize Kingdom! I would like to speak with the King of Darkness one-on-one."

If his voice traveled this far, he must be using a magic item.

".....What do you say, Lord Ainz? If he is not declaring the opening of hostilities, he is of no value. Should we start the battle?"

"NO, ALBEDO. THAT WOULD BE RUDE. HE DESIRES A BATTLE OF WITS. IF WE DECLINE, PEOPLE WILL SAY LORD AINZ IS VINDICTIVE AND SMALL-MINDED."

"Let them talk." Albedo sneered. "They will all perish here regardless. If there is no one to listen, words have no meaning."

Ainz certainly would prefer to avoid anything requiring wits. And this man was royalty. He was likely superior to Ainz in every way besides military might. Still...

"Albedo, have you forgotten? There are those stealing glances at us."

"...Forgive me."

"Hmm. I'd better go. A prince has come out alone. I should answer in kind."

".....Are you sure it's safe, Lord Ainz?"

"No. But if it seems like I've been subjected to mind control, use that World Item to save me, Aura."

Ainz had left the World Items he normally carried behind in Nazarick. If Aura used the Scenes of Nature and Civilization, Ainz would be sucked into it as well. Even if Ainz was brainwashed, he could not teleport outside of it.

"Of course!"

"Hmm." Ainz nodded and climbed aboard a soul eater, riding it out of camp. He had been practicing horseback riding and was getting quite decent at it. But he wasn't exactly skilled, either; to avoid embarrassing himself in public, he'd opted for an undead mount.

By the time Ainz reached Zanac, the royal had dismounted, so he followed suit. Whatever fate awaited him in the future, Ainz intended to return gestures of respect or insults in kind.

The prince was a stout fellow. But no makeup could hide the circles under his eyes.

"An honor to meet you, Your Majesty. I am Zanac Valléon Igana Ryle Vaiself."

"The honor is all mine, Your Highness. I am Ainz Ooal Gown, King of Darkness. This is

no conversation to have standing up."

Ainz cast two quick spells, creating a pair of black thrones nearby, which were placed facing each other. Since they were made with magic, both were indistinguishable.

"Metal chairs are unfortunately quite hard, but they will allow us to sit and speak."

"My pleasure, Your Majesty."

Each took a seat, and Ainz cast one more spell. A gleaming black table appeared between them.

Despite the magic he was throwing out, Zanac showed no signs of alarm. Perhaps because he was not here to make an attempt on Ainz's life.

Ainz drew two glasses from his inventory as well as a bucket of ice.

"Will water do? It seems an inappropriate time for a drink. I also have orange juice if you prefer?"

"Thank you, Your Majesty. Water will be just fine."

Ainz couldn't drink, but etiquette dictated that he fill his own glass, too.

"Now we are ready to speak. What did you have in mind? The moral justification by which we invade?"

"There is no need to make that point any clearer, Your Majesty. But I did have something to ask. Why choose such a vicious response? Why not accept our surrender?"

A natural question. To Ainz, it was all logically sound, but from his perspective, it must simply seem like an onslaught of uncalled-for violence.

Ainz nodded gravely. No point or means of hiding it, so he simply spoke as their plan dictated.

"There is no benefit to doing so. I shall make an example out of you, and thus all shall know how foolish opposing the Nation of Darkness truly is. For that purpose, once we have wiped your army out, we shall march upon the capital and reduce it to rubble. For hundreds or thousands of years it will stay that way, an everlasting reminder of

the wretches who dared defy me.”

“...That does not sound like jest.”

“I did not intend it as such. It’s simply a statement of fact.”

“But why?”

“Why?” Ainz echoed, confused.

“The Nation of Darkness possesses great power. You could easily demonstrate, Your Majesty, without such extreme tactics.” Zanac licked his lips, then swallowed hard.  
“Why be so vindictive?”

“Vindictive, hmm.”

Zanac appeared concerned he had upset Ainz, but he felt no such emotions.

“What is it you’re after?”

Ainz rolled that phrase around his tongue.

Once, the friends he’d made in *Yggdrasil* had been everything to Ainz—or Satoru Suzuki. Those memories still gleamed. That was why he had wanted to see them once more.

When the game drew to a close, in the instant everything was about to be lost forever—he had been sent here.

The end was *not* the end.

Merely the beginning.

The NPCs his friends created came to life, and he could sense the spirit of his old friends in their every action. At first, he’d been scrambling to make sense of the changes happening around him and feared they might betray him—a notion that now seemed laughable. He barely ever worried about that anymore.

But it might not just be Ainz who found himself here. There had been plenty of signs that other players existed.

Naturally, this had given him hope that the friends from his happiest days might be here, too. Admittedly, if being present for the end was a requirement, then he was likely alone.

Each time he'd used certain spells or gained new information, he'd felt their absence most intimately. But as long as he did not know for sure, hope remained.

Perhaps it was foolish to cling to a hope that faint. Perhaps it was pathetic in a way.

But those times had been everything to him.

But now that dream was fading.

His friends were precious. But the NPCs were just as important to him.

They were like the children his old companions had left behind.

And as the last one here, it was his duty to keep them safe.

That was why Ainz was prepared to sacrifice everything else. His top priority was making his nation stronger—so that the NPCs would never be exposed to danger, so that the Great Tomb of Nazarick didn't lose a single soul.

Shalltear had been placed under the control of someone unknown once before. He'd managed to steal her back, but she could have leaked all Nazarick's secrets and enabled a hostile actor to deal them a fatal blow.

He could not let that happen again.

"What am I after? That sounds hard, yet it is quite simple, really. I seek only one thing. Happiness."

"Happiness?" Zanac blinked at him.

Ainz chuckled. Like he hadn't said anything that odd.

"Man or not, that's what we all want."

He'd forgotten to maintain his usual act and simply spoke as if with a dear friend.

“And you’ll rob others of their happiness to achieve that?”

“Don’t we all? If those who matter to me are happy, then why should I care what happens to anyone else? If the happiness of your citizens required the suffering of those from other realms, would you tell your subjects, *Sorry, you can’t be happy?*”

“Preposterous!” Zanac quickly recovered himself, bowing his head. “I do apologize, Your Majesty.”

Ainz, too, had reassumed his monarchal demeanor.

“No apology necessary.”

“With your wisdom and power, was there no other means of achieving happiness?”

“...Perhaps there was. But perhaps not. If I look up and see a simple path to happiness right in front of me, there is little point in waffling around in maybes. I am far better off seizing that chance that has presented itself. What was the line? The goddess of fortune has no hair in the back.”

Zanac looked puzzled.

“What an odd sort of goddess. Forgive me—I meant no insult to the object of your faith.”

“Oh, don’t concern yourself. I have no faith at all. It was merely a saying I’d heard once. My point is, for the happiness of those I must protect, misfortune must fall upon your country. That is the basis of most wars, really. Satisfied?”

“I suppose. I certainly have thought similar things from time to time. For the benefit of my country, for the happiness of those I rule—considering these things is the duty and burden of any leader. If our destruction brings comfort to the citizens of the Nation of Darkness, then I understand why you will not accept surrender. Nothing can be done to change it.”

“Glad we could clear that up. Perhaps it is my turn to ask a question, but I’m afraid nothing comes to mind...” Ainz looked up, thinking. “Oh, I supposed there is one thing. If you are wearing his armor, what about the sword? Who carries the blade of Gazef Stronoff?”

"We have entrusted that to Brain Unglaus."

"Brain Unglaus? Oh, him."

One of the men who'd borne witness to his duel with Gazef. He vaguely recalled the name. It had been a long time ago, and the man's face escaped him.

While they razed the capital, there were several items worth recovering. One of which was Gazef's sword.

"Is he here with you?"

"No, he is not, Your Majesty. He should still be at the castle."

"Ah. Then it doesn't matter what spells we use to wipe you out."

Cocytus was in charge of securing the palace, so he should mention this detail to him.

"We have no intention of losing, but I would appreciate it if you could use gentler spells that kill without undue suffering."

".....Hmm. A reasonable request. In deference to your candor, I shall slaughter you as gently as I can."

"I appreciate it," Zanac said, grinning.

Ainz was left speechless. This man was rather daring. Ainz was not sure he could have done the same.

*I bet I couldn't. Is this what being born into the life does for you? Very educational.*

Zanac picked up his glass and drained it. He clearly didn't even entertain the idea it might be poisoned.

"Most refreshing, Your Majesty. There is one more thing I'd like to ask. Were any of your subordinates responsible for my brother's death?"

"Your brother?" Ainz blinked at him. Come to think of it, he had heard that a kingdom prince had been eliminated. The name escaped him. All he could remember was that it had been quite long ago. "I believe so, yes."

"Ah... so he is dead. That had been bothering me for some time. I appreciate you confirming it. Good-bye."

And with that, Zanac got to his feet and headed toward his horse.

Ainz put the glasses away and headed toward the soul eater. Zanac waited by his horse for Ainz's arrival.

Unsure why he was waiting, Ainz climbed aboard the soul eater. Only then did Zanac mount his steed.

A prince and a king. Given the difference in their standings, perhaps he had not wanted to be looking down upon him. Ainz was unfamiliar with manners surrounding mounts and horses but sensed this was proper noble decorum.

*I should probably learn aristocratic etiquette sometime soon. There's so many things to learn. Will I ever get caught up?*

•

"Your Highness!"

The nobles were there to greet Zanac upon his return. Nearly all held lands nearby and had responded to his call.

No one had stopped him from riding out, but now it was the opposite, and he found he could not step inside the camp. They had all pinned their hopes on him. Hopes that the King of Darkness would make some concession.

Zanac started with the question foremost on all their minds.

"It was no use. The King of Darkness is here to massacre all of us. No room for negotiation at all."

It seemed odd to him that this turned any of them pale. Had they still believed anything else would happen here?

Zanac got off his horse and left them to their anguished thoughts.

Inside his tent, the war minister met him with a wry smile.

“So no good news, then?”

“Exactly what we thought. But there was one surprise.”

“Oh? I’ve never seen the King of Darkness. How vile a monster was he?”

Zanac smiled.

“Much more human than I expected.”

The minister’s eyes went wide. Perhaps for the first time since Zanac had met him.

He reflected upon his meeting with the King of Darkness.

His appearance was certainly that of a hideous monster. His aura was palpable, and the robes draped on his person were clearly precious beyond all measure. But beneath it all was a motivation most anyone could relate to—the happiness of those he cared about.

That seemed incredibly human. Not at all like the undead—the sworn enemies of all living things.

He had no idea what line of thought had led the King of Darkness to this specific strategy. But like he’d said, he could understand his reasons.

“Yeah, that’s... my takeaway. He’s just... like any human.”

Zanac’s gaze drifted to the tent above.

Perhaps there had been a better move. Long ago, before it came to this. But it was too late now.

“...How goes the battle preparations and setting up the chain of command?”

“Those under your direct command—the capital forces—can move out at any time. Dividing them up by address proved very effective. But the movements of the landed nobility are rather sluggish. It’s almost as if they’re competing to be the worst.”

The war minister did not hide his disgust.

"That's only to be expected. They are not under our command, and many of them have not made their peace with death yet. All we ask of them is that they not strike the first blow. I want to believe they can at least manage that much."

If they couldn't keep up, that was certainly an issue, but without them, they'd lose a quarter of the army's strength—far worse.

Even if the King of Darkness used that spell again and they lost two hundred thousand, they would still have half their number. An alarming figure, but if the noble-led troops were half that remaining number, then their role would be much more important than a quarter initially suggested.

"So what's the plan, then?"

"We don't really have one, Your Highness," the adviser admitted, looking exhausted. "We're not even in any cohesive formation to speak of. All we can manage is an unorganized charge. Which means if morale collapses, so do we... Should we attempt to cut off our path of retreat?"

"Belay that. We're better off putting the royal knights out front. And—"

"Please, Your Highness. Leave that to *us*."

Zanac raised an eyebrow. He was far from a formidable warrior himself, but the idea of this egghead waving a sword around was unconvincing.

"If someone must lead the charge, it should be me. Our prince should remain in command at the rear."

Zanac met his gaze and held it a long moment. Then he nodded.

"I'm glad we're in agreement..." The minister's eyes darted up to the tent's roof. There was nothing to see there. The tent top blocked his view of the sky. But he stared at it a long moment before murmuring, "Honestly, I never much cared for Stronoff. But now every day I wish he were still with us."

"I feel much the same way, except I rather liked the man."

The minister smiled faintly, then turned his attention to a commotion suddenly arising outside.

“What’s that? Has the Nation of Darkness begun their advance?”

“No...,” Zanac said, listening closely. “This is something else.”

Several men came rushing into the tent.

All feudal lords with land near—well, not that close, really—but relatively near the capital. Their number included several of the pale faces he’d noted earlier. The rest must be mercenaries. He saw fresh blood on their blades.

“You dare enter the prince’s tent with drawn blades?! Stand down!”

None of them responded to the minister’s roar. Eyes like cornered rats, all on Zanac.

It was all Zanac could do not to double over laughing.

He’d suspected as much from the start, but this made it all too clear just how stupid they were.

Perhaps it had been an error to move the knights away from him, positioning them with the commanders. This desperate attempt was only possible because there was no one left to stop them. It had never occurred to him anyone would try to mutiny here—he had clearly placed far too much faith in humanity.

No, wait.

Arguably, they were making the right choice. They were just searching for a way to get through this ordeal alive.

Thus, Zanac had only himself to blame. It was his inability to sense where their hearts lay, assuage their fears, and unify them.

He wondered if his father could have done better, and despite his best efforts to look intimidating, he once again had to fight off a smile.

“Down, you fools!”

“...Halt, Minister.”

“But, Your Highness...!”

“I said halt. Stand down.”

“I cannot accept that order.”

“Minister—”

“That’s quite enough, Your Highness. Buying time will get you nowhere.”

“Hmph. That was hardly my intent.”

He might be girded in a national treasure, but he had little combat training or experience. His brother might have fared better, but Zanac stood little chance of cutting his way out of this.

If this mutiny was not on impulse but planned, his fate was as good as sealed.

But when he glared around the room, they flinched.

Pathetic. If they believed themselves to be in the right, then they should be more sure of themselves. Zanac followed his own example there, standing strong and unyielding.

“What business brings you to my tent? I’m sure you are well aware what these drawn blades signify.”

“—We are, Your Highness. We demand that you offer up a surrender.”

Zanac smiled. “The King of Darkness will accept no surrender. I spoke to him about just that. There is nothing we can do to change his mind. Perhaps you’ll find this hard to believe, but our sole path to salvation is to fend his forces off.”

“We can’t win...,” one noble whispered.

Zanac agreed. “Yet, fighting is our only option. I offered him our capitulation. In vain. Once again, the only way we survive this is to fight.”

“Perhaps for you, Your Highness. But if we impress him, perhaps he will allow *us* to escape. Our lives in exchange for yours.”

That got them all chattering at once.

"This is all the fault of that idiot who attacked their convoy! We're not to blame!"

"We pledge loyalty to the King of Darkness!"

To Zanac's ears, these words were indistinguishable from the prattling of young court ladies idly discussing their ideal knights over tea and crumpets.

"Let me be clear on one point. Attempting to capture me will get you nowhere. I am a prince, here to fight until the bitter end. If you come at me, know that it may cost you your life."

Honestly, what a mess this all turned out to be.

At the hands of his own allies. What an unseemly end.

Perhaps he should consider it a stroke of luck these fools would perish here and cause no trouble for his father and sister.

With that warrior by her side, these fools would never put Renner down.

"If you want my head, come and take it!"

Zanac drew his sword, and the war minister stood by his side.

He had no confidence in his skills, but his equipment was far superior.

When none of them moved, he glared.

"What? You came here with blood on your swords! You chose not the way of the poison chalice! The moment you dirtied your own hands, you must have been prepared for it to end like this!"

The insurrectionists exchanged glances.

Clearly, they hadn't thought that far ahead. Zanac found that disappointing. He would have preferred to die at the hands of someone aware of the consequences.

In the face of the armies of darkness, fear had drawn their heartstrings too taut, and they had snapped, rushing headlong into this foolish mistake.

Perhaps he had never been cut out to be king. He possessed none of his father's magnetism, his brother's authority, or his sister's wits. But that was fine. He had never really wanted to be king. He had only wanted to make this country better.

Indeed.

The country, the citizens, and his family...

He had just wanted them to be happy.

One of the noblemen yelled something at the tent flap, and several burly mercenaries came rushing in.

Zanac swore under his breath, then remembered how his brother swung the blade. He did his best to imitate that roar as he charged into the fray.

•

Ainz was discussing the assault on the capital with Cocytus, Aura, and Mare when Albedo came back from checking the final formations with a frown on her face. He turned toward her, wondering what had happened.

“Lord Ainz, the enemy have fallen into disarray.”

“...What? Disarray? How so?”

Ainz rose to his feet and stepped outside. There was definitely something going on. It looked like they were turning on one another.

Eventually a group of knights came charging out of the formation. It did not look like they were trying to land the first blow of the battle.

Ainz and his minions watched in silence as they approached the Nation of Darkness camp. From the ramshackle gear, these had to be a group of mercenaries, accompanied by the nobles who'd hired them.

An older man in aristocratic finery emerged from the host of imposing fighters. He called out, his voice tinged with hysteria, and the wind caught his words, carrying them to Ainz's ears.

"We wish to speak with the King of Darkness! Prithee!"

Zanac was not among them. Between the evident disarray and this small breakaway group, he had a hunch what had gone down.

"Albedo, bring them to me."

Albedo bowed her head, but Ainz didn't even look her way. He turned back to his tent and sat down upon his makeshift throne. The three guardians inside spoke not a word as they took their places beside him.

Soon, Albedo entered with a dozen or so nobles in tow. Their guards were forced to wait outside.

They flinched at the sight of Ainz, gasped at the sight of Cocytus, and were baffled by the presence of Aura and Mare.

"Bask in the glory of His Majesty's visage!"

The kingdom nobles took a knee by the entrance, bowing low.

"Raise your heads," Albedo intoned before finally taking her place by Ainz.

"An honor to be graced with your presence, Your Majesty," the eldest noble said, apparently speaking for the group. From the deference the others showed, he was clearly the leader. "We are but supplicants awed by your grandeur, wishing only to serve beneath your feet. First, we bring you this gift..."

One of them thrust out a bag. Albedo started to step forward, but Ainz stopped her. He rose slowly from his throne—a move he'd rehearsed many times before—and stepped toward the nobleman.

He took the bag.

*Not a trap, then.*

Rather disappointed, he inspected the gift.

He could smell fresh blood wafting from inside. It was all too easy to predict the contents.

Ainz opened it anyway, peering inside.

His eyes met Zanac's.

He looked back at some length. He had only just met the man for the first time, so it was hard to rule out the possibility of a look-alike. But from their behavior, the odds of that were not high.

Ainz closed the bag, handing it to Albedo on his way back to the throne.

"Give that a proper burial."

They still had more than enough bodies to create undead from. There was no need to make use of Zanac's.

"What happened to the armor he was wearing?"

The gathered nobles looked confused. Likely they thought bringing the head of their commander would earn them lavish praise.

"Well?" Albedo hissed. "Do you intend to not answer Lord Ainz's question?"

"R-right, the, um... I believe the prince's body is still in his tent," the leader managed to blurt out.

"Oh. Fine. You have done well."

They looked delighted and bowed their heads again.

"Fine work deserves a fine reward. What is it you wish?"

"Please, spare our families, Your Majesty! We swear unswerving loyalty to you and you alone!"

This cry went up from a nobleman toward the rear of the group. The urgency was apparent on his face. The leader spoke up as well.

"Silence! But my wish is the same. Your Majesty, we beg for clemency."

Each of them quickly voiced their agreement. Ainz calmly raised a hand, stopping their

cries.

“Very well. I understand your request. You are all in agreement on this?”

They nodded vigorously.

“Then we shall not kill you. Albedo—have them sent to Neuronist.”

“—Understood.”

“Your Majesty, our families...” one whispered. Ainz did not let that pass.

“Them too?” He smirked. But they did not catch his meaning. “You’ve talked me into it. Albedo, find out where their families are located and send them all together.”

“As you wish, Lord Ainz. Gentlemen, this way.”

Albedo led the noblemen out of the tent. Once they were out of earshot, Ainz beckoned Aura over.

“Tell Neuronist not to kill them until they beg for death.”

“You got it, Lord Ainz!”

Aura started to move, but he caught her hand. She looked surprised.

“And keep them alive for a long while even *after* they do.”

“Okay!”

He let go, and Aura took that to mean his orders were complete. She ran out after Albedo.

Ainz watched her go, giving orders to the remaining guardians.

“I’ve lost all interest in this farce. Cocytus, take command with Mare as your second. I’ll allow you both to join the fight if you so wish. Do not allow a single kingdom citizen to leave here alive.”

Their voices echoed in the affirmative.

And an hour later—the Re-Estize Kingdom's last army vanished from this world.



OVERLORD [4] The Witch of the Doomed Kingdom

# **CHAPTER 4**

## **WELL-LAID TRAPS**

# 1

Heels clicking, Hilma led three fellow Eight Fingers members through the halls of the manor, bound for the great hall designated by the King of Darkness's retainer.

Everyone else was already there, ready for the arrival of the emissary.

This was because the retainer had specified the day and location but not a time. Hilma and the other chiefs were taking turns, ensuring there was always someone waiting on their arrival.

If they kept this emissary waiting, it could be interpreted as an insult, which opened up the possibility of being put through pure hell again. If there was even the slightest chance of that happening, they had to do everything within their power to prevent it.

A minute had passed since they started their walk.

The manor was large to begin with, but they'd specifically placed the resting areas as far from the great hall as possible. There were closer options, but after taking everything into consideration, they decided it would be better to reserve nearby rooms for the storage of any incidental baggage.

The silence may have proven unbearable. One of their number—Prian Polson—spoke.

"I don't care for *that*."

All Hilma's nerves were concentrated on her ears.

She could definitely hear children's voices. But it was so faint, you could not tell where in the building they came from; if you weren't listening for it, chances were you'd never even notice. Keeping the baggage near the main hall and their living quarters far removed kept it at that threshold.

But while it might not bother them, if the King of Darkness's envoy objected to the sound, the results would be beyond imagining.

".....Could be an issue," Orrin said after some thought. "Shall we insist upon total silence?"

Everyone nodded. They'd have to mention it to those they were relieving and have them hush the children back in the break room.

But the brief conversation must have lightened the mood a bit. Orrin spoke again, saying what was on all their minds but none had dared to voice.

"Still... will they actually come to save us?"

The stress of waiting for the Nation of Darkness's emissary had clearly gotten to him.

Seven days ago, an army of four hundred thousand had marched out of the capital. A day before, word got around that the Nation of Darkness's armies were camped outside the capital walls. They'd only been on standby a single day, but the toll on their minds was far greater than the physical fatigue.

They'd received these instructions when the war began—over a month ago.

Specifically, when the Nation of Darkness reached the capital, they would transport those who demonstrated loyalty to a safe place but no more than a thousand. They'd been tasked with making that list.

The manor currently housed exactly that number—Eight Fingers members and families.

The total sum of Eight Fingers members was far greater. The chiefs had been forced to pick and choose the most skilled and loyal members. With families included, they'd quickly reached their limit. That was why they could hear children's voices.

But all feared salvation would never come.

On their scramble to the top of the Eight Fingers, each of them had promised to save lives, then ordered those same people slain when their use reached an end. They were in that exact position now on the opposite side of that bargain and could not shake the notion from their minds.

Without so much as a glance backward, Hilma said, "The King of Darkness is a man of his word."

"I—I believe he is!" Orrin stammered. Clearly panicking. Hilma's words suggested he doubted their benefactor. "I never meant to imply otherwise."

His voice echoed far louder than those of the children. Realizing this, he clamped his lips shut.

No one else dared speak a word until they reached the great hall.

When they opened the door, they were met with listless smiles on tired faces.

The Nation of Darkness's emissary had yet to arrive.

Hilma felt a wave of relief tinged with fear. Likely all four of them felt the same.

"There you are!" Noah Zwedane said. "Our turn to rest. If they arrive—"

He glanced at the magic item—a handbell.

It was paired with another of similar make—if one was rung, the other would, too.

If they were moved too far apart, the effect would be severed. There was only one ring available—not especially versatile and rather lacking as a means of communication. But they came in handy for things like this.

"We'll let you know," Prian said.

"I'm *still* on standby? Is this king ev— Fine, *His Majesty*. Don't look at me like that."

Those words came from a thin, reedy man.

The chief of the slavery division, Coccodor.

All the kingdom's criminals had been freed from prisons, conscripted into the armies facing the Nation of Darkness on the front lines. They'd snatched him up during the turmoil and brought him here.

At first, opinions were split on what to do with him.

If he joined the war against the Nation of Darkness, he would definitely die—and he was a colleague, so they had always intended to save him. What caused the split was how to introduce him to the King of Darkness.

He was chief of a division that had long since been reduced to a mere shadow of itself;

several had said there was no point in mentioning him at all. But the opposing side argued that he was still an Eight Fingers chief, and the King of Darkness likely already knew who he was, so to do otherwise might make it seem like they were hiding things.

Wanting to eliminate any risk, the latter option had won out.

The next time they were on the chopping block, they'd make the introductions.

It was now unanimous that he would be introduced the moment the emissary arrived. To avoid arousing even the slightest suspicions.

“You can’t leave here. We have to present you properly.”

For that reason, he’d been trapped in the great hall, waiting for an emissary who could arrive at any time. He ate and slept here. And Coccodor was nearing the end of his rope.

“Look, I am grateful, okay? The bribes you sent kept me safe from the terrors of that prison. And you snatched me out of that mess of a mobilization. Despite my failings.”

“What’s your point, Coccodor?” Noah asked.

“It’s too generous,” Coccodor said, his eyes narrowing. “I’ve lost all my money and connections. What are you after? This manor is already filled with Eight Fingers members. You’re not planning on killing me to encourage unity, are you?”

“Huh?” Hilma was genuinely startled. Not just her, either. Everyone but Coccodor looked stunned.

Sometimes forcing everyone to share responsibility for a crime could bind you in the life. He must be implying something of the kind, but...

“Wh-why are you all...? I’m guessing I’m off the mark.”

They looked at one another, like they were dealing with an awkward relative.

“Whatever are you talking about, Coccodor?” she asked. “No, Ampetif. You’re one of us!”

“—Huh?!”

Now it was his turn to look flabbergasted. She almost laughed out loud.

"Wh-what are you actually after? Are you all monsters wearing flayed skins, disguising yourselves? At the behest of the King of Darkness?!"

He was clearly beside himself with fear because he simply couldn't wrap his head around their actions.

The monsters he mentioned were imaginary, a threat mothers made to convince naughty children to stay in bed. Adventurers agreed no such monster had ever been encountered.

"I knew something was up! You all went on the same diet?! Hilma's taken hers way too far! Being that thin can't be healthy! If you're skin stealers, that explains it!"

She just smiled warmly at him. What bliss it must be to not know what hell was like.

"Wh-why are you smiling?"

"Oh, don't worry, Ampetif. I thank you for your kind thoughts."

"—Huh?!"

"What?"

"N-no, nothing. Forget it. I really... All joking aside, are you really Hilma? The Hilma Shugneus? Not a twin sister? Or magically mind controlled?"

"Am I that different?"

She was very thin, but that was obviously not what he meant. She was probably just much, much nicer now. But wasn't that a welcome change? She did not think it deserved so much suspicion.

".....You're like a totally different person. That goes for all of you. Are you sure you haven't been replaced?"

"We've just been through that much," Noah said.

Everyone nodded. And Coccodor looked spooked.

"Like... what? I don't want to pry, but... a warning would—"

Then the center of the room *changed*. It seemed like a layer of pitch had appeared. Thin yet seemingly bottomless. A semicircle with the bottom cut off where it lay flush against the floor.

Everyone had been dragged through one of these before. It was a Gate. High-level magic, beyond any caster in the kingdom, only used by the King of Darkness and his minions. If one was active here—

Hilma hastily dropped to one knee. She could feel Coccodor following suit.

Head down, Hilma's hands clenched tight.

Their fate lay in the balance.

Was this their salvation or their destruction?

She heard a single set of footsteps.

"You may raise your heads."

Before the Gate stood a girl, chest oddly prominent for her apparent age. Hilma had not been formally introduced, but she had heard this girl addressed before as Shalltear. No one here had the courage to use that name. Coccodor was blissfully ignorant, but even he could read the room.

"I have been sent to collect you. I'm told you've selected a thousand, so have them brought here at once."

"Right away! They're waiting nearby."

Orrin ran off. He was the strongest of them.

"Shadow demon," Shalltear called—and a demon stepped out of the darkness. It had been here the whole time. They had all suspected their every action was under surveillance. This merely confirmed it.

The shadow demon whispered something to Shalltear. She nodded, listening closely. When it was done, Noah spoke, choosing his words carefully.

"Uh, um... while Orrin is fetching the others, there's someone we should introduce. Can you spare a moment for it?"

"That will not be necessary. You all have baggage to bring, so let us begin moving it all. It seems there is quite a lot, so it will be faster if we use my minions—do you mind?"

"I-if it's not too much to ask."

"Excellent," Shalltear said and cast a spell. Probably a summon of some sort. Several powerful undead stepped forth. They were let out of the room and came back with stacks of luggage, carrying them all through the Gate.

The baggage was taken care of in astonishingly short order, and as the movers wrapped up, they heard footsteps rushing toward them.

This was the largest hall in the manor, but it wasn't enough to accommodate one thousand people.

"Pass through the Gate in the order you arrive. You will find yourselves in a village built within a forest. You'll exit into the village square, so do wait there."

Following these orders, they began filing through the portal.

Some were certainly hesitant to step into the unknown, but since their arrival here, they'd been repeatedly told never to disobey an order, so there was less chaos than anticipated.

The biggest problem was boys of a certain age—they had a tendency to stop and stare. And quite a few nearby girls were openly disgusted as a result.

Shalltear was certainly a showstopper.

Love at first sight was as inevitable as the hostility from her own gender.

But Hilma was taking mental notes.

If these children did anything stupid, she would be held responsible. She would have to take steps to prevent that. She was most on guard against girls touching their own flat chests, comparing themselves to Shalltear.

But those children's parents took their hands and pulled them smoothly through the Gate. To her great relief, no significant problems occurred.

The chiefs were the last to pass through, and when they stepped out of the Gate, they found themselves in the promised location. A row of wooden houses surrounded by the scent of the forest.

The undead had piled all the luggage in the center of the square, and there was confusion in the air—or was it excitement? The younger they were, the more the latter held sway.

Perhaps a natural reaction for anyone after their first passage through a Gate.

"Listen up!" Noah roared. And the crowd quickly fell quiet—faster than expected.

Shalltear was floating above the ground, perhaps to ensure all here could see her.

"We are hard at work on your villages and will guide you to them in a week's time. Until then, you will live here. To help with village maintenance, we will be loaning you four golems. Use them if you need to move anything heavy. There are undead placed around this village, but they are there to prevent monsters getting in. However, these undead are not good at improvising—if you set foot outside their ring, they'll attack you as well. Ensure you do not step past their defenses."

Shalltear scanned the crowd, making sure everyone understood her.

"For the rest, work out how to get through this week together. We have left you two weeks' worth of provisions, so that should pose no issue. I will return once in three days' time, so if any issues arise, report them then."

She came in for a landing, looked around once, and her eyes settled on Coccodor.

"You are one of the chiefs?"

"Y-yes. Er, um... did you want something from me?"

He could clearly *feel* how outclassed he was and was being extremely mindful of his tone.

"You will have to visit the Prince of Fear."

"Huh?"

Shalltear closed the old Gate and opened a new one.

Pure animal instinct warned Coccodor this was bad news, and he looked around for help.

His eyes met hers, but Hilma instantly averted her gaze. She could not argue with Shalltear's decision. Nor could any of her companions. None dared say a word.

"W-wait, don't! I don't wanna! I can see it in your faces! Help!"

"Yes, yes, move along now."

Shalltear grabbed Coccodor and forcibly hauled him through the portal. His attempts to resist were utterly futile.

"No, stop! Help!"

*Sorry, Coccodor.*

Hilma watched him vanish through the magical doorway and let out a small sigh. The Gate vanished.

No one relaxed. A silence settled over the square.

Most of these thousand souls were blissfully unaware of what hell awaited him. But seeing Coccodor hauled off like that told them more than enough. No one dared move a muscle.

It was all too clear the one who brought them here had not done so out of kindness. Their new home seemed host to untold horrors.

"We failed to save Coccodor" Noah said, moving to Hilma's side.

They had not wanted anyone else to peer into those hellish depths. But preventing it had proved impossible. The guilt was overwhelming.

"A shame, truly. But... it won't kill him. Let us call it a rite of passage. Now he, too... will know. Know why we value one another so."

"A rite... yes. Calling it that does make me feel better."

"Hilma, Noah, I share your concerns for his well-being. But we have other business to tend to first."

It fell to them to alleviate the concerns of the crowd.

Hilma stepped forward.

If the Nation of Darkness wanted them dead, they would have left them where they were. It would be pointless to go to the trouble of transporting them here. Or taking Coccodor away for that matter.

All Shalltear's actions were proof that the King of Darkness had kept his promise.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," she said, bowing her head.

She did not know which direction he was in. But this was the only way she had of expressing her feelings.

It was very much like a prayer.

•

Three guardians stepped forth from the camp outside the kingdom capital.

Cocytus was in charge of toppling the castle. Aura was tasked with securing critical facilities. And Mare's job was to cast spells that hit wide areas, reducing the city to a heap of rubble.

Each had minions following in their wake.

Mare was backed by the Hanzos, Cocytus by the frost virgins, and Aura by her own bestiary.

The streets ahead were eerily silent. Were the city's residents already in mourning? Cowering in fear of the Nation of Darkness?

A few days before, they had annihilated the kingdom's armies. From the camp nearby, Ainz could see a paltry number of troops standing atop the capital's walls, ready to

defend them.

Far too few. But that was arguably true for Ainz's camp as well.

There were no high-level minions here, not even the Nazarick Old Guards. Just Ainz, Albedo, and ten undead Ainz had made—death knights and the like.

Albedo was in full plate, a halberd in hand. She had a World Item on her person as well, just in case.

“.....Almost time?”

The guardians spread out, surrounding the city. Ainz was watching from a distance, Albedo by his side.

“Yes,” she answered. “With us this far apart, it’s their last chance to act. If they do nothing here, then we can safely say we’ve come up empty.”

Ainz grunted in agreement, his eyes back on the city.

Just in time to spot something flying out of the capital. He glanced around but couldn’t identify any backup.

The intel they had showed only one man with the courage to go up against magic that could fell an army two hundred thousand strong.

The man with the power suit. The Drops of Red.

He narrowed his eyes, observing the approaching shape. “All right, here we go,” he muttered.

They could now shift to phase two of this operation, but that carried some concerns.

This was a very important plan. It required a delicate response, like walking on thin ice. Could he actually pull it off? Maybe not, but neither could he leave such a vital role to anyone else.

The shadow was closing in.

Honestly, he was a bit appalled at his foe’s recklessness; did he not wonder about the

conspicuous lack of aerial defenses? Did he think none of the other guardians spotted him flying over? Or was he taking action in full knowledge of all that?

If he saw the trap for what it was and flew in anyway, then that spoke to his courage and determination.

“Reckless or merely conceited? Or... well, either way, we’ll soon learn.”

“Yes,” Albedo said.

“It’s all yours.”

“I shall handle it.”

She was rarely this taciturn. Ainz was unsure what was on her mind. But she definitely didn’t seem like she was in a *good* mood.

Ainz looked back up at the power suit. It would probably take a while to get here. Maybe they should have attacked closer to the city, Ainz thought—then realized his mistake.

Odds were this attack was a decoy.

“Does he know his role? Or is he ignorant of that fact?”

“Who knows? Either way, stage three is a lock. Ready?”

“...No problem. I will play my part to perfection. You focus on yours.”

“Fine,” Albedo said. “No, wait—your wish is my command, Lord Ainz.”

At last the power suit reached the Nation of Darkness’s base. It was one hundred yards up and one hundred yards out.

From here, they could clearly identify it. Though they had never had any doubt.

The crimson power suit hit the brakes, hovering in midair. The face was hidden, but it seemed to be glaring down at him.

Albedo raised a hand, and the death knights stepped forward into the line of fire.

The box on the hovering power suit's shoulder absorbed light—then released it as lightning.

"Chain Dragon Lightning." Ainz muttered the spell's name even as the electric dragon hit one of the death knights. It took massive elemental damage, and then the spell leaped to the undead around it.

The blinding light illuminated their surroundings—and then there were no undead. It had taken them all out in an instant. The spell had not struck Ainz or Albedo—not because the pilot had intended it but just sheer coincidence.

"Such insolence! State your name!" Albedo snarled. So loud Ainz almost clapped his hands over his ears. Even from this distance, the pilot must have heard—but no answer was forthcoming. No—there *was* an answer. If you could call it one.

The boxed weapon rack on the suit's left shoulder began absorbing light and activated a different spell.

Ainz and Albedo were enveloped in a torrent of fire, raining down all around them.

Fire Storm. A faith-based area-of-attack spell.

Fire was Ainz's weakness. But this spell was not buffed by any special skills nor cast by a mage of Ainz's level, so it did not do much damage. Still, he could hardly afford to sit here ignoring it.

And so he gave an order.

"Go, Albedo. Do not let him escape."

"By your command!"

•

When the order came down, Albedo took a tight grip on her halberd and flew off.

Her black wings fluttering, she soon closed the gap.

Startled by her rapid ascent, the man in the power suit turned away, movements rather stiff.

She tried to slam her weapon into the suit's unprotected back, but just before her blow landed, it shot away—not back to the capital but headed south.

Albedo considered the lay of the land.

Nothing in that direction stood out as remarkable. Nowhere that would make for a good ambush.

Beneath her helmet, her scowl deepened.

*Really, does he think we're so blind we can't tell what he's after? Or... does he just think it won't matter even if we do? In which case, I'd better be careful.*

She glanced back over her shoulder at the Nation of Darkness's camp. She could see a small figure all on his own, looking up at her. She had her orders, but she was a *tank*. Her role was to protect others—especially her one and only master. Leaving him behind felt wrong.

Even worse, she couldn't make her target pay the price for this.

She clicked her tongue once, glaring after the retreating power suit.

There was a backpack-like protrusion on the armor's back, six thrusters firing away. White flames shot out, leaving comet-like tails in its wake.

Anyone unversed in power suits would assume destroying these would rob their capacity for flight and leave them tumbling toward the ground.

But according to her master, those were merely *cosmetic*.

The power suit's flight ability was quite similar to the Fly spell. Her master insisted it was technically something else, but either way, the suit could keep flying even if its thrusters were completely nonfunctional. But her master had not personally verified this, so he'd been careful to point out that this was just how it had been "back in the day."

*But how far is he planning on flying? We're already quite far from our base. Or am I the real target here?*

He was slowly putting more distance between them.

Perhaps he might even get away.

Albedo did not have any skills that increased her flight speed. In chases, she was meant to summon her war bicorn, but since she was yet unable to mount it, she was reliant on her wings. And she had already reached her maximum speed.

But naturally, she was prepared for this. She'd borrowed a speed boost item from her master. If she equipped it, she could close this gap in an instant. So why hadn't she done that yet? To find out what her foe's next move was, naturally.

But if he was *just* trying to run away, Albedo was ready to put a stop to it.

As she scowled at his backside, he abruptly swung around to face her.

Bracing a weapon similar to Shizu's Mana Gun.

"Hmph," Albedo scoffed.

Where Shizu's was shaped like an assault rifle, Cocytus had said this weapon was a heavy machine gun. It had more destructive force than Shizu's.

With a low growl, it spat a stream of bullets in her direction.

Bigger than acorns, the rounds came in very fast and in great quantities—dodging them all would be nigh impossible.

But it was easy enough for Albedo to bat one back from whence it came if she so desired. That would hurt a lot—the weapon damage of her foe's gun, plus her halberd's damage, and the bonus provided by her skills.

She chose not to activate those skills. Instead, she held her halberd high, doing nothing, merely closing the distance between them.

Fully intent on letting all the bullets strike her.

And as the bullets reached her armor—

*Oh, dear.*

—she'd assumed her armor would neutralize any incoming damage, but it didn't even

need to.

Not a single bullet hit her. They were all deflected.

Apparently, these bullets had no magic in them.

Floor guardians could all render unenchanted projectiles useless. If she'd known this weapon hadn't been imbued with magic, she'd have unequipped that item first.

*I was hoping to evaluate the destructive strength of it, but all I've done is reveal one of my own abilities. If we give them another chance, they'll definitely make sure to use something magical...*

Albedo could tell this rattled him. But he must have known it was possible; he quickly took one hand off the gun, holding a palm out toward her.

Preparation for a magic attack, no doubt.

"What now?" Albedo muttered. Once again, using no skills, just advancing steadily toward him. Even at this distance, she had skills that would let her attack him, but she had no intent of giving anything else away. A bright-green light shot from his right hand and struck Albedo.

For an instant her body—her armor, technically—flashed the same color. The light soon faded, doing nothing in particular.

She felt no pain.

This was not because she'd actively defended against the spell to prevent the damage but because her resistance had not allowed the effect to activate at all.

Odds were high this was an instant death spell, the sort of magic her master excelled at.

Spells like that were affected not just by stats, passives, special skills, and items—level difference also played a significant role in determining the success rate, so unless the supporting stat build was extremely specialized, they were only useful on targets of equal level or below.

So an attack from someone reliant on a power suit never stood a chance of harming a

heavily accessorized level-100 NPC like Albedo.

Throwing out an instant death spell to learn the difference in their abilities could be a worthwhile gamble, but if he genuinely believed that magic would work on her... Well, Albedo found that rather insulting.

It was high time she drove her point home.

Albedo was already nearly on top of him, so she lashed out with her fist.

She didn't bother using her halberd, partially to demonstrate her contempt but also because she had no real clue how much damage the weapon would do.

He tried to block the swing with his gun, but she was a bit too fast for him.

Even pulling her punch, a level-100 swing hit quite hard.

There was a loud *clang*, and he went sailing away.

The power suit was a good three yards tall, putting it well over Albedo—so seeing it knocked back that far and shaking like a leaf, it was all rather droll.

*More damage than I expected. Like he's made of tofu.*

She hadn't expected much, but...

*So weak!*

Albedo was actually rather alarmed by it. Nonetheless, she laughed out loud.

“Mwa-ha-ha-ha! Prepare to suffer the fate that befalls all foolish enough to attack Lord Ainz. First, I shall sever your limbs from your body. Next, I shall break each of your teeth so that you may not even bite your own tongue. Oh, perhaps I should do that the other way around? Either way, once I am done, I shall bring you back to Lord Ainz and force you to apologize.”

“Tch...”

Her ears caught a derisive sound.

Beneath the helmet, her eyes narrowed.

"You dare click your tongue at me? How ill-mannered. The moment you attacked without giving your name, I knew you were a boor. I suppose I should simply say this was just as I expected."

"Big talk from a genocidal maniac! All's fair when eliminating absolute evil."

"Oh? From your sudden attack, I assumed you were a primitive incapable of human speech. Well, anyone living in this kingdom is little better than a savage, really."

"Say what you will, Prime Minister Albedo."

Albedo considered the pros and cons of continuing this conversation and decided it might have its uses.

*Perhaps Lord Ainz or Demiurge could think one step ahead...*

She knew her domestic affairs but was not completely confident when it came to political intrigue and diplomacy. But there was no one here to offer her advice, so she had to trust her own instincts.

"I shall, Drops of... What was it again? Sorry, I can't be bothered to learn the names of adventurer parties."

"Won't make much of a minister like that, lady."

Was Drops of Red accurate? Was he deliberately not arguing with that to trick her?

Either way, she intended to keep chatting. The hit she'd landed had told her enough about his strength. If they clashed again, it could get rather messy.

So she pretended to enjoy their banter.

*Buying time is such a drag...*

To keep her foe from catching on, she had to play the part of a haughty tyrant.

•

Albedo flew off after the crimson power suit.

Now Ainz was alone in the camp. If he was right, the next phase would soon begin.

Ainz activated Body of Effulgent Beryl.

If someone wanted to eliminate Ainz and had even an ounce of intelligence, they'd go all in on the weakness shared by all skeleton-type monsters—blunt damage. To achieve his goals here, he could not really afford to take hits that took advantage of this obvious vulnerability and suffer significant damage.

Then he got a ping on his Delay Teleportation.

Just as expected.

He'd figured they weren't after Albedo. Ainz was relieved. If she'd been their target, it would have made things far trickier.

But could he be sure of this? The trap could have multiple layers.

The enemy was already coming at him from behind.

Solo.

That alone told him they were a close-range fighter.

While the delay was still happening, Ainz cast Explode Mine over his shoulder, on the teleport location. Then he stood perfectly still, waiting for his enemy to appear. He already had Life Essence active and wanted to do a visual check on whether it was draining his foe's energy, but he held back.

As they arrived, the explosion went off.

Ainz leaped forward—away from the enemy—and spun around.

“Silver... no, the gleam isn’t right. Platinum? Some metal I don’t know?”

The explosion’s dust cleared, revealing platinum-colored full plate.

Four weapons floated around it.

A spear, a katana, a hammer, and a great sword.

Each was a bit too large for a human to swing; their designs were less practical than playful. Like many of the weapons stored within Nazarick's treasury.

The gleam of these weapons was exactly like the armor itself—they, too, were likely platinum.

But several questions remained. Despite its value as a rare metal, platinum imbued no specific magical effect. He could not see the advantage of crafting weapons with it.

The most likely explanation was that the platinum coating was meant to disguise the actual metal within. There were creatures like that in Nazarick—he'd only just recently learned about the golems in the Prince of Fear's room.

It could also be a metal that merely *looked* like platinum, one unique to this world that Ainz was unaware of.

Ainz watched his foe carefully. Any scrap of information could decide the outcome of this encounter.

His gravest concern was that he couldn't detect any emotion in his foe's demeanor. They stood stock-still ever since arriving, not moving at all. Perhaps an expression of confidence after suffering no injury—or at least that's how it seemed to Ainz, as there was no visible blood or wounds.

But it had to have hurt.

He found it hard to imagine anything could get caught in his Explode Mine and emerge without a scratch. Ainz might be specialized in death spells, but it shouldn't be possible to entirely negate high-level spell damage without a trick of some kind. And Explode Mine had no element, so it was even harder to counter.

Did this aplomb just come from gritting teeth and fighting through the pain? Born of willingness to die in battle? Or was there actually some trick to it after all?

“Did you think I was standing here with my guard down? Like the spell you—”

Ainz had intended this to provoke a reaction but was not permitted to speak further. The armor was preparing to attack—the hammer had floated into easy reach.

One piece of info confirmed, Ainz grinned.

They were after him—not Albedo.

If they refused to engage him in conversation, then they had no reason to buy time. They wanted to finish him before his backup could arrive.

If they had appeared in the air and started talking, he would have known they were after Albedo. Or planning on striking them both down.

Everything was going just as he'd planned.

But the enemy's attacks caught him rather by surprise.

The weapons remained floating. Ainz had imagined a warrior would close in, but instead his foe waved a hand, like issuing an order, and the hammer rocketed toward him.

And it moved really fast.

Like it was thrown by a very high-level player—Ainz was unable to dodge it.

If no magic was involved, he could negate the effects of all projectiles, but this weapon clearly had some sort of magic in it.

So he chose to stand his ground, just like this foe had done, and took the throw head-on. Naturally, the instant the hammer struck him, his spell activated.

Body of Effulgent Beryl completely nullified the blunt damage.

Ainz never once took his eyes off his foe, watching their every movement. He saw this give his opponent pause. Clearly surprised by the lack of visible damage.

The hammer shot back to the warrior's hand as fast as it had left, joining the other weapons after resuming its orbit.

"Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Ainz laughed, spreading his arms wide and driving his invulnerability home. "Do you see? You know full well skeletons are weak to blunt attacks! Naturally, that applies to me as well. But did you really think I would do nothing to address that? Did you mistake me for a fool? Let me be clear."

Ainz thumped his own ribs.

"Any damage of the sort will not work on me."

As he boasted, the enemy made no further attacks. Ainz was thinking furiously about what that could mean. If he read it wrong, it could prove fatal.

His foe raised a hand. And spoke. The voice was clearly male.

"World Isolation Wall."

A wave spread outward, centered on the user, like a distortion in the air itself.

If it maintained the shape it started with, the area was now surrounded by a translucent semisphere. It covered a huge area, most likely best counted in miles. But he was sure his guardians were all on the *outside*.

Ainz's mind went into overdrive.

The clear advantage of spells like this was cutting off contact with external forces. But how effectively could it keep them out? Did it block physical entry from people charging at it? Entry via teleportation spells?

And what about the effective range? It had looked like a half circle, but could you dig under it?

And most importantly, what conditions needed to be met to destroy it?

He had too little information to be certain of anything. But he could make some educated guesses.

First, this foe clearly knew Ainz was a magic caster. At the very least, he would employ a spell that stopped him from teleporting away.

If his opening move was not an attempt at mind control with a World Item, then this was not the enemy who'd brainwashed Shalltear. Or if it was, he had reasons not to use that. Ainz still knew next to nothing, but this was clearly not a foe to be trifled with.

Why? Because Ainz had considerable knowledge of spells and skills. Extensive

training had left him with granular comprehension of their inner workings; his knowledge of fighting techniques was likely unparalleled even within Nazarick.

But Ainz had no memory of whatever move his foe had just used. Given the sheer scale of it, he could only assume it was a super-tier spell or a World Item. And that made it all the more likely this foe could easily throw out other unknowns, activating them in an instant.

This posed a legitimate threat.

A foe who could potentially take down Ainz—or the level-100 floor guardians.

Despite that fact, Ainz displayed no trace of emotion.

For one thing, his face wasn't capable of emoting in the first place. It was possible for his voice or body language to give his feelings away—but it was also because Ainz Ooal Gown would never do something so humiliating.

He could not allow his enemy to sense his relief, his joy.

His certainty that he'd been right to pick this fight.

Ainz kept his eyes focused, observing his opponent.

That technique might be new, but it was not beyond comprehension. For one thing, using it apparently cost health. And a great deal of it at that. This meant the wall that had appeared was not just for show. It must have some *effect*, and he needed to figure out what quickly.

Ainz had Life Essence active, and he'd sensed his foe's health decreasing as the wall went up. Yet, there'd been no reaction from mana essence. His foe seemed like a pure warrior build and likely had little to no mana to begin with.

If this mystery barrier was a prison to prevent Ainz's escape, then he must believe Ainz was trapped here. That might loosen his lips. Especially if he had faith in his own skill.

So Ainz acted generous.

His tone so amenable you'd think he'd forgotten about the hammer.

"I'll forgive the ambush. I assume you know my name, but allow me to state it anyway. I am Ainz Ooal Gown, the King of Darkness. Your turn. May I hear your name?"

There was a long silence before he answered.

"..... Rik Aganeia."

Ainz instantly began analyzing that information.

This meant a sharp increase in the odds that this barrier was not just to prevent his escape but to prevent anyone else from getting in as well. Giving him *any* information was proof he did not intend to let Ainz get away and was quite certain he would receive no reinforcements.

This name had not appeared anywhere in the information Sebas and Demiurge had gathered. It seemed unlikely they had found nothing on a foe this powerful. Even if he'd been in hiding, Ainz had his doubts that anyone this strong could have avoided carving his name into the kingdom's history books.

The most likely explanation? He had given a fake name.

In which case, why?

A kingdom subject would likely just give their name and declare themselves here to vanquish the evil despot invading their lands. If that option was off the table, then this was someone who needed to keep his identity secret. He could be trying to direct Ainz's fury to the real Rik Aganeia. Or perhaps he was simply being cautious, worried that Ainz could do something with knowledge of his true name.

While placing the wilderness under his control, he'd gathered information from a number of subhuman tribes, and that had included the idea that curses were easier to stick if you knew the target's true name—the one linked to their soul. They'd researched the concept back at Nazarick and been unable to find any proof that the theory had any merit—thus, they'd assumed it was mere folk superstition.

It was possible Rik might hail from a tribe that believed in those stories.

Ainz had too little to work with and was just piling guesses on top of guesses. But as far as platinum-clad powerhouses went, he could think of two offhand. One was not likely to take human form, but the other—

"I have heard the songs of the bards. The tales of the Thirteen Heroes. The names of several have been lost—but one of them wore armor rather similar to yours. Was Rik Aganeia his name? I'm sure that bard would be delighted to learn it."

"Oh?" his foe said, with neither a shrug nor any other gesture of note. "I had no clue I was famous enough for any bard to care."

Was this really one of the Thirteen Heroes? Or did he think pretending to be would hide his true nature? Perhaps there was some other motivation.

*Damn it,* Ainz thought.

This was making it far too difficult to tell what was true and what wasn't. But this man had the confidence to go toe to toe with Ainz Ooal Gown, the caster who'd wiped out an army with a single spell. Ainz would need to discover the depths of his prowess before this fight was over.

"Mind if I call you Rik?"

"Don't."

A swift reply. And laced with loathing to boot.

"How rude of me. A bit too friendly! Aganeia, then."

"That will do."

"Good. Then a proposal for you. Would you like to come work for me?"

The air around him seemed to crackle. But Rik neither raised his hackles nor shifted his stance at all. He just stood there.

Baffling.

This would make sense against a clearly weaker foe. Just as Cocytus had taken no stance against the lizardmen. Did Rik believe he had Ainz Ooal Gown outclassed?

That seemed unlikely.

In which case—*was* this Rik's stance?

This bolt-upright posture would make sense if he intended to finish Ainz by ordering these weapons around—and never moving himself.

“...I’ll take that as a no,” Ainz said. “Shame. I can’t talk you into it? I always have a place for true strength. I am treating Dark Hero Momon like a proper subordinate. Should you join me, I could be persuaded to call off the kingdom invasion. Your value is greater than any country.”

“Never.”

His proposal was cut down on the spot. No hesitation at all.

Beneath Ainz’s immobile face, his brain was quickly mulling over the implications.

Even if he was dead certain he could save the kingdom once he took out Ainz, would he really not be the least bit tempted? Or was he convinced the Nation of Darkness would quit the field if Ainz perished?

*Does he just not care what happens to the kingdom? Is he from somewhere else?*

“Light Shroud.”

Rik’s armor began to glow. At first, Ainz thought it was reflecting sunlight, but Rik’s health began dropping again. Clearly, he’d activated another ability.

And that cinched it.

Rik’s moves burned HP.

But health could easily be restored with magic or potions. These moves were likely not *that* strong. Even in this world, the strength of a move was commensurate with its cost.

But Rik busting out a special skill meant diplomacy had failed. Ainz activated a spell of his own.

“Greater Teleportation.”

Ainz moved—to the side of the barrier. The moment his vision cleared, he found the translucent wall standing before him.

“The teleport failed...”

He glanced around, but there was no sign of Aganeia. It was possible he had no pursuit skills.

Ainz had set his destination to the Great Tomb of Nazarick, so it was likely in this direction, beyond the barrier.

He'd verified at least one effect. This wall could completely stop him from teleporting out. But since he'd managed to move to the barrier's edge, he could still teleport around in its confines. Just not out. If he tried, he would travel in that direction and stop once he reached the walls.

That was critical information.

He had never intended to teleport away from the fight, but this had been well worth revealing a card.

Ainz reached out.

If it doubled as a trap, he might take damage from coming into contact, but the odds of that were low. If that was the case, he likely would have taken damage from trying to teleport through it.

His hand touched the barrier.

It looked soft at a glance but was actually extremely hard. He gave it a good push, but not only could he not get through, it didn't even budge. It was like the world ended here.

Ainz pulled out a gold coin and tossed it at the wall.

It hit the barrier and promptly bounced off.

Aiming carefully, he activated Lightning.

“...Nothing gets through. Hmm.”

These results were what he'd expected—and then he heard the ping on Delay Teleportation. Must be Rik.

Ainz activated Body of Effulgent Beryl and stayed very still, keeping his back to Rik.

As Rik arrived, something hit his back at high velocity. It was more blunt damage, so once again the spell's power kept him perfectly protected.

But somehow it pushed him forward, pressing him against the barrier. This was pretty strange. Ordinarily, if damage was canceled out, accompanying effects like knock back were as well. Not with Rik's attack apparently. And Ainz had yet to work out what that meant.

He slowly—and deliberately—turned around.

The hammer retreated to Rik's side. Each of the four weapons floating around him were now wreathed in a white glow. This was new. It looked just like the glow enveloping his armor.

And his health was lower than before the teleport.

What's more, it had dropped by more than when he'd activated his armor. Was this because he had to use this magic on each weapon individually or because teleporting here had also cost health? Ainz wanted more info on this.

"I said bash damage would get you nowhere. Did you not get that?"

"Try and teleport all you like. You can never escape the barrier. You are fated to perish here."

*Not much of a conversation,* Ainz thought. He left that unsaid, keeping his tone light—trying not to wind the man up further.

"Interesting. I'm impressed you had the nerve to cast an anti-teleport barrier. I assume you're prepared for the consequences?"

In lieu of an answer, one of the hovering quartet stopped rotating—the great sword.

—Now.

Clearly, he'd had enough small talk. So Ainz made his move.

"Twin Magic: Obsidian Sword."

The spell created two blades of black stone, which he immediately used to attack Rik.

If his foe was using weapons, he would, too.

The first swing struck the hovering great sword, but the second was dodged by a very unorthodox evasive maneuver.

“What the—?!” Ainz let out a yelp despite himself.

The evasion itself was not at all surprising. But the *way* Rik dodged was impossible, even for Cocytus.

Rik had dodged with a lateral somersault at head height. That alone was odd but... acceptable. The problem was the *lack* of something any *human* should have required.

In order to jump, you had to kneel slightly and put strength into your legs. There were nonnegotiable prerequisites to jumping. But Rik had skipped those steps. No preparation, just straight into the somersault.

It might be possible with the use of Fly or similar magic, but even Ainz would struggle to pull it off. His body would always resist moving like that.

Maybe someone with a body specifically attuned to Fly could reproduce these moves. But Ainz felt like something else could better explain Rik’s bizarre dodge—but the idea wouldn’t quite come together in his mind.

Even as Ainz was frustrated by that, Rik’s great sword came at him again. His obsidian blades were knocked aside by the other hovering weapons.

This great sword moved like it had a mind of its own. Reminded of the weapons that symbolized a guild, Ainz activated a defensive spell.

“Wall of Skeleton.”

The sword slammed into this bony barrier and destroyed it in a single hit.

“...Impressive.”

Where the wall of skeletons had been just moments earlier, the great sword hovered, tip pointed his way. Rather than float back to Rik’s side, it came swinging at him, as if

someone gripped the hilt tightly. Rik himself did not budge. He simply stood there, no stance at all.

And the sight of that finally jogged Ainz's memory.

*Ah. He's like a puppet*

Rik moved like he had strings.

Like there were giant hands above him, one manipulating Rik himself and the other moving the weapons.

*So he's not using Psychokinesis to control the weapons but the armor as well? Wait, is the suit empty? Or is he controlling his own body, too?*

The great sword slashed down with an overhead swing, and Ainz took out a staff—a Blasting Staff—to block it.

The weight was tremendous, and he thought he felt his feet sink slightly into the dirt.

If he had any weapon destruction skills, there might be a point in attacking this great sword, but Ainz had learned nothing of the kind. Acid was effective against physical objects, but if he tried using those spells, it would take too much time. It was Rik himself he should attack.

“Grasp Heart.”

Ainz's specialty was ghost magic. Unfortunately, it did nothing to Rik at all.

Did he have complete resistance against this type of skill? Or was it simply resistance to status effects? As Ainz mulled it over, the great sword took a horizontal swing, moving even faster than before.

“Gah!”

Neither block nor dodge was in time, and he caught the blow on his torso. Slash damage got through his defense, knocking him back a bit—and slammed him into the wall of light. This was not the ideal position.

“Greater Teleportation!”

Ainz moved himself higher into the air. Since his swords worked differently from conventional summons, they remained floating near him.

Up here, he was easy to locate, but he had no intention of gaining distance or hiding until Albedo returned. This was the fight he had *wanted*.

Just in case, he activated Body of Effulgent Beryl once more. Rik was a tiny speck below, and he watched as the man located Ainz and started rising toward him.

Since he wasn't sending the weapons up alone, there might be some limitation—maximum distance, perhaps.

Ainz began dropping.

As they passed each other, he flung his blades.

These obsidian swords were only useful for attacking and worthless for blocking incoming blows. They were fragile things, without the durability blocking would require. If he even tried, they would not last long.

The blades sliced through the air and were batted aside by the weapons surrounding Rik.

Blocking them seemed to be all he could manage—he did not counterattack.

He passed Rik and headed for the ground. That was when a spear shot down from above.

Ainz flung himself forward, barely managing to dodge the attack. Fly was still active, so he easily righted himself.

He did so a short distance away, just as Rik slowly came in for a landing. Three weapons were circling him—at least until the spear pried itself from the ground and returned home.

Ainz had his obsidian blades floating on either side of him.

The more he watched Rik, the more certain he was there was nothing alive inside that armor. He hadn't bent his knees at all upon the landing.

Then—he actually *did* move, taking the great sword in hand.

And charging in fast. The fastest he'd moved yet.

Like a meteor.

Ainz sent the blades toward him, but the circling weapons batted them to the ground.

“Call Greater Thunder”

Bolt after bolt struck Rik, but his charge didn't even slow down. He *was* taking damage. Ainz could see his health dropping. He was just enduring all the pain.

The great sword swung high, then came crashing down.

“Gnh!”

Even as he took damage, the corner of his eye spotted the katana swinging in from the side.

Ainz swung the Blasting Staff in return.

Rik weathered the blow. Assuming a caster's swing was not that strong, he chose not to dodge but to power through so he could land a good hit on Ainz.

That was the correct choice.

Ainz would have done the same in his position.

But here, it was a huge mistake.

Ainz grinned inside as a shock wave sent Rik flying.

Like Yamaiko's Iron Fists of a Lady Teacher, the Blasting Staff had a very high knock-back effect. As a tradeoff, it did almost no damage, but for a caster, the ability to control distance in a fight was vital.

As Rik flew backward, the other weapons were dragged with him. The katana's swing missed, the tip barely scratching Ainz's rib cage.

Rik stayed upright as he flew, and Ainz sent a spell after him.

"Summon Tenth-Tier Undead."

His obsidian blades vanished, replaced by a level-70 undead that specialized in close quarters—a Doomlord.

It wore a rusted crown upon its helmet, a cape stained with blood, its full plate studded with scythe-like blades.

Negative energy—in the form of a black mist—poured from the chinks in its armor, gradually depleting its health. This was the penalty for summoning it with power far beyond its level—making good use of it required a veteran's finesse.

Which didn't matter to Ainz, who only needed it to tank for him.

Summoned monsters were your shields or your swords.

Casters that could do that were strong. But a truly powerful warrior would wisely ignore them.

How would Cocyte have handled it?

He would likely knock the monster into the summoner, close in, and attack both at once.

Or Albedo?

She'd let her defense speak for her, ignoring the monster to focus on bulldozing the caster or smartly pulling aggro so they hit each other.

How would Rik handle it? He had primarily been letting his weapons auto attack. He'd swung the great sword himself once but shown no signs of putting any special skills or martial arts behind it. That meant Ainz still had no real grasp of his potential as a warrior.

Hence this approach.

Rik made a beeline right toward it. No wavering, a regular dauntless charge.

Was he specialized not in the use of these floating weapons but in super-close-range fighting? In that case, he couldn't leave any space between himself and the summons if he wanted to take it out quick.

As Rik closed in, the Doomlord raised its weapon. A war scythe with the blade affixed perpendicular to the handle. It was imbued with negative energy and shrouded in that black mist.

Ainz gave it an order through their magical link.

An open-ended one, merely informing it their foe was likely inanimate and to incorporate that into its approach. Summoned monsters received a portion of their summoner's knowledge base. It likely knew that without him spelling it out, but... best to be sure.

The Doomlord activated a skill.

Ruinous Night.

The black mist sprayed outward, blanketing the area.

This increased the Doomlord's health drain ability but temporarily boosted all combat abilities in return.

Furthermore, it canceled the damage reduction stemming from the gap between its level and its opponent's. *And* any undead within this black mist—naturally, including the Doomlord itself—got a reduction to the effects of anything light-, faith-, or positive karma-based. That effect had no overlap with conventional buffs, so it stacked on top of anything else it had active.

Ainz would rather like to gain the benefits of this himself, but the mist's range was not exactly large, so he was forced to abandon the idea.

He was keeping his distance from their fight, not wanting to be targeted.

And in full observation mode.

Ainz was ready to strip Rik's powers bare.

The Doomlord's scythe struck the floating great sword with a mighty *clang*.

Neither was knocked away; neither gave up any ground.

Their physical strength was an even match.

The sound of weapons clashing echoed again and again as the scythe and the katana traded a flurry of blows.

The scythe deflected the sword's slash, but the hammer acted as a shield, blocking the scythe's follow-up thrust. The spear flew in, but the scythe's hilt knocked it aside. The great sword swung down, but the Doomboss stepped out of the way.

That dodge put it but a half step out, but Rik moved with it, not letting the gap open at all.

Their exchange was nigh even, but Rik was getting more hits in, giving him a slight advantage.

"Negative Burst."

A wave of blackness, like a substance that repelled light itself, spread out around Ainz, swallowing everything in a murky darkness.

This negative energy healed the Doomboss's wounds. But the amount healed was not worth the mana spent—and Rik had emerged unharmed.

The spell had done no damage to him—he'd completely resisted the negative energy. Where did that come from? A racial trait? A job class? Some piece of equipment seemed most likely.

He'd known he was going into a fight with an undead, so naturally he'd shored up his defenses against typical undead attacks. Just as Ainz would increase his fire defenses when facing a fire-breathing dragon.

As the clanging of their blows continued to ring out, Ainz cast his next spell.

"Perfect Unknowable."

Rendered undetectable, Ainz stopped hiding behind the Doomboss, circling around it.

As he did, the katana shot out at speeds that couldn't be dodged, stabbing him right

through the robes at his waist.

He had flawless defense against stab attacks, so it did no damage, but he hastily retreated back into the Doomlord's shadow.

The flying katana quickly returned to auto attacking the Doomlord.

"...Eyes that can see the unknowable, hmm?"

This was not surprising. Even if you weren't at Ainz's level, any advanced player would have a countermeasure prepared for it.

The question was by what specific means had he been spotted... and for that, he lacked an answer. There were far too many options out there and not nearly enough information to narrow them down.

So what should he try next?

Rik seemed eager to attack Ainz directly and kept directing the array of weapons his way, but the Doomlord was covering for him. None of these blows was getting through.

The way this battle was going, if he just cast high-damage spells and summoned new Doomlords each time one died, he would likely emerge victorious. But that was not what Ainz was after.

Rik was clearly an enemy far stronger than any Ainz had faced in this world and had a number of moves Ainz's knowledge could not identify.

If he could learn all that Rik could do, then that would give him an advantage against future foes with similar moves.

So Ainz refrained from using attack spells.

One might think shoring up his defenses would be a wiser move, but he had reasons to avoid that, too. Well aware of the risk, he simply chose to grin and bear it.

He continued watching their exchange carefully.

The Doomlord was being slowly pushed back, but neither was taking much damage.

You could generously call it a battle that ebbed and flowed, but Rik's approach was so simplistic, it rather baffled Ainz. It was clear enough why the Doomboss couldn't gain the upper hand—the Doomboss's skills were all negative energy or psychic attacks that weren't effective against Rik.

By now he was convinced that Rik was the member of a race with traits like a golem or some other construct, or owned magic items that conveyed similar bonuses, or was actually a construct himself.

What was more likely? Well, the fact that they'd been able to converse suggested the former possibility. There were races like half-golems that retained some construct-like traits, so he could be one of those.

He had no clue why one of those races would be backing the kingdom, but what mattered here was not Rik's standing but his skill. So why were his attacks so simplistic? He was using no special skills, no martial arts.

One of the Supreme Beings had made very good use of golems, and Rik reminded Ainz of them.

If his opponent was a half-golem, that was fine, but if they'd done something tricky like stick a speaker inside an actual golem, that could be a pain.

The strength of the golems Ainz knew was based on the value of the metal used in their construction, the crafter's skill, and the data crystal that tied it all together. Making a high-level golem carried a pretty hefty cost.

But if Rik was actually a golem and it was actually possible to make a golem this strong from a low-value metal like platinum, then there could be a lot more like him out there.

He needed more info.

Ainz sent the Doomboss another order.

It obeyed, spraying even more black mist.

Its speed and damage rose again, and now it began to scratch Rik's armor. In return, its health quickly drained as well; the Doomboss did not last long.

As it vanished, Ainz cast Summon Tenth-Tier Undead again.

This time he called forth a level-68 undead—an Elemental Skull.

At first glance, it appeared to be *just* a floating skull. But it was enveloped in a shimmering magic aura, shifting constantly between four shades—red, blue, green, and yellow.

Ainz had ordered it to hang back and took up position in front of it.

Elemental Skulls were a type of undead specializing in elemental attack spells.

They had a caster's health. Far less than the Doomboss boasted. But their magical offensive capabilities were significant. All the spells this undead cast were maximized.

On the defensive end of things, it had strong resistance to all types of magic and complete resistance to the four elements—fire, lightning, acid, and ice. But it was extremely weak to physical attacks, blunt damage being a particular weakness.

That's why Ainz *had* to stand in front of it.

Despite seeing a caster step forward, Rik didn't put his guard up. He simply closed in and started attacking Ainz.

*At least be taken aback!* Ainz thought as he began parrying Rik's slashes just like Albedo had taught him.

This was really more of a one-sided barrage; he was lucky to parry one in five attacks. Even when Ainz's staff managed to deflect one weapon, the three others would follow up without fail. The hammer nailed him once, but Body of Effulgent Beryl negated the damage. A third straight cancellation must have finally convinced Rik it was futile, because he made no further effort to use the hammer.

Ainz had known this going in, but his foe was *fast*.

Perhaps not quite as fast as the floor guardians but close enough. Abandoning the hammer was a real stroke of luck. If he'd kept that in the fray, Ainz would have had no shot at winning.

Watching the Doomboss fight had been enough to convince Ainz he stood no chance on the front lines.

Naturally, Ainz did have the option of using Perfect Warrior, but that would have required using special gear to turn the tide.

As he grimly hung on while fighting up close and personal, a spell rocketed in from behind.

As it did, Ainz activated the ninth-tier spell Vermilion Nova.

The strongest single-target fire spell lit Rik up. Yet, his attacks didn't slow at all—the great sword hit Ainz hard.

Even wreathed in fire, his flurry of attacks didn't slow down. Perhaps that was simply the way of a warrior who knew his priorities. But even so, it seemed a bit *too* blasé.

The Elemental Skull had used a ninth-tier spell, Polar Claw. Extremely icy claws had slashed directly at Rik. It was nothing fancy, just pure damage. But in return, they were capable of dealing the most damage out of any chill attribute spells. A spell Ainz had not personally acquired.

Ainz remembered exactly how much health Rik lost from each spell.

The spear and katana hit him for a two-hit combo.

In response, he activated the ninth-tier spell Call Greater Thunder.

The Elemental Skull used the tenth-tier spell Mist of Super Acid. Another spell Ainz had not learned—knowledge of such spells was *why* he'd summoned this particular undead.

For a brief moment, Rik's frame was enveloped in a powerful acidic mist. So were the weapons hovering around him.

Mist of Super Acid not only damaged the target, it had a supplementary effect where it damaged their gear, as well. These weapons might be floating around him, but the spell had clearly deemed them *his*.

The cloud reached even the farthest weapons, but despite Ainz being *right there*, it did not affect him at all. Magic played by its own rules.

He could immediately tell that this acid was taking a chunk off Rik's health. Acid

seemed to have done the most damage out of the four elements he'd tried so far.

But this was still not a *lot* of damage in the grand scheme of things.

His current analysis suggested Rik was built less for offense than defense. In other words, he was a tank first and foremost. He had pegged him as somewhere around level 90 in power.

*My best plan would be to keep hitting him with acid... Ow! Ow!*

"Let me think!"

His stream of thought suddenly interrupted, he felt a flash of irritation—and it brought a miracle to pass.

His staff struck the katana as it came in—and if Ainz had eyes, they'd have popped out.

The katana went sailing away, as if the knock-back effect had gone off.

*Why?! How?!*

This staff's knock-back activation had very clear-cut rules.

First, blocking a warrior's charge with the staff would not activate it. It only activated if Ainz was actively attacking.

Next, even if he attacked, if his foe blocked it with sword or shield, the effect wouldn't trigger. It had to score a direct hit on the target's body. Swords and shields did not qualify as part of the body. But the knock back *would* kick in if his foe blocked it with, say, a gauntlet.

So what did that say about Rik's katana?

Based on the rules, it must have parsed the floating weapons as part of Rik's body.

That was very strange.

Ainz recalled a time when Sebas had brought back some interesting weapons from the capital.

They were floating weapons used by a dancing girl.

They'd investigated them in the treasury room, but they had simply floated around, obeying orders and attacking semiautonomously. They were ordinary gear as far as anyone could tell. If he had struck the dancing girl's weapons with this staff, no knock back would have occurred.

If he wanted a knock-back effect to work on equipment, he'd need a weapon like the Iron Fists of a Lady Teacher. Those had been made with the intent of causing shock waves just by punching the air. Only a weapon *that* devoted to knock back could make it happen.

This staff was *far* weaker, so why had it worked?

Given these facts, Ainz could only deduce that these weapons really did qualify as Rik's body.

*Interesting.*

Ainz had two theories.

First was the idea that Rik's weapons were like Entoma's Lip Bug. Some sort of... sword-shaped golem might qualify as a valid trigger for the knock-back effect.

Alternately—and this seemed far more likely—Rik's weapons weren't equipment at all but actually a *part* of him. Much like how a knock-back attack would kick in if you used a move with that effect to aggressively parry a dragon's claws.

He had sensed health gauges in the weapons around him but had assumed this was just because they were counted as part of Rik's loadout. Especially since every time he hurt Rik, all their collective health went down proportionally. This understanding had been the wrong way around. It seemed more and more likely they were all *one* life-form. In which case...

Ainz hesitated for a very long moment.

He did have an approach in mind—

But was it the right one?

No. *That* would be a mistake.

Ainz sensed the Elemental Skull preparing to cast the tenth-tier faith spell Seven Trumpeters and stopped it.

He knew what his role here was.

Ainz silently cast Message, even as Rik leaped backward, following the katana. The katana shifted back into orbit.

Would the weapons stop moving if they got too far from Rik, or did he just want Ainz to think that? Or had the knock back simply taken him by surprise?

“...We’ve gained a sense of each other’s strength now. Could we—?”

Rik came sliding up to him, wordlessly hacking away. He had no intention of talking at all.

Ainz was rather annoyed at this silent fighting style.

Certainly, if your enemy started blabbering, they were most likely stalling for time. Only an idiot would stop and talk in a life-and-death situation. Perhaps he should respect Rik’s strategic choice, but that didn’t make him any less sad that his efforts were in vain.

“Wait, wait! Let’s talk—”

Even as he soaked another hit, Ainz threw his staff away. He saw Rik hesitate.

And went down on hands and knees.

“Wait! Please, a moment of time! Hear me out!”

Rik paused, great sword raised high. Ainz’s head right below.

There was no danger of critical hits, so exposing his head like this wasn’t particularly frightening. And he’d already given the Elemental Skull its orders.

“I had no intention of seriously going against you. This all began when the kingdom stole provisions intended as aid for the Sacred Kingdom. I believe it is clear which of

us is at fault here. What do you say? Do you truly believe us in the wrong?"

"...You've gone too far. There were other ways."

Ainz lifted his head.

Rik still had his blade raised. But he did not look ready to swing it yet.

"Easy to say looking from the outside in. But what would you have done? Forgiven those who stole the food your country grew?"

"If you did not possess excessive strength, this outcome would never have been possible. Those with power must take care to use it well and be mindful of the consequences. I protect this world. Yes—this world is under *my* protection."

Rik spoke as if uninterested in any answer he might offer.

*At last the idiot speaks,* Ainz thought. He pretended to be listening. Some people's lips loosened up if you were responsive, and others not—since Rik was speaking softly, as if talking to himself, silence seemed the better option.

But he paid close attention to Rik's gaze.

"What the Merciful Mother and her followers are doing is a mistake. Just as my father erred, so do they. That power is too great. It is the root of all that is wrong."

Ainz silently watched him, doing his best to make no sound at all.

Rik was enjoying his monologue. It would be rude to interrupt.

Nothing the man said made a lick of sense. Ainz thought Rik could use some tips on how to speak more persuasively. All he was doing was preaching to himself.

"It is all our fault, yet we ask no pardon. I cannot stand idle while you continue to commit evil deeds. That is why you must perish."

His blade came whooshing down.

Not nearly as fast as before, perhaps out of guilt at striking a defenseless foe.

*No, wait, keep leaking information!* Ainz was ready to scream. But he seemed to be done monologuing. In which case, there was no more use keeping up this undignified act.

The fight was back on.

He had kept the Elemental Skull on standby, and it moved into the path of the great sword, taking the blow for him.

An effective use of a summons. Or more accurately, the Elemental Skull had served its purpose, so this was all that was left for it to do. If this had been Shalltear's Pipette Lance, he would have reconsidered, but Rik's weapons had no absorption effects, so there was no downside to using his summons as a sacrificial shield.

"Eeeek!" Ainz let out a pitiable shriek. "So this is all your fault?! All this is your doing?!"

He had no idea who he was blaming or what for. He was simply trying to manipulate Rik into spilling more beans.

Rik momentarily paused, perhaps because of another pang of guilt, and Ainz used that opening to roll backward.

The Elemental Skull moved between them.

"—Defend!" Ainz roared.

The skull activated a spell. Rik ignored it, stepping forward to approach Ainz again. The skull tried to intervene, but it was too small and had no interception skills.

"Wall of Skeleton!"

Ainz cast a spell himself, leaving the Elemental Skull and Rik on the other side.

"Pathetic, King of Darkness!" Rik bellowed.

Angry at him for abandoning his summons and fleeing beyond a wall? But Ainz didn't give a damn what his foe thought. If an arcane caster stood there defenseless and exposed, they were nothing but suicidal. And worse—

You'd think he could easily have leaped over the wall, but Rik chose to attack it *and* the

Elemental Skull instead.

The Wall of Skeleton was not as durable as the summoned skull. Rik's onslaught easily punched through it.

Meanwhile, the Elemental Skull was repeatedly casting Vermilion Nova, chipping away at Rik's health. It did not really stand a chance of defeating him. He *was* a tank and very magic resistant in general.

So Ainz cast a spell of his own.

“Temporal Stasis.”

A single-target ninth-tier spell. It completely stopped an enemy's movements but with one big caveat—you couldn't do any damage to them while they were in stasis. Thus, it was generally employed while facing multiple foes.

But that hardly mattered; Rik was immune to this spell. He must have anti-time measures in place. Given his overall strength, hardly surprising.

The great sword shot toward Ainz while the other weapons homed in on the Elemental Skull.

Even as he took damage from the sword's slash, he cast Greater Break Item on the incoming weapons, just to be sure. No effect. Also likely innate.

He was even more convinced Rik's weapons were part of him.

Just as the skull's health was getting low, Rik suddenly looked up.

He'd spotted someone swooping down at him.

Albedo.

“—!”

Ainz heard a voiceless yelp. Something about this had come as a shock.

But even as he reeled, Albedo was coming in fast. Like an arrow shot by Aura. And—

“Rahhhhhhhhhh!”

With a vicious snarl, her halberd—3F—swung down upon him. Rik crossed spear and great sword to meet the blow.

But there was so much power behind 3F that his feet sank into the dirt.

And a moment later—Rik was sent flying to one side.

Albedo had ducked under his weapons and unleashed a kick at his chest. His armor screamed from the sheer force of it.

“Insect! Such insolence before Lord Ainz! You must paaaay!”

Her bellow made the air quiver, and she renewed her attacks.

The gap between them vanished in an instant. Albedo wound up for a mighty blow.

A metallic *clang* echoed.

Two of Rik’s flying weapons rushed forward to stop her.

But then he was the one sent flying backward. That was no jump. His feet were off the ground, in full-flight mode.

“Albedo, stop! That’s enough.”

Ainz could tell she was eager to press the advantage and called for a halt.

She’d done enough. He couldn’t let her continue this fight any further.

“—Yes, my lord.”

She seemed slightly disgruntled but heeded his order to stop.

Rik began backing away, still hovering in the air. He quickly realized the fight was over.

Albedo stood silently before Ainz, placing herself directly between her master and his foe. She was fully on guard against any possible sudden attacks, whether from up close or from a distance.

"Sir Aganeia, I will ask once more. Will you not serve me? Any request you have shall be granted."

There was no response, but Ainz didn't let that get him down.

"A pity! But the gates of the Nation of Darkness are always open to you. Come see us anytime!" He lowered his voice, turning to Albedo. "Think he still wants more?"

"I doubt that very much. But if he does back off, we should probably end him here. Between the two of us, we won't even need to *try*."

Rik likely heard none of that. After a brief moment, he vanished. The barrier around them seemed to melt away at the same time.

Which came first: the teleport or the barrier cancellation? How far had Rik retreated?

His departure had left behind some thought-provoking questions, but Ainz's mission was a success.

"...Whew. That's one job done. Good work."

"There may still be eyes upon us. We should hasten back to Nazarick."

"Yes, let's."

He dismissed the Elemental Skull, then cast Greater Teleportation. Time for him and Albedo to leave this place.

•

The platinum armor that called itself Rik Aganeia used World Movement to reach the meeting spot. He found his collaborator already there.

"Were you waiting long?"

"Nope, just got here."

The one who answered was Azuth, leader of the adamantite adventurer team the Drops of Red.

The man was inside his massive power suit, so Rik was forced to crane his neck up at him.

Azuth was stretching the truth. He'd been standing there a good five minutes.

Rik was well aware of that. He'd been observing him from a distance, after all.

Wary of the possibility that Azuth was being used as bait.

If it turned out someone from the Nation of Darkness was watching him, Rik planned to abandon Azuth and head home. He'd kept his distance until he was sure the man was alone.

Even now there was still a risk, but uncovering that required conversation. That was the only reason Rik had shown himself here.

"Sorry, Zey. She got away from me and ended up heading your way. Tell me. Did you manage to take out the King of Darkness?"

"Sadly, that proved impossible," he said, bowing his head. "I asked your help with this but have nothing to show for it."

While he had told the King of Darkness his name was Rik Aganeia, it was actually Zeyndelux Vaishion.

He and the rest of the dragonlords were the greatest beings this world had ever seen. That was why he could already hear the others complaining that humbling himself before a mere human was out of the question. Zey paid that thought no heed. If bowing his head made a favorable impression, then he saw no reason why he shouldn't.

"No need to say sorry. You couldn't take him out because I didn't keep that woman busy long enough. You must've run out of time, right?"

Zey considered what answer would most benefit him. "Not at all," he said, keeping his tone reassuring. "That isn't the case at all, Azuth. You were just no match for the Nation of Darkness's prime minister. The fact that you kept her at bay for any significant amount of time was all anyone could ask for. My failure to defeat the King of Darkness is simply because he was far stronger than I had imagined."

This much was unvarnished truth.

According to the deal they had struck, Azuth's job was to lure Albedo outside the barrier, separating her from the King of Darkness. Nothing more, nothing less. Before the battle, Zey had considered there was a very good chance she would kill the adventurer in short order. Of course, admitting that out loud would likely discourage Azuth from taking part in the plan, so he had kept that to himself.

The fact that Azuth had fought Albedo and lived meant he had done quite well.

Zey did not wish to lose anyone who could help in the struggle against the evil "players."

But he had his doubts. Something didn't feel right.

How was Azuth still alive?

The suit he wore did have high offensive and defensive capabilities. It also gave the pilot access to any number of moves. At the same time, it offered no improvements to health or mana. A hard shell with a soft, squishy center.

Zey had fought Albedo for mere seconds, but that had been more than enough.

She was *clearly* stronger than the King of Darkness.

That king might be able to destroy whole armies, but he struggled in single combat.

And Albedo was not someone Azuth could fight and live to tell the tale.

So why was he still alive and kicking?

"What did you make of that demon Albedo? Did you stand any chance against her?"

"Not even a little. I only made it out because I threw everything I had at her and never let her get close."

*Ah,* Zey thought.

Albedo had not used any ranged attacks and didn't seem to have any gear that allowed her to engage from a distance.

It made sense. Perhaps his suspicions had been unfounded.

Zey had feared Azuth had sold him out by making a deal with Albedo—and the King of Darkness. Now he felt somewhat ashamed for his doubts. But considering every possibility was never a bad thing. Plus, Azuth was merely a collaborator, not a friend. And he still couldn't rule out the possibility of a betrayal.

"Oh, right. I told the King of Darkness my name is Rik Aganeia. Best if you remember that. If you're ever in a situation where he might hear, use that name instead."

"Rik Aganeia? Where'd that come from?"

"Nowhere. Just the first name that popped into my mind. If there is anyone named that, I've likely ruined their day."

This was not entirely true.

He had never heard of a house named Aganeia. But Rik was different.

"They'll have unwittingly attracted the fury of the King of Darkness, then?"

"Entirely possible. And Prime Minister Albedo bears a grudge."

They shared a grin.

If there really *was* a stranger out there named Rik Aganeia, he likely would not find this amusing.

As he laughed, Zey's mind turned to other things.

His focus was the demon Albedo.

The King of Darkness had been trapped, which was good, but she'd smashed right through World Isolation Wall—a mid-tier wild magic spell.

This spell created a space completely isolated from the outside world. Entering or exiting this space by any conventional means, including teleportation, was completely blocked. Getting inside required the use of wild magic or the possession of a World Item.

He could not be sure if she was a "player" or an "NPC," but given her subservience to the King of Darkness, it was likely the latter. That was another mystery—why had Ainz

not carried the World Item himself and instead entrusted it to Albedo?

*Or is there a chance that she is the “player” and the King of Darkness is the “NPC”?*

This wasn't out of the question. He could see someone deciding it was safer to act as second-in-command.

*Or did the King of Darkness also have a World Item? The odds aren't high. If he did have one, he should've been able to get through World Isolation Wall. Is it possible he has one and just didn't bring it with him?*

That also seemed plausible. Rik had learned some groups had two. Plenty of reason to suspect the Nation of Darkness was one of them.

“Zey, how strong was the King of Darkness? If you couldn't take him down, he must be pretty good, but could I— No, could this suit beat him?”

“Azuth, don't take this the wrong way, but there's no way. Even given ample time, I would struggle to finish the job.”

“Ah...”

“But with your help, I now know his power—and the limits of it. The next time we fight, assuming it's one-on-one, I should be able to win.”

That said, if he was using this armor in that fight, it would be a very narrow victory. And if the King of Darkness utilized summons more, the outcome could prove unpredictable. It would come down to which of them arrived most prepared.

Still, Zeyndelux was a bit relieved.

If the king had been on par with that vampire, he might have struggled. But as himself, without the armor, he need not fear the King of Darkness. In his own body, even the vampire would pose no real threat.

But giving them time to rally their forces would be a bad idea.

“Wow. Just wow. You aren't the world's strongest dragonlord for nothing!”

“I've never once considered myself anything of the sort. I'm sure there are plenty of

beings out there stronger than I am. But if all I have to contend with is the King of Darkness, then I shall emerge victorious.”

His powers were particularly effective against the undead. And he’d been able to confirm they were effective against the King of Darkness. Thus, he had decided the king was not that grave a threat.

That demon Albedo was far more worrying.

“Azuth, I hate to ask... but if there is a next time, I would like your help again.”

“If...?” Azuth’s tone was somber. Zey knew exactly why, so he said nothing else. After a long silence, Azuth croaked, “The kingdom’s doomed, isn’t it?”

“...That seems to be the case. I have done all I can.”

“Oh. But next time, you’ll want me keeping her busy again? I can try, but I doubt she’ll let me buy as much time.”

“True. They won’t even let us split them up. That’s why I want to wait until something leads her away from the King of Darkness—and then we will *both* fight together.”

If Azuth took on the summons, Zey was confident they could easily defeat the King of Darkness.

No Nation of Darkness minions had attacked while they spoke, and there was nothing more he could do here. Zey turned to the distant capital.

He had seen the fall of many a country in his time. This was but one more. It was sad, to be true—but he was far more concerned about sharing a border with the Nation of Darkness.

The council state was not exactly *his* country, but he had grown fond of it.

He’d called in some friends, but at this rate, he might need to speak to the other dragonlords.

“...Oh, forgot to mention. I met some Theocracy folk and dropped the name you mentioned on ‘em.”

"You did? Then they'll know you've got someone significant on your side."

That should make Azuth's position extraordinarily more secure.

The man himself was not that valuable, but his power suit was precious; odds were *that* was what the Theocracy had been after. If this ploy had made them think twice about coming after Azuth, then it played into Zey's desire to maintain their cordial alliance.

"I do have one question—why can't I just say I heard it from you?"

"Simple. If the source is a mystery, they'll have to look into it. And doing so will make the Theocracy leaders suspect one another."

The other reason was that doing it this way meant he could easily cut Azuth loose if he had to.

"No use talking any longer here. Let's get going. Your friends are waiting for you."

"Yeah, they are. Thanks, Zey."

As he prepared World Movement, Zey thought about Azuth.

Specifically about whether there was any point in helping him further.

The armor he wore was valuable. But without it, the man himself was unappealing. Quite honestly, loaning this armor to someone stronger would be more beneficial.

And Zey had his doubts about how pliable the man was.

For now, they were cooperating. He was neither the man's superior nor a friend.

Azuth had acted rashly before, and next time it might prove fatal.

That had been a bit of a mistake in judgment on Zey's part as well.

Azuth had originally not even noticed the Nation of Darkness's advance, and to drive home the urgency of the situation, Zey had told him exactly how far they'd come.

Azuth had come to Zey in the first place in hopes of saving the kingdom, asking him to

defeat the King of Darkness. He should have known that deep-seated desire would motivate him to take the power suit and fly off to save that city, consequences be damned.

Had he not revealed himself, perhaps the King of Darkness would have approached the capital unprepared—and been defeated.

*Should I kill Azuth here and steal the power suit?*

There were advantages to doing so. Giving the suit to someone more skilled and more trustworthy would leave him with a much more valuable card to play.

He didn't have anything against Azuth personally. He had no desire to kill the man. But this world was filled with things that mattered more than personal misgivings.

..... Rik.

Zey laughed at himself for digging up memories that had been buried a long time ago. He already had blood on his hands. What did a little more matter?

And he could pin it on the King of Darkness.

He could simply say Azuth had fought Albedo, been badly wounded, and had bequeathed the suit to Zey in his final moments.

But was history repeating itself?

"Hey! What's gotten into you, Zey?"

".....Hmm?"

Zey realized he'd been lost deep in his thoughts.

"What's wrong, Zey? Something on your mind?"

"...No, nothing, Azuth. Let's get going."

It could wait for now. Resurrection magic existed, so death was not a guarantee of silence. Any situation in which the power suit was recovered but not Azuth's body would seem suspicious. And rushing toward short-term gain could force him to pay

the price later on.

He would have to mull this over carefully and ensure he did not come to regret the outcome. Only then would he decide whether to cut ties with Azuth and the Drops of Red.

Hoping his choice today did not prove fatal later, Zey activated World Movement. The armor still had one use left in it.

The wind howled through the empty space they left behind.

•

Ainz emerged from the Gate in the Great Tomb of Nazarick, accepted his ring from the surface team, and used that power to move Albedo and himself to the ninth level.

From there, they walked to their destination.

“Albedo, should you go first?”

“No need. Your achievements were greater than mine this time, so you take the lead.”

Ainz thanked her and opened the door.

He walked toward the throne ahead, but when he reached the center of the room, he took a knee, bowing his head. He could tell Albedo had done the same behind him.

“Well done, Pandora’s Actor, Albedo.”

“My lord!”

He raised his face in time to see his master on the throne, nodding majestically. Ainz was flanked by Shalltear and Demiurge, the latter of whom was holding the Mirror of Remote Viewing.

They had been using that to watch his battle with Rik.

Pandora’s Actor had been disguised as his master, but he now allowed that illusion to fall away.

"Lord Ainz, I know I should return the items you loaned me at once, but I imagined you would not wish to be kept waiting, so I have come here before you with them still in my possession."

Since he was wearing his master's proper equipment, what Ainz now wore was second-best. Forcing him to do such a thing was a heavy burden to bear.

"Ah. Pandora's Actor, you need not concern yourself. Feel free to return them later. As you implied, that is not the priority here—our concern is with the foe you fought. We all watched the battle but wish to hear your firsthand account. What did you make of him?"

"I took him for a tank class, around level ninety in strength, given how ineffectual magic was across the board."

"Aha. Pretty formidable, then. Mm? What it is, Albedo? You have something to add?"

"Yes. Unlike Pandora's Actor, I believe his strength to be lower. I only landed two blows, so I cannot be entirely certain, but I would have pegged him as a tank no more than level eighty in strength."

If that platinum armor was actually a tank, then as a tank herself, Albedo's opinion might well be more accurate.

"Interesting. Pandora's Actor fought it far longer, so his words should hold more weight here. However, Shalltear was watching the battle with me, and her opinion matches Albedo's—she estimated him to be somewhere in the mid-eighties. Perhaps we should have called Cocytus or Sebas as well."

Shalltear was a force to be reckoned with but wasn't a purely physical attack class.

The opinion of a dedicated fighter might have resulted in a more accurate assessment, but Sebas was busy in E-Rantel, and Cocytus was preoccupied with the destruction of the capital. Neither had been available.

"Weighing these three opinions together... Do you all agree that he is a pure tank class that specializes in magic defense?"

They glanced at one another, considering this.

“...Shalltear, I spy a frown on your face. Could you share your thoughts?”

“I might be imagining things...”

“Worth saying anyway. We went to great lengths to strip our foe’s abilities bare. Anything could prove a valuable hint to uncovering the nature of his skills, so we should entertain all perspectives.”

“In that case, Lord Ainz—perhaps I only noticed because I, too, can summon Doomlords, but his offensive skills seemed a tad low when he fought against it. Or was that because Pandora’s Actor was the one who summoned it?”

“That seems unlikely. When Pandora’s Actor is disguised, his abilities do not match the subject he copies, but the monsters he summons are unaffected. And the boosts my skills convey were not in place. Let’s have you each summon one later. It may help narrow down what’s bothering you.”

“Yes, Lord Ainz!”

“Next, Pandora’s Actor. You spoke to him at length, but what exactly did you talk about? What was his general attitude, and what emotions were you able to provoke from him? The mirror doesn’t have audio, so that was something we couldn’t monitor.”

“Lord!”

Pandora’s Actor relayed every word he and Rik had spoken. They had not spoken for long, so this was quite easy. He then added his own personal interpretations of their conversation and described the emotions Rik had displayed during the relatively brief interaction.

He could feel Albedo growing irate, and indeed, she hissed, “Even if you’re trying to get a foe’s guard down, the King of Darkness is the absolute ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick! He would not go down on hands and knees before anyone!”

Pandora’s Actor had not been too fond of that himself. His master would never have done such a thing. But when he turned to his master to apologize, Ainz was nodding approvingly.

Was that in agreement with Albedo’s anger?

He readied to bow his head, but his master spoke first.

"No, that was a fine choice."

Sarcasm? No, his master appeared to be in fine spirits. Unsure what to make of it, he failed to bow his head in time.

"Prostrating yourself did wonders. If that is what it takes to get through to a foe, then feel free to debase yourself all you like. It costs me nothing. And it may have convinced him that I am an insignificant threat. Heh... you've poisoned his mind already."

—Terrifying.

His creator coveted victory no matter what had to be done—even Pandora's Actor felt a chill.

In a real fight, he might well have won—yet he would go this far to loosen his lips.

He was a king—the absolute ruler—yet he spoke as if he had no pride, as if the strategic need was always paramount. Could one accustomed to looking out over bowed heads so easily bend a knee to an inferior foe?

It would be impossible for your average monarch. Only the great man before Pandora's Actor now could be expected to do such a thing.

Perhaps the same thought struck each of them, because all guardians present seemed similarly impressed and awestruck.

It was Demiurge who broke the silence.

"If they learn that a man as great as Lord Ainz went down on hands and knees over such a trifle, will that not make them suspicious? Will they not realize that you are a man who always makes the right move at the right time?"

"I doubt anyone would draw *that* conclusion. Most people would think I was entirely unimpressive—that I'd finally shown my true colors. Consider it the other way around. If someone prostrated themselves before me, I would no longer deem them worthy of caution. Though I might simply kill them then and there. Would you not do the same, Albedo?"

"I would certainly kill an ordinary citizen, but a king I would capture in the hopes of extracting information. Perhaps... I would let my guard down."

"Aha. And you, Shalltear?"

"I would torment them."

"...Hmm. Perhaps not the most effective tactic, then. When physically on your hands and knees, it *is* rather difficult to evade your foe's attacks... but I digress. Let's discuss that barrier."

Pandora's Actor had had no clue what to make of it. He had assumed it blocked physical and magic passage, but Albedo had been able to pass through. Had she solved the puzzle?

"I'm sure you both have guessed as much, but we can assume that was created with a World Item. However, after hearing Pandora's Actor's account, I am marginally less certain."

His eyes went wide.

Certainly, that would explain it. Albedo had been carrying a World Item, while Pandora's Actor had not. But...

"How did you know that?"

"A natural question. We were using the mirror to monitor your fight with Rik, but even after the barrier activated, the mirror's functions were undisturbed. I assumed it was an illusion—a fake barrier." Ainz turned toward Pandora's Actor. "But the barrier itself was quite effective. We had to reconsider the possibilities. We looked at the difference between us—me, using the mirror, and you, Pandora's Actor."

Ainz patted the World Item in his belly.

"When I took this out, the mirror showed nothing. When I equipped it again, the mirror was unchanged. I would imagine Rik's item had powers similar to the one I've given Aura."

"...Hold on, Lord Ainz. Rik said the words *World Isolation Wall*. And his health had dropped upon activation. Is this not some special skill only super-high-tier beings can

use, the match for the ace up your sleeve?"

"The skills from our abilities offer no such thing. I'm inclined to believe the words themselves are most likely a bluff. As for the health loss—well, it could be a World Item that drains your health with each use. What's bothering me is that I've heard of no such World Item. There are those with an activation cost, but health loss is so... insignificant."

"His health didn't continue decreasing the entire time it was active, did it?" Albedo asked.

Pandora's Actor shook his head. "Only immediately upon activation. There was no sign of additional health loss to maintain it."

"That's the thing. From what you told us, each power he activated came with an additional drop in health. There are World Items that have multiple uses, like this one." Ainz stroked his orb. "But those powers were far too disparate."

As far as they could tell, Rik had buffed the weapons, buffed the armor, teleported, and set up the barrier itself.

"...You suggested he might possess abilities like my own. Perhaps this is a kind of ability unique to this world. At worst, a type of ability equivalent to the power of World Items. In that case, we might have to consider the idea that what brainwashed Shalltear was not a World Item at all. How irksome."

"Lord Ainz, we do not have enough information."

"True, Demiurge. We may have to lose to Rik once more."

The guardians flanking the throne did not look pleased. Albedo was likely just as disgruntled.

Even intentionally, none of them wanted to see their master lose.

"Do not look so upset. I take no pleasure in losing. But to learn what is in a foe's hand and ensure a flawless victory in the future, it can be necessary. If this was a training exercise, a loss would not mean death, and there would be no need for *acting*. But this is real combat."

Everyone listened with rapt attention, Pandora's Actor included.

"We've confirmed that you and the people of this world can be resurrected. But we still are not certain that *I* can be. There are legends of the Six Gods and Eight Kings of Avarice. If we assume they were beings like me, the fact that their tales end in death suggests it might not be possible to revive me. In which case, we have to assume that my death would be final. These intentional losses ensure that I do not meet with ultimate defeat."

"Lord Ainz..."

"Yes, Albedo?"

"I entirely agree with everything you've said. In which case, wouldn't it be better if you remain inside the Great Tomb of Nazarick from now on?"

How right she was. If their master could not be revived, then the safest choice would be to never leave the safety of these walls.

"...True, I have given it thought. But the thing is, you see—you get it, right?"

Pandora's Actor pondered the point, but nothing came to mind.

How shameful.

He was among the sharpest minds of Nazarick yet could not immediately decipher his master's thoughts.

His mind went into overdrive, working furiously to find the answer. Demiurge and Albedo looked equally desperate. Shalltear alone appeared perfectly calm, as if she was not thinking at all.

Pandora's Actor put her out of his mind. That was her problem.

After a long silence, their master sighed. As if deeply disappointed in them.

The sheer shame Pandora's Actor felt prevented him from lifting his head. Demiurge seemed much the same. Albedo was behind him, so he couldn't see her, but she likely fared no better.

"What? Raise your heads."

That was but a punishment, yet one that could not be disobeyed.

Pandora's Actor obeyed and looked up.

"...Well, moving right along—who exactly was he? Does the platinum give us any clues?"

Albedo spoke up. "Pandora's Actor attempted to confirm one possibility with the man himself. He could be a member of the Thirteen Heroes."

Their master nodded.

"The other possibility is that he is the Platinum Dragonlord, a councilor of the council state. I have heard of no others associated with that metal."

"In light of that, let's consider that this could be an intentional misdirect. Could someone be trying to convince us that our enemy is the dragonlord or a hero? Or it could simply be that he *is* one of those two. What do we think is the truth?"

"I'm ashamed to admit it, Lord Ainz," Demiurge said. "But at the moment, we simply don't have enough information to say either way."

Pandora's Actor felt the same, but if his master was asking for opinions, he felt there was a right answer. That's why Demiurge had opened with an apology.

"Any other opinions?... I'll take that as a no. I agree with Demiurge here. The information we currently have on hand gives us little to work with. Once they've completed their tasks in the kingdom, ask the other guardians their thoughts on this. Perhaps someone will pick up on something we've overlooked. Either way, let's send an envoy to the council state. Include some loaded words for this Platinum Dragonlord. That won't be an issue, will it, Albedo?"

"Not at all, Lord Ainz. Do you have a phrasing in mind?"

"I leave it to you."

"Your wish is my command."

"And I think that's basically it. I need to get back to the capital. Pandora's Actor, it's about time we exchanged clothes."

"Oh!" a voice cried. Their master turned to address it.

"Yes, Shalltear? Did you forget anything?"

"I did, Lord Ainz. I have a question—are you *actually* planning on recruiting Rik?"

"Oh, that. Of course not! If he does agree to come along, then we'll glean whatever information we can—who he works with, what else is going on behind the scenes—and then make sure he perishes."

"Is it not a waste to kill him?" Albedo asked.

"He did not seem like someone I could *control*," their master said ruefully. "Unknown skills, potential possession of a World Item—and he seems tricky to manipulate to boot. Could you handle him with confidence, Albedo? If so, I'd happily give him to you."

"I cannot say without more precise information. But if that possibility exists, I would certainly like to make use of him."

"Hmm."

Their master gave her a long, appraising look.

Likely balancing Albedo's abilities against Rik's potential response. For a creator with an eye on events thousands of years in the future, adding any new plans to the mix would require analyzing all potential consequences.

As the massacre of the kingdom's inhabitants had.

Pandora's Actor, Demiurge, and Albedo all agreed he had only contradicted his previous statements because he had multiple plans in mind—far grander than just sending a message about the treatment of the Empire and kingdom.

The experiments on undead spawn were obvious enough.

But this was his creator. Undoubtedly schemes beyond his comprehension were swirling in the depths of that unparalleled mind.

Knowing that he had been created by an intellect this magnificent moved Pandora's Actor to the brink of tears. He knew it would be rude, but suppressing the urge to boast about it was a constant hardship.

"Interesting. Certainly, if he is dead, we can do little with him. We'll consult with Demiurge as well, but if we discover a way to do so, I might allow you to have him, Albedo. But only on the condition that he bends the knee of his own free will. If he refuses to submit, death is the only option."

No one dreamed of arguing. Their master's decisions were always correct.

"All right, then... Any other thoughts on the matter? No? Then I'd better get back to the capital. We've still got things to wrap up."

"Is there really a need for you to personally attend to such trivialities? I am confident I could handle it all myself."

"That won't be necessary, Albedo. I should be there. Heh-heh—I do relish the chance to play the villain. Perhaps not as much as Ulbert, though."

"...Ah, is that why?"

Albedo spoke as if harboring great insight, and their master gave her a long look. As if evaluating how much she understood of what he'd left unspoken.

At last, he seemed convinced and declared majestically, "That it is, Albedo. That it is."

## 2

When Climb returned to the palace with Renner and Brain, the few remaining knights informed them they had visitors waiting.

The Blue Roses were requesting an audience.

Normally, they would be let in immediately, but right now the three of them were not exactly ready to receive guests—in particular, Renner was currently dressed like a serving girl, not at all appropriate attire for a princess. And they were covered in sweat. The knights were ordered to let the Blue Roses in an hour from now, and the three of them set about making themselves presentable.

The Nation of Darkness had their armies camped outside the capital and could attack at any minute. The knights were running around preparing the castle and palace defenses. Yet there were no maids left to handle these things.

The vast majority of palace maids were the daughters of nobility, and they had all quit the palace, returning to their homes in the capital. Were they safer there? Not really.

Renner had pointed to the tragic fate of all cities in the Nation of Darkness's path, saying that was most certainly in store for the capital, too. No matter where in the city you were, there was no escaping what was coming.

When he'd asked what *would* be safe, she'd said the only option was to risk everything on a desperate flight out of the city.

Climb had spoken to Brain, and they had secretly arranged for a sturdy carriage to remain on standby outside the palace. If Renner did decide to make a break for it, they'd be ready.

He was well aware she had no intention of doing that. But he could not be sure she wouldn't change her mind. It was better to be prepared.

Climb readied water and a towel that Renner could use to wipe away the sweat. Perhaps he should have prepared a hot bath, but they did only have an hour.

With no maids, Climb was forced to assist with Renner's ministrations, which left Brain preparing the tea. Seeing a swordsman of his repute rummaging around the shelves for the tea leaves made him wince and grin at the same time.

While Renner was wiping herself down, applying perfume, and choosing a dress, the two men hit the waters.

These two had it far easier than any court woman—especially a princess.

They could just strip naked, dump water over their heads, rub and scrub, then rinse themselves off. They still had to don clean clothes after, but it took all of ten minutes.

Even so, the hour was up before they knew it. Of course, all three were ready. Renner was still concerned about lingering odors and kept sniffing her hair and wrists. Climb could detect no sweat on her at all. He did think he caught a hint of the smoke from the kitchen in her hair, but it mingled with the perfume, and he couldn't be sure.

The knights led Lakyus in—and not just her.

Her whole team was present. Only Lakyus was dressed up. Everyone else was in their full combat kit. It looked like they had come guarding a noble lady.

Climb was mildly surprised.

Lakyus certainly never arrived unaccompanied, but it was rare for her to bring everyone. This might well be the first time ever.

“I know you must all be busy, so I do apologize for the delay.”

“Not at all. We showed up without warning, so the fault lies with us. I should be thanking you for making time. No need for tea—we won’t be here long.”

Brain had poured Renner a cup of the tea he’d brewed, but Lakyus stopped him filling hers.

“Lakyus, I don’t think we’re *that* pressed for time,” Evileye said. The rest of the Blue Roses were all nodding. Lakyus looked rather surprised.

“Are you all thirsty?” she asked.

Evileye sighed dramatically.

“We had no appointment, yet Her Highness has generously prepared tea for us anyway. And then our leader spurns the kind offer? How heartless. Right, Muscles?”

Gagaran said nothing. All eyes gathered on her, but her poker face was unchanging. It was like she’d seen and heard nothing.

“Don’t act like I wasn’t talking to you, girl least likely to float in water.”

This, too, was ignored. And that provoked an even more dramatic sigh.

“Gagaran.”

“Mm? Oh? You need something? What is it, Evileye?”

“...You want tea, right?”

“Sure do. Could gulp down like ten liters of the stuff.”

“I can’t believe we wasted that much time just prying those words out of you, but... quantity aside, leader, can we feel free to drink?”

“Go right ahead... Evileye, does that include you?”

Lakyus’s eyes had widened slightly. Climb had not expected this from Evileye, either. Drinking tea would require she remove her mask, and he had never once seen the Blue Roses’ caster without it.

Evileye offered no answer. She shrugged, but it was unclear if that was a yes or a no.

“Then we’ll help ourselves. Boss, you and the princess get talking. I’ll make sure the tea’s strong enough it’ll make you bark.”

“Um, it’s already in the warm bottle?” Renner said, blinking.

Tia shook her head. “Not enough for this crowd. See?”

She poured a cup—and sloshed a little into the saucer. The kingdom had no formal custom of drinking from the saucer, so Lakyus shot her a frown.

But if that was how she was pouring, the warm bottle likely didn’t have enough for eight.

“I don’t need any,” Brain said.

“Neither do I,” Climb agreed.

Not because they thought that would help stretch the tea—even with them both abstaining, that container would have struggled to serve six.

“Then let’s drink. You don’t appreciate our kindness.”

Did making tea really count as kindness? That was a bit weird.

Tia poured five cups of tea, then shook the warm bottle, demonstrating its emptiness.

“Oh, all gone! Too bad! Not nearly enough for the ten-liter hog.” She glanced at Renner.

"At this rate, word'll get around the third princess can't even provide tea for her guests!"

Lakyus had her head in her hands, but Renner was laughing.

"That would be a shame," she said. "Naturally, I don't want anyone thinking I'm living a life of luxury, but I do want them to believe the royal family has a future. Do you mind readying a fresh pot of tea?"

"Don't bother, Renner."

"Lakyus, don't begrudge their kindness."

"Huh?" Lakyus blinked at her.

Renner made a face. "Should I tell her, Evileye?"

"Hmph. You've cracked the riddle! Go on, tell our hardheaded leader what's up"

"I will. They're trying to give us a chance to say good-bye."

"...Oh."

Climb finally understood.

Adventurers generally stayed out of wars because their presence would drive up the death tolls. But this time, the enemy was undead and in the middle of perpetrating a massacre on a scale that had never been seen before.

Thus, the capital's Adventurers Guild had accepted the crown's quest and mobilized their forces—much like they had against Jaldabaoth.

But it was up to the teams themselves about what they would do.

There were teams that had set out a week ago, joining the army—none of them had returned. Other teams had stayed in the capital, preparing the final line of defense. Several high-level teams had simply vanished into thin air, either taking the Theocracy's offer of asylum or deciding they were better off fleeing the capital on their own.

The Blue Roses had stayed to prepare for the final battle.

With the Nation of Darkness's forces camped outside, they did not have time to linger here.

But Lakyus had made time to visit her friend Renner because she knew they would likely—no, almost certainly—never see each other again.

Five cups of tea had been poured. Placed before Evileye, Gagaran, Tia, Tina, and Climb—yet not one of the girls made any move to drink.

If they had told Lakyus to make time for a last good-bye, she would likely have refused. But if her companions asked for a moment to drink tea, she could not object. This was her team's way of being considerate.

“...In that case, Brain Unglaus, we have some parched guests, and I’d like to quench their thirst. Show them where they can boil some water.”

“Right over here.”

And for that reason, too, Brain—a far better bodyguard than Climb could ever be—was tasked with showing Tia and Tina out of the room.

“Should I leave, too?” Climb asked.

“Mm? Oh, don’t worry about it,” Evileye said. “That’s not why they pried him away.”

*Really?* he thought. If the goal was to make a moment for the two of them, then everyone else should clear out, surely.

But Gagaran and Evileye were clearly not budging. Maybe they really were actually just boiling water.

“Then let’s take them at their word and talk until the tea’s ready,” Lakyus said. “But first, I must know—where did you go? If you’re busy getting ready for something, I won’t keep you.”

“You know about the orphanage I founded? I was visiting them, cooking a meal.”

“Cooking? At a time like this?”

That was surprising news. Climb had been dumbfounded when Renner had ordered him to ready the carriage for that little excursion.

But once he got there, he knew exactly why she'd chosen that moment for it.

"Yes, the Nation of Darkness's armies have had the capital surrounded for days. The rations distributed before our armies left are gone, and the food shortage is only growing worse. I secured a few meals' worth of food and took it to them."

The orphanage did not have much funding, and as the shortage continued to drive food prices up, there was little they could do except serve less food less often. Renner had secured black market supplies and, since she was there, helped cook.

The words she'd whispered then stuck with Climb like a needle in his heart.

Standing in the kitchen, preparing the children's food like an accomplished chef, she'd said, "If only I could feed *all* the people. But we don't have enough. I'm just making myself feel better."

The Nation of Darkness had repelled a combined force of four hundred thousand. There was nothing more they could do. The capital's fall was inevitable, as was the royal family's demise.

But Renner was a gentle soul, and Climb wanted nothing more than to get her out of here. Yet he could tell she wanted nothing of the sort.

His loyalty was running up against his emotions. Caught between the two, he was suffering. But he could not let that show here, while these two were enjoying their chat.

Climb suppressed the heart-rending pain.

"I'm willing to bet a large sum you are the first and last princess who knows her way around a kitchen."

"Oh, I doubt that. They just don't make note of it in the history books. I do hope those children are enjoying it."

Renner's stew was supposed to be their lunch for the day, and she'd gone to great lengths to ensure there was enough for everyone, including the staff. Everyone should

be feasting together right about now.

She'd made enough for the evening meal, too.

Renner had come in unable to even peel a potato, but she certainly had caught on fast. Each time she'd peeled a potato, the peel had been visibly thinner than the one before it. Climb didn't believe his eyes at first.

This dazzling woman had a knack for cooking.

Renner caught Climb's look of respect and smiled.

A gentle smile.

Both she and Lakyus were choosing happy subjects. Perhaps unconsciously avoiding the fate that awaited them. Or no—this was *because* they knew exactly what lay ahead.

At last, Tia came back, warm bottle in hand.

"What's keeping Unglaus and Tina?"

"Mm? They're searching for treats to go with the tea. Sent me back ahead."

"Treats?" Lakyus gave Tia a look. "If we'd brought some ourselves—"

"—Don't worry about it. We made a lot of biscuits recently. The goal was stocking up on food that would keep for a long while, but they did have a little sugar in them, so they'd do nicely."

"See, even the princess agrees. Stop acting like a dem—demented person and relax. And enjoy the first tea I've ever made."

She poured some tea from the warm bottle. It was very dark.

"Here, demon boss. Recommend knocking it back. Easier on the throat."

"Thank you."

"It's really good, so I can't recommend it to the princess. You can have my old cup. No need to worry about it being too hot!"

Tia passed her old cup over to Renner.

This was definitely crossing a line, and Lakyus raised an eyebrow. But Renner said nothing. Climb elected not to speak out of turn.

Lakyus lifted her cup and savored the aroma—or not. She made a face.

“That’s rather pungent.”

“Ignore that.”

“...That’s a tall order. I’ve never had tea smell like this. How many leaves did you *use*? ”

“Ha! There’s a first time for everything. Don’t let it get your heart all aflutter.”

“I see now why you were searching for something sweet. To cleanse the palate? Renner, you were right not to try any.”

“How rude! See, demon is too soft for you. You’re the devil incarnate!”

“Sigh... next time make it something more humane.”

Lakyus raised the cup to her lips and took a sip. Her expression was as bitter as the drink. How strong was this tea supposed to be?

Tia slipped up beside her, peering into her face.

“Good?”

“Er, it’s incredibly bitter, so I wouldn’t call it— Ugh!”

Lakyus screwed up her face.

Then she shoved Tia away and stood up, clutching her stomach. So fast everything on the table rattled.

As Climb reeled, Lakyus’s dress began turning red. There was something long and thin stuck in her.

He had no clue what was going on. His brain refused to process any of this.

Who would ever have believed Tia would stab Lakyus?

Lakyus must have been just as shocked. She made no attempt to cast a healing spell. Every part of her being was dedicated to processing what was happening.

Gagaran ran up to her.

To help? Climb thought—but that notion was soon betrayed. She landed a punch on Lakyus's stomach.

Lakyus, too, had been expecting help and failed to raise a guard, so the blow landed like a battering ram.

“Gah!”

“Next!”

Before Lakyus could even breathe, Tia had another needle in her. The tip was moist—some sort of poison?

“Princess!”

Climb pulled Renner's hand, shielding her behind him and moving to the corner. Tia and Gagaran made no effort to stop them—they just kept hammering Lakyus.

Lakyus *was* trying to dodge now, but their attacks were perfectly coordinated, and she couldn't get away or even block properly, for that matter. Without any equipment to speak of, she was never a match for two fully kitted-out adventurers.

Evileye was simply watching, and Climb turned to her.

“What is this?!”

“Don't move. Or the spell will hit you *and* the princess.”

Climb had reached for his sword, but Evileye pointed a hand at him, and he froze. Perhaps he *should* step in, but Renner was what mattered most. He had to keep her safe, no matter the cost.

When he tried to edge her toward the door, a crystal sword landed at his feet.

"I said, don't move. No leaving this room. Try again and the princess loses a leg. Obey and we won't harm either of you."

Evileye's threat was clear, and Climb was out of options.

If Brain came back—or Tina found out—but even as his mind clutched at straws, the Blue Roses' battle raged on.

"I've been watching you, Lakyus," Tia muttered. "Trying to figure out how I'd kill you. Anything ordinary, you'd resist. Magic, you'd cancel it out. So what's left? But if I keep using different kinds of poison, it gets harder to resist, right? Evileye, you're up."

"Mm."

Confusion, hope, grief—all those emotions mixed with the pain that cast Lakyus's face in sharp relief, yet Evileye cast without hesitation.

"I know. Weaken Resistance. No use, she blocked it."

"Damn," Gagaran growled. Lakyus was turtled up, but she got another punch to the gut, and Tia stuck another needle in.

"Weaken Resistance. Okay. Now—Charm Person. Great. You can stop—she's under."

Gagaran and Tia moved away.

"Lakyus, heal those wounds."

"Yes, I know," Lakyus said, like nothing had happened. "Tia, can you pull these out?"

The power of mind control. Climb shuddered.

Tia stepped forward, but Evileye snapped, "Don't! Anything that causes pain will register as a hostile act and break the spell. Lakyus, sorry, but you'll have to remove them yourself. They're not in that deep."

"The goal was always just to get the poison in your bloodstream. Didn't use big needles. If you were wearing any armor, it'd never have worked."

"Very well. But it takes a lot of nerve to pull them out myself."

Lakyus bit her lip and extracted a needle. She began casting healing magic on the stab wounds.

"Gagaran, open a window, let in some fresh air—what about the blood on the floor?"

"The dress absorbed most of it," Renner said. "Barely anything spilled, and it hardly matters now."

Everyone but Climb was just going about their business. It felt like the whole thing had been a hallucination, like he'd slipped into an alternate reality.

"You don't bat an eye, huh?" Evileye said. "I always thought you were a tough cookie."

"I'm hardly *that*, but..." Renner tilted her head to one side. "I just couldn't imagine you attacking your own without good reason. I definitely see how scary mind control can be, though! Didn't you, Climb?"

"I thought the same thing."

"And... do you mind sharing why you did this?"

"If I say we do mind?"

"No apology for staining my carpets?"

The mask obscured it, but Climb was pretty sure Evileye had grinned.

"You got me there. The truth is simple enough. We care more about the lives of our friends than the fate of this kingdom. That's all."

"Protecting the capital was our demonic boss's idea, and we were all secretly against it."

"But if we said so, we figured she'd just tell us she was going to stay and defend it by herself. We realized we were gonna have to do a snatch and grab. But a fair fight would never end well. She's not the type to fall for some cheap trick, either. Sorry to do this in front of you, Your Highness, but being here gave us the edge we needed."

Tia and Gagaran were both nodding. Lakyus's teammates were all on the same page. Brain wasn't back because Tina was busy buying them time.

"Did you really have to go this far?"

"That's what I said! But they insisted."

"If we ask nicely, her guard goes up and stays up. We only stood a chance against this demo—Lakyus because she doesn't see it coming. I know from experience."

"Yeah?"

"Five types of poison, with no magic items equipped, and a weaken spell on her. Even then, it was pure luck that the charm took hold. Any less and we never would've been able to pull it off. Okay." Evileye clapped her hands together. "Soon as Tina gets back, we'll teleport to the inn, collect her gear, and teleport the hell away from this city."

She turned to Climb and Renner.

"...Since you're here, fancy joining us? No use mincing words. This place is doomed. There's no bright future for the princess of a doomed kingdom. This might be your last chance to get away."

Climb looked at Renner.

This might be just what they needed.

The Nation of Darkness had them surrounded, but a teleportation spell would get them past that. And Evileye was right. Her future was grim beyond imagining. He saw no other outcome—they were up against an undead willing to slaughter countless innocents.

"May I ask where you're heading?"

"Definitely outta here, but... I guess southeast? Go far enough, and you reach a place that fell into ruin long ago. The capital's a ruin, cleansed with fire, but I'm thinking of going there. It's pretty far, so we'll need to make a series of shorter teleports. But basically somewhere far—farther than you'd ever know."

"Oh."

Renner had her face down. Struggling to decide? But when she looked up, her mind was made up.

“Thank you. But I’m not coming with you.”

“Got it.”

Evileye didn’t ask again.

Climb felt a wave of panic. This moment had sealed Renner’s fate.

Perhaps true loyalty meant dragging her to safety by force—just as the Blue Roses were doing to their leader.

He looked to Renner for guidance, but she simply smiled, like she knew everything. The smile that always showed him the right way.

“Climb, this is my royal duty.”

That hit him hard.

Renner mattered as a person, but she also mattered as a princess.

The duty she spoke of was a grim one. Yet, Renner had lived her life as royalty and always used her station to help people—and she planned to face her end the same way.

He was clutching at straws in the dirt, while she sailed by on high.

At last... Climb accepted it.

His final task would be to keep her alive for even a second longer. He would die shielding her from the Nation of Darkness’s armies.

As Climb renewed his determination, Evileye muttered, “Hitting me where it hurts.” And as she said that, there was a knock at the door, and it swung open. Tina and Brain came in bearing trays.

“We found sweets.”

“And she rejected a dozen options, so it took us ages. Glad we made it back in time—are we? What’s going on?”

Even with the window open, the smell of Lakyus's blood lingered in the air. Brain immediately lowered his hips to the floor, and his eyes darted around the room.

"...She's got blood on her clothes. Was there an attack?"

"No—" Lakyus began.

"Don't you worry about it," Gagaran interrupted. "The princess'll catch you up once we're gone."

Brain looked at Renner, clearly suspicious. His first thought was making sure she was safe and sound. If she'd said the word, he'd have drawn his blade in an instant.

"Everything's fine. Relax, Brain."

He looked at Climb.

Climb followed Renner's lead.

"...Then I guess that's that."

"Oh, Brain Unglaus," Evileye said. "I should ask you, too. Interested in getting away?"

".....What?" Brain's eyes darted around the room once more. "What did they say?" he asked, jerking his head at Renner and Climb.

Evileye shook her head, and he made a face. "Ah. Then—no, either way, I wasn't going anywhere. I'm done running. And to think there was a time I thought *that* was easier..."

That last came out in a whisper, not meant for Evileye. It was addressed to the blade on his hip—and the man who'd once carried it.

"All right. I suspected that was how you'd answer. Guess I was right."

The Blue Roses gathered around her. And as if they'd already said all their good-byes, they vanished into thin air. The lingering scents of blood and tea were the only signs they'd ever been here.

This was likely the last time they'd ever see one another, so it seemed far too abrupt. But the longer they lingered, the harder it would be. Perhaps this was the right choice.

But that was how Climb felt—perhaps Renner was different.

It must have come as a blow. How could he comfort her? Climb turned to Renner and found her usual gentle smile gone. Grief had wiped it away. Her face was completely devoid of expression, like a mask.

Had this cut her deeper than he expected?

Climb stepped closer.

“Princess, I know it must be a shock. But...”

No more words were forthcoming. He’d meant to promise to stay by her side, but how could he possibly replace her friend? A noblewoman *and* an adamantite adventurer? His mind searched desperately for any way to comfort her.

And she must have picked up on that. Her lips curled. Her old gentle smile had returned once more.

“Don’t worry, Climb. You and Brain have things to do, yes?”

“Yes. Your Highness, Climb, might as well do this now. It’s time we went our separate ways. Don’t try and stop me.”

What was this?

Climb didn’t know what Brain was thinking. So he simply asked.

“Where are you going?”

“Mm? I’m gonna go challenge the King of Darkness to a duel. If not that, gonna try and cut down one of his minions, at least.” Brain took the sword hanging at his hip and tossed it to Climb. “I’m returning that,” he added.

“Wh-what are you talking about? This sword was left in your care after Sir Stronoff’s death in accordance with his wishes!”

“Oh, come on. You were there! I said I had no intention of doing things his way. And that’s a national treasure! It was never meant for me. Your Highness, give that back to the king.”

“Very well.”

“Princess!”

“Climb, Brain has made up his mind.”

“You get it, Your Highness. You were a lady worth serving. Not that I know anything about ladies. Anyway...” Brain stood up a little straighter. “This is probably good-bye. Your Highness, we had some good times. Climb—meeting you and Sebas brought me back to life. And I’m grateful.”

Brain turned his back to them and walked away.

“Meeting you and Gazef made me a happy man.”

Those were his last words before the door closed behind him.

“This is awful. If it weren’t for the King of Darkness—”

Climb felt as if everything were crumbling around him. Everything he’d ever known was slipping away, except for the one that mattered most. But he couldn’t cling to that, either. She, too, would likely not last long.

“Climb, I think it’s best we take that sword back to my father now.”

These words pulled him from his dark thoughts. Right. Until that moment came, he would serve the woman who’d saved him, the one he’d devoted himself to.

“...Also, um, so...” Renner stammered, her whole demeanor changing. “Could I hold that sword a moment?”

“Mm? Oh, sure.”

He handed it over and Renner drew it from its sheath.

“It’s pretty heavy,” she said, handing him the scabbard. Razor Edge had an incredibly sharp blade and could cut through armor like paper.

Before he could say, “Careful!” Renner swung the blade at empty air.

Climb's eyes widened with surprise. Certainly, the weight of it had made her stagger, and the tip scratched the carpet. She lacked the arm strength for it, but her stance and swing showed signs of training—her movements were almost as sharp as the blade. This was not the swing of someone who'd never held a blade, regardless of gender.

"Mm, definitely not for me."

"N-no, that was quite something. A little training and you'll likely be better than me, Your Highness."

"Oh, let's not be silly. And I doubt I'll ever swing a blade again."

Renner took the scabbard, put the sword away, and handed it back to Climb.

"Let's go see my father. But first..." Renner glanced down at herself. "I'll have to get ready."

•

Brain Unglaus was walking down the deserted streets of the capital. Where crowds usually thronged, there was not another soul. All hiding in their homes, terrified of the King of Darkness. Yet, Brain was all too aware that would not save them.

He knew that because he'd stood at Renner's side. He knew there was no earthly reason that would stop the King of Darkness from utterly demolishing this city.

But if asked how they *could* survive, he would have no answer.

Perhaps if they got together and agreed to scatter in every direction, some of them would survive. But better solutions escaped him.

Brain glanced up at the buildings lining the street. Doors and shutters locked and closed. Probably boarded over from the inside to prevent them being easily opened again.

*Worst case... there are people inside killing themselves or their families.*

There always were.

The stories going around had made it clear just how menacing the Nation of

Darkness's armies were.

They could go for a desperate gambit, rile up everyone left, and— Well, even that probably wouldn't hurt the enemy much, but at least it might surprise them. But there was no one left capable of that, no one who could capture the people's hearts and minds.

Perhaps the princess could have done it, but she seemed disinclined.

*Would things have been different if he was here instead of me? Maybe.*

He knew damn well fighting wouldn't get them anywhere. He'd watched that four hundred thousand-man army march off with realistic expectations. Yet, he didn't have it in him to mock that gamble, though the odds were one in a million—no, probably billion or trillion.

Zanac had not led them forth out of desperation or delusion. He had simply gone with the best odds he could find.

Like Brain was doing now.

He smiled sadly, then felt it on his skin.

*The air is different.*

Nothing had changed. The city smelled like it always did. But there was something fundamentally *wrong*. Something he could sense only because he'd been through more than his share of harrowing moments. It almost seemed like something smelled off, but what he sensed tickled not his nose but his mind.

He remembered feeling this during that fateful evening at E-Rantel, with Climb at his side.

It was the smell of loss and defeat.

*The King of Darkness finally ordered his troops to advance?*

That was the only cause he could imagine.

His opportunity.

If Brain simply walked toward the King of Darkness, he would likely never even get close. *Likely* was a poor choice of words—there was *no* chance he'd be able to do that.

But if the King of Darkness led the assault, perhaps he could slip through the chaos and reach him. He had no idea if the defenses at their camp would ever get that sloppy. But if they were focused on conquering a city of this size, perhaps their resources would be stretched thin.

Brain had stopped to consider the task ahead—and then he saw the walls ahead turning white.

It was like someone was pouring dye on them.

He could hear screams in the distance.

If the assault had started, those cries had to be coming from the tents near the walls, housing the refugees from the towns surrounding the capital.

Everyone knew the enemy would be headed for the castle. Almost no one was running toward Brain—or the castle behind him.

*What now? If the attack's begun, should I abandon my original plan?*

His first goal had been to find a way outside the walls and wait for the enemy to start committing forces to breaking in. That was the moment he'd skirt around the edges of their army in the hopes of getting closer to the King of Darkness.

But if the enemy was already in the city, then maybe he should just hide himself from their forces, wait until they'd passed by, and leave the capital behind that way.

But if he waited too long, the King of Darkness might leave their camp, and he'd have to locate him first. A huge waste of time and opportunity.

What about lying in ambush near the castle, assuming the King of Darkness would personally arrive to occupy it?

Either way—

*I'll have to hide.*

That said, there was no need to be as good as thieves or assassins. He simply had to be somewhere they wouldn't think to look.

As he wondered where that might be, he saw the gate come tumbling down. White fragments caught the light, sparkling—beautiful despite it all.

What magic had they used? This was the King of Darkness, the man who could summon all those nightmares. Anything and everything could happen in the next couple of moments.

He saw a small speck stepping over the rubble. From a distance, it looked tiny, but whatever it was, it was likely far bigger than a human.

Despite this advance, no soldiers stood in their way. That could only mean one thing.

None were left.

Brain shuddered.

This was another unparalleled monster.

It was coming steadily closer but didn't look hurried.

Brain winced.

This thing was ridiculously powerful. The speed it moved at was simply a by-product of that. It would not take it long to move through empty streets. So why was it taking this long?

*Because why not? Razing a city with nothing to protect it, slaughtering the populace—that thing must find this all too trivial. No reason to rush.*

No wonder it was so relaxed.

Brain squinted. It was still too far off to really make out.

This was the road Gazef had dragged him down in the rain.

The road he'd taken after meeting Climb and Sebas, bound to raid the Eight Fingers' lair.

He'd walked along it with the kids he'd picked up, hoping to train one into the next captain.

And this monster was strolling down it like they owned the place. Trampling a road that belonged to everything Brain cared about.

That was unacceptable.

Brain changed his mind. To hell with the King of Darkness. Right now, he wanted *this* thing.

*I can take it.*

Brain had sent those children away.

Had they made it to safety? Knowing that he had sown the seeds of the future was a comfort. Maybe there was one in a million—no, one in a billion chance one of them would grow up strong enough to take on the King of Darkness. That tantalizing delusion made him feel even better.

Brain stepped to the center of the road, waiting for the monster to reach him.

This was likely stupid.

He should definitely be hiding, searching for a chance to strike down the King of Darkness. There was no use throwing himself against an advancing monster.

Anyone watching would've told him to remember the big picture. That he was being dumb as all hell.

But Brain had lived his life by the sword. He would fight wherever and whoever he pleased.

It took a while, but the monster was now close enough to make out.

This was no man.

But one thing was clear enough. Whatever this light-blue creature was, it was a high-level race.

And—

*Cold.*

The wind blowing from his foe carried the chill of midwinter and made him shiver. This wasn't some psychological reaction to danger or hostility but literal cold air. The white cloud his breath made testified to it.

"What the...?" he muttered.

Was this creature wreathed in frost? Perhaps that was how the gate had gone down—shattering like ice.

*But how—?*

The gate had not been small. If this thing could really freeze and shatter it, that was genuinely terrifying.

But he'd known that going in.

Brain's grip tightened on his drawn blade, waiting.

His hand shook. Not in anticipation or from the cold—

This was *fear*.

His heart was screaming, telling him to step aside and go hide in some far-flung corner. This was a *monster*, but the way it carried that halberd showed it had a warrior's soul. If he acted like a coward, he would be ignored like a pebble by the side of the road.

In fact, it was already paying no heed to the stirrings in the houses that lined the street.

Brain need only act like one of them.

Then he would live for a while longer yet.

But his feet wouldn't budge.

He made no move to flee.

The grip on his hilt tightened, and his free hand slapped his cheek.

"Go time!"

The shaking subsided. His body and soul were now of one mind.

The blue giant surely saw Brain, yet its pace never changed. It walked right up to him.

It had a halberd in one hand, and the closer it got, the greater the intensity. Brain swallowed hard.

He was standing in this monster's path, blocking its way forward.

He'd been too preoccupied with the creature to realize it before, but there were people following it. Clad in white gowns, these pale-skinned women sported long black hair. Each of them also gave off a chill.

Brain could feel their eyes boring into him.

His enemy had yet to take any action against him.

Brain took a bottle from his belt and downed it. Then another and another. Three buffs enhanced him.

Drinking potions was a clear act of aggression, yet his foe still did not attack. He could sense it was *willing*, though.

It was now a mere five yards away.

*Come on! Another impassible wall?!*

At this range, that much was abundantly clear. This monster's strength was absolute. A creature that stood in a realm no amount of hard work could ever bring Brain to. He would barely be able to lay a finger on it, much less win.

Yet, even knowing this, he did not step aside.

His foe stopped.

Three yards left.

Given the length of this creature's arms and the halberd it carried, Brain was well inside its range.

"Brain Unglaus," he said, raising his sword before his eyes, his nerves stretched taut.

"I SERVE AT THE PLEASURE OF A SUPREME BEING. AINZ OOAL GOWN, THE KING OF DARKNESS. COCYTUS."

Brain blinked.

Was that this foe's name? He had not expected an answer.

And it jogged his memory.

Like he'd heard that name once, a long time ago. He couldn't place it. Maybe just his mind playing tricks on him.

Then he realized how careless he was being and kicked himself.

He had an impossibly powerful foe right before him and one willing to answer. It was rude to dig into the obscurity of memory.

And this was a monster well out of his reach. At least as good as Sebas, possibly even Shalltear Bloodfallen. To this foe, he was but an ant, scuttling along the ground. Yet, the creature's attitude betrayed no contempt.

If their positions were reversed, would Brain have done the same? No, he would have ignored his foe, cut them down, and moved right on. After a few moments, he wouldn't have even remembered they were there at all.

Brain straightened up, bowing his head. Like a student to a master.

"Thank you."

"NO NEED."

Brain's fingers clenched his hilt. Tighter and tighter.

Going up against a foe this powerful with no plan might be a betrayal of everyone who'd saved him. What he was doing was tantamount to suicide.

And what good would it do to slow this creature's advance?

It would accomplish nothing.

And yet—

*I'm a fool. Cocytus here is hardly the only one attacking. They—no, they're not children. They can decide their own fates. The way we all do.*

Cocytus stuck his halberd in the ground to one side.

“IMPERIAL SWORD ZANSHIN.”

He pulled a blade out of the air longer than Brain was tall. And raised it high.

Brain was grateful.

No words were needed. It was clear his foe had honored him by choosing this weapon.

He let out a long breath, then inhaled. As if releasing the last bit of hesitation in his soul.

That left him defenseless, but Cocytus did not budge. Brain respected that.

This warrior's soul was as exalted as his skill.

If he was as good as Shalltear, then he could probably strike Brain down from a resting position before he could get a hit in. Yet, Cocytus had taken a stance.

Not because he viewed Brain as a threat.

But because he had sensed Brain's resolve and acknowledged him as a fellow warrior.

And that was gratifying.

*A far cry from Shalltear.*

Perhaps it was rude to compare them.

*Mm? Shalltear? Cocytus? I have heard this name—no, don't! You can't let yourself be*

*distracted for even an instant, you fool!*

Brain focused his mind on nothing but victory.

If that blade swung down on him, he was clearly not up to the task of blocking it. If this creature was as strong as Shalltear, trying would not even slow the swing, and his head would wind up cleaved in two. It might even snap his sword in half.

Should he sidestep Cocytus's opening swing?

No, even if he was lucky enough to manage that, his foe would not stop there. A second and third swing would follow close behind. In a fight against anybody else, he would *deflect* the first strike and counter once his foe was off-balance. But against an opponent like this, deflecting would take everything he had—and leave him unable to attack himself. It also exposed him to whatever Cocytus's next move was.

So—

*Snatch victory from the jaws of death, was it?*

He'd heard Vesture use that phrase once.

The only way he could defeat Cocytus was to strike *faster*. But a blow to the head or body would do nothing to the speed of that swing. At best, they'd take each other out.

He'd have to aim for the sword hand.

Moving faster than a Shalltear-class monster and striking hard enough to sever their limb—what kind of sick joke was that?

And yet—

*That's the only way. I've got one shot.*

Brain lowered his hips.

The technique that had chipped Shalltear Bloodfallen's talon—the Nail Clipper.

—No.

This was no longer the Nail Clipper.

Originally, the Nail Clipper had required Domain (which guaranteed a hit) and Divine Strike (which boosted his speed) to set up an attack with Fourfold Slash of Light. That had been the crystallization of all his arts. And he had barely managed to shave off a sliver of Shalltear's nail with it. Arguably, that itself was a feat that would go down in history—but knowing creatures like her existed meant he could not rest on those laurels.

He had sought greater strength. Sought out Gazef Stronoff's teacher, the retired adamantite adventurer Vesture Kloff Di Laufen, and trained like a madman. The result had been the acquisition of the Sixfold Slash of Light. Sadly, he had not managed to get as far as Gazef had.

Domain and Divine Strike were still in place, but his technique now used Sixfold Slash of Light instead.

Martial arts were fueled by focus, and the stronger the art, the more focus it required. A skilled warrior—a high-level one—would have a greater capacity for sustained focus, but using multiple powerful martial arts at once was still a challenge. Brain certainly had a greater reserve than the average warrior. But the version of Nail Clipper he'd used against Shalltear Bloodfallen had pushed him to his limits.

Sixfold Slash of Light took far more focus to pull off than the Fourfold version—so he should not have been capable of swapping it in.

He'd pulled it off—for one reason.

Brain Unglaus had surpassed Gazef Stronoff—and reached the realm of the heroes.

And he'd gained a new art—the True Nail Clipper.

Cocytus shifted his leg forward ever so slightly, edging closer. It was the most minute of movements.

Given the gulf in their physiques, he could easily have lunged forward and cut Brain down.

So why do this?

The answer was clear. He'd chosen to bury Brain as a *warrior*.

Brain's respect for his foe grew only greater. He was in the True Nail Clipper stance now, thinking.

*Not yet.*

*Still not there.*

With three potions applying three buffs, Brain was stronger than he'd been when he fought against Shalltear.

And yet.

Brain Unglaus was merely human. No match for a monster like Cocytus.

This was no surprise. An ant could not fight a dragon. This was a truth he was forced to accept.

But he did not wish to lose. So what could he do? How could he close the yawning chasm that lay between them?

*I'm a warrior. I must do what warriors do.*

“Ability Boost.”

Brain activated a martial art.

True Nail Clipper, by its nature, took all the focus he had. There was nothing left to activate another art.

And yet—Brain's eyes were turning red. Blood poured from his nose. Capillaries were rupturing.

With an almost audible snap, he went *past* his limits.

The art had taken hold.

Power surged through his body.

Yet, it was still not enough.

He still stood no chance.

What next?

There was only one option.

Brain activated another martial art.

“Greater Ability Boost.”

Once again, Brain Unglaus did the impossible.

The man himself didn’t realize it, but his talent allowed him to increase his focus capacity. That was the only reason he’d been able to develop Nail Clipper in the first place, and by leveling up still further, he’d been capable of mastering True Nail Clipper.

But *this* was supposed to be Brain’s limit. He could not activate any further arts. That was the rule the world ran upon.

And yet, in this instant—Brain *broke* the world’s rules.

A second miracle.

The first had happened when he’d cut Shalltear’s nail.

And once again, he’d made another miracle happen.

Blood gushed from his nose.

His soft flesh was paying the price for breaking the rules.

Within a minute, Brain would no longer be moving.

But a minute was a long time with anyone this strong.

Cocytus stepped forward—

—and into Brain’s range.

Zanshin swung down—

Brain's sword swung back—

And then—

the loud sound of flesh being cleaved apart rang out.

Cocytus swung the imperial blade once more, cleansing it of blood and fat. He stowed the katana in space once more and plucked his halberd from the ground, gazing down at the man he'd slain.

A fine warrior.

Cocytus had not a scratch on him. His foe's blade had never reached him. Yet, this was still a warrior worthy of praise.

*FAR FINER THAN I'D HEARD.*

It was a shame to kill him.

If it was up to him, Cocytus would have spared the man's life and had him swear loyalty to his master. He could easily have snapped the man's blade, deflected his blow, or broken his legs. But that was not the way of a warrior.

Cocytus had felt it when he spotted this man in the distance and had become certain of it when they stood face-to-face. This warrior had made his choice.

And he did not have it in him to disrespect that choice.

He knew placing a warrior like this beneath him would be immensely useful, and yet he still slew him. Perhaps he had let Nazarick down.

But he had to respect it.

A warrior staking his life on his blade in battle.

If the Warrior Takemikazuchi had been here, would he have backed Cocytus's decision?

*HE WAS LIKELY LEVEL FORTY.*

That one blow aside, he had not seemed all *that* high level. Perhaps he had used a particularly strong skill, like Cocytus's own Acala.

Compared to Cocytus, the man had been weak. But by the standards of this world, he had been very strong.

Cocytus picked up Brain's blade.

"I'LL KEEP THIS."

It was by far the weakest blade in Cocytus's collection—it would be of no use to him. Perhaps it would be better to leave it sticking in the ground next to this man, in place of a gravestone. But Cocytus chose to take it with him.

And he did not wish to leave his body where it lay.

He turned to the frost virgins. "FREEZE HIM," he said.

Ice began to cover Brain's body.

Cocytus was about to step over him—but then he stopped.

He looked up at the castle ahead.

"....."

And then he silently turned away.

He went left down a narrow side street, following it until he reached a fork. There, he turned right, making sure the castle was dead ahead, and then made another right at the nearest side street, emerging back on the main road.

Cocytus glanced to his right.

To where Brain's body lay.

Without a word, Cocytus turned left—and headed toward the castle.

“Don’t you try and stop me!” Aura yelled.

She was talking to the frightened soldiers on the castle walls as she ran up the side, her feet finding footholds in the smallest depressions.

The soldiers above tried to stab at her with their spears, but she moved like no human could, vaulting over their heads, spinning in the air—

“Hyup!”

—and landing on the battlements behind them.

“V for victory!” she said, throwing up a two-finger salute.

Aura may have looked like a child, but the eyes upon her were filled with fear. After that unnatural display of acrobatics, no one here thought she was a normal child. Besides, she had a number of beasts with her.

Paying the humans no attention, Aura pulled a piece of paper out of the pouch at her hip.

The soldiers were slowly surrounding her, but she didn’t seem to notice their spears.

“Listen up, everyone! I’ll say it one more time. Don’t try and stop me.”

She unfolded the paper and began comparing the city before her to the map on it.

The landmarks matched up.

She found her first destination right away—the Wizards Guild.

Pleased with herself, Aura turned to look at the soldiers surrounding her. Quite a few spears were leveled at her, so close they’d stab her if she moved at all.

“Look, just because I climbed up here first doesn’t mean you should all be focused on me. I’m not alone!”

The soldiers glanced at one another and then threw themselves against the outer

walls. Too late. Aura's beasts were swarming over the top.

The soldiers' pathetic shrieks echoed all around her.

Aura was far more powerful, but looks mattered.

Losing all will to fight, the soldiers scattered.

Some definitely thought they had to stand their ground, but it was hard to remain calm when everyone else was already running away.

These were the outer walls, so the top was fairly wide. But as fear overwhelmed them, the fleeing soldiers began pushing up against one another. An orderly retreat would've been much faster, but they were too busy fighting one another to do much more than rout.

It would have been simple enough to chase after them and wipe everyone out, but none of Aura's familiars saw the sport in that, and their master gave no such orders, so they ignored the fleeing soldiers.

Except for *one*. A level-71 beast, the largest pet she'd brought with her—an Iris Tyrannos Basileus. This looked a lot like a tyrannosaurus rex. But it had fins on its back, and like the goddess it was named after, it gleamed with all the colors of the rainbow.

Aura didn't know the details, but she'd once heard her masters say it was based on the king of monsters.

The Iris Tyrannos Basileus let out a roar.

One so loud it shook the very earth.

This was no intimidation tactic nor an emotional outburst.

It was a special ability—the Howl of Fear.

Against someone who was around the same level, with ample resistance against psychic effects, it was just a very loud cry. For anyone else—well, the fleeing soldiers made it very obvious.

They crumpled to the ground as their faces contorted in absolute terror.

The shock alone caused instant death.

The great big beast took no pleasure in slaughtering fleeing foes—it had likely just seen the throng and thought they were in its way. And for that reason alone—they all perished.

The Iris Tyrannos Basileus was not unharmed. The cost of using this power was significant.

It was surrounded by five of the six other beasts Aura had brought with her. A level-78 fenrir. A level-77 Hound of the Wild Hunt. A level-76 Kirin. A level-76 Amphisbaena. And a level-74 Basiliskos.

The Kirin's backward kick connected first. The Hound of the Wild Hunt followed suit, and then each of the others attacked the Iris Tyrannos Basileus in turn.

Possibly just telling it to shut its mouth already.

Actual strength aside, all of them were higher level, so the Iris Tyrannos Basileus let out a plaintive cry, hoping to earn Aura's sympathy. This only made the others redouble their attacks.

If this outburst had started at the intensity of teammates messing around with a loudmouthed rookie, now it had escalated to outright hazing.

The one beast staying far above the fray was a level-58 Toad of Greed.

This was a giant, nightmarishly misshapen toad, its mouth lined with stained, yellowish molars, and eyes like an aging human driven mad with desire.

“Oh, stop that. I’m not mad, so let’s all stop being mean to Iris.”

She had her hands on her hips, glaring at them through narrowed eyes. They all whined.

“It’s fine—I’m not mad at you, either.”

Every one of her familiars except the Iris Tyrannos Basileus gathered around Aura,

rubbing up against her.

"Mmph!" Her squeak was adorable. She might be stronger than any of them, but with their massive bodies all coming at her from every direction, this reaction was expected.

"Hey! Gimme some room!" she yelped. They all obediently jumped away. "That's enough playing around."

She clapped her hands—but they were all huge, so it wasn't like they could line up on the wall. They wound up simply perching wherever they could, trying to look impressive and formidable. Their goofiness from earlier had all but vanished.

"Right! We're headed into the city to capture a few buildings. Not all of you will get to do things!"

The Iris Tyrannos Basileus looked dejected. It was the largest beast here.

"But I've got a special mission for you! I want you to walk around the city walls crushing everyone beneath your feet!"

"Rooooar!" Its howl shook the air, but that swiftly died away. It looked sheepishly around at the other beasts, then at Aura.

"...Uh, okay. Everybody else, commence operations! Move!"

Aura jumped down off the wall, entering the city proper. She landed on the roof of some house at a run and dashed across the eaves.

The beasts all jumped after her, touching down with impossibly light landings considering their size.

She glanced back once to make sure her pack was still with her. She spotted the Iris Tyrannos Basileus's long neck and tail waving and waved back. Its tail wagged even harder, sending a chunk of the masonry flying.

*—Get to work already!*

She shot it a telepathic order, and it got startled before it started stomping off along the wall.

Aura first led her beasts to the Wizards Guild. This place kept a lot of magic items and had high security to match their wards; the siege planners had deemed it the one location in the capital most likely to put up the stiffest resistance.

The enemy combatants weren't an issue, but it could take a while to collect all the magic items stored there. She might have to call in reinforcements.

Mulling that idea over, Aura made a beeline across the rooftops.

The capital was large but not large enough to pose an obstacle to Aura's top speed.

She reached her destination not long after leaving the wall.

None of her beasts dared lag behind. Well, the toad was on the slow side, so the Basiliskos had to carry it.

Surrounded by a long wall, the guild building was composed of three five-story towers connected by long two-story buildings. The doors were barred shut, with watch stations on either side of the gates.

No signs of anyone outside, but plenty of faces in the windows, keeping watch on the world outside.

Aura came in for a landing in the grounds, unrolled her map, and gave the building a look over.

"Hmm, if that's... then this must be..."

The kingdom collaborator had provided them with enough information to work out a basic floor plan—which included likely locations for the stores of magic items.

But there were several possibilities and no information on what might be stored where. Capturing a high-ranking caster and coaxing the intel out of them had proven a tall order. Aura would have to do that herself.

That was a pain, but given this sprawl, it would be more effective than throwing numbers at it.

"Fine, let's do it."

Aura headed for the front door, and several humans filed out of the guard rooms. Five men, one woman. The man in front was quite old.

*Oh, Aura thought.*

If this man was a high-ranking guild member, that saved her some time. But closer inspection left her disappointed.

He seemed to be some sort of warrior.

His fighting gear was of good make: black bottoms and blue-green top. Two swords hung from his hip, and a plate covered his chest.

His hair had long since gone white, without a trace of color left. His arms were as scrawny as his age seemed to imply, but that didn't mean they were sagging. His overall impression was thin, but he looked hard as steel.

Narrow, hawklike eyes bored into Aura.

His attitude suggested he had a lot of confidence.

*"Just to be absolutely sure... kid, you work for the King of Darkness?"*

Aura glanced at the group behind him. They were all dressed the same, but none had swords. Likely he was the master and they, his students.

She didn't really get why a Wizards Guild would have anyone like this on hand, but they were probably here to protect it.

They might have more information than the average caster but probably not anything really important.

*"What, no answer? I won't hesitate because of your age."*

Despite the beasts backing her, he kept his bluster up—likely because none of them showed any hostility, any interest in a fight, or any signs of blood lust. And their foes had courage, duty, and confidence.

*"Hmm, if you show me around, I don't need to kill you. I won't even hurt your students."*

She meant it. Mare would probably kill them later, though.

"Big talk, boyo. But we can't let you take one step farther. There are dangerous items here that spawn demons or the like. Can't let you have 'em."

Aura grinned.

That proved the good stuff was still *here*. She would have to gather them all up and send them to Demiurge.

"Oh yeah? Then my offer is—"

"Rejected. As my name is Ves—"

The old man crumpled to the ground.

Aura had nocked and shot an arrow.

It was so fast, his head had burst like an overripe pomegranate before he got more than a few words out, spraying the contents in all directions.

"No time to waste on idle chatter. Next? Or are you all gonna say the same thing? In that case, I'll just go grab the most important-looking caster."

The crowd behind the dead man all looked stunned. Aura couldn't be bothered waiting for their minds to recover. She turned to her beasts.

"Kill them," she said.

And with that, she headed to the door while her beasts moved like the wind, attacking the remaining humans. They left nothing but blood and chunks of flesh behind.

•

Mare was sitting alone on the second-highest tower of the castle, looking down at the city below.

He'd killed a lot of people in the fight three days ago on their way here. But those were all men, no women and children. But that described most of the people here—all in all, very weak.

Mare looked very sad.

He kept doing the math in his head.

—It just wasn't possible.

“What now?”

He wanted to ask someone for their advice, but there was no one to talk to. No, there were probably some Hanzos, but they wouldn't show themselves before him, and even if they did, they couldn't help.

*Um, so how do I efficiently destroy this huge city and cleanly kill everyone in it?*

On his way here, he and his master had destroyed a bunch of towns. He had quite a lot of experience now. But that was why he knew just how complex and difficult destroying cities and exterminating entire populaces was.

If he cast a whole lot of spells, he could knock down all the buildings and turn the city to rubble. But that alone wouldn't kill *everyone*.

For example, if he used a spell that caused an earthquake, that was perfect for knocking buildings down and destroying everything underground. A lot of people inside would get trapped under the collapsing buildings and die.

The earthquake would only occur in the area affected by the spell, and nothing outside of it, so there was no risk of people hiding in their houses in other parts of the city noticing the spell itself. But the sounds of the houses falling and the people inside screaming were another story.

Things like that would give away what was happening, or at least make people come outside or go to the windows.

People who knelt down with their eyes closed and their hands over their ears were the best. Anyone who thought they could weather this disaster in their own homes, curled up in bed—Mare could easily kill them all with one more spell.

The problem were people who realized they'd be crushed next and moved on instinct or a flare of courage. And even worse—the weaklings who panicked or flailed out in desperation. People like that often ran in the direction you least expected.

And desperation was contagious.

Anyone who saw people running was likely to leave their house and start running, too.

It was one thing if they ran somewhere that still had standing buildings. But in their panic, some people would run into the pools of blood and rubble. There were even those who'd try to save survivors from the collapsed buildings.

*I wish they wouldn't try to run...*

If they ran the wrong way, he'd have to use more area-of-effect spells to catch them. It was double the trouble.

If he had time, that was no big deal. But he couldn't spare a single moment when his master was watching.

His master's time was precious, and it was embarrassing to admit he couldn't wrap this all up on the first pass.

The other problem with earthquakes was that they didn't guarantee kills. There were actually a good number of survivors. *And* they tended to start fires, which could kill more people but be seen from a distance, sparking primal terror and increasing the number of runners.

If it wasn't one thing, it was another.

*I've got to practice more and get better!*

BubblingTeapot had designed Mare to be good at crowd control. He was quite proud of the fact that none of the other guardians were as good at area-of-effect attacks.

So being in a position where he couldn't easily demolish a city and slaughter the populace really undermined his primary purpose.

If BubblingTeapot saw him like this, she might blow her top.

*"Sniff..."*

Imagining her scolding made tears well up in his eyes. But he wiped them away before they fell.

“I’ve got to try. Lord Ainz said so, too.”

Mare was filled with gratitude and respect.

If Ainz hadn’t let Mare practice destroying cities and taught him to learn from his mistakes, he never would’ve gotten this good at it.

Mare remembered the first village he’d demolished. It had been a total mess!

It did his creator a great disservice.

But even when he’d been reeling in horror, Lord Ainz had been so nice to him. Mare remembered being so happy he almost cried.

Lord Ainz had said if you *knew* you were lacking in experience, all you had to do was work hard and get better at it.

If that had come from another guardian, it wouldn’t have affected him the same way. But Ainz was like BubblingTeapot—a Supreme Being.

Mare made up his mind.

He had to destroy more villages and towns and cities and slaughter way more people so he could live up to what BubblingTeapot wanted him to be.

“Okay!”

An adorable child’s voice but far brighter and forceful than anything that typically came out of Mare. If the other guardians could see him now, it probably would’ve shocked them. They had no idea he could be this positive.

“It’s time!”

He clenched his hands together.

Putting everything he’d learned to use.

“I’m gonna destroy this capital and kill everyone in it! Let’s goooo!”

He raised both fists in the air.

The Hanzos secretly watching did the same.

•

In the hall, Climb was gazing through the thick glass windows at the view outside.

Renner had sent him out here before they went to meet the king, saying she needed to have proper makeup on if the Nation of Darkness was coming. She might have to change her dress, too, so he figured this would take a while.

His gaze turned back to the deserted hall.

The few remaining knights had gone to their posts, sealing the entrance to the castle and settling in to wait for the Nation of Darkness's armies.

Some might mock this as a futile show of resistance. They weren't exactly Gazef Stronoff's Royal Select—most of them were only slightly better than the typical kingdom soldier. The Nation of Darkness's monsters would likely crush them without breaking a sweat. But the royal family had knighted them, and they were loyal to the crown. This was their sworn duty. Climb pitied anyone who would laugh at that.

Given their respective backgrounds, there were precious few knights he'd had good experiences with. He'd assumed they'd all run the first chance they got. How wrong he'd been. He was still kicking himself for it.

Their loyalty had been true—and that was exactly *why* they'd been so against a street urchin serving at the hand of royalty. Climb had never understood the strength of their feelings.

Climb looked toward the palace doors.

Wondering if perhaps he should go stand with those knights—but he soon dismissed that notion.

Climb had not been saved by the crown but by Renner herself.

If Renner had ordered it, he would have joined them at once. But as long as she did not, he would serve at her side until the very end. It was his duty to ensure she lived at least an instant longer than he did.

The moment she'd reached out to him, he'd become hers, body and soul.

Here in this deserted, silent corridor, Climb let his thoughts run wild.

Reflecting on the past, on Renner herself, on futures that might have been, and—

He looked to his side. No one stood by him now. The man who'd once been there, Brain Unglaus, had left the palace behind.

How far had he made it?

If the Nation of Darkness's armies were already at the castle, perhaps he'd already perished.

Climb's heart ached.

Brain had taught him a lot, shown him the way forward.

He'd been like a mentor, a friend, and a brother.

He'd been closer to Brain than he ever was to Gazef. Renner was his everything, but Brain had come close to being just as important.

"Why did it have to end this way?"

His whisper melted away in the empty hallway.

He couldn't help but wonder.

He'd thought peace would last forever. Tomorrow and the day after. But now— His thoughts were interrupted by the door slamming open.

Climb jumped at the unexpected noise. He spun around to find Renner standing there. Her dress unchanged, her makeup so lightly applied he could not tell if she wore any at all.

For all the time she'd taken, Renner looked just like she always did.

In her hands, she held Razor Edge, scabbard and all.

Had something happened? Before he could ask, Renner said, "Climb, we must make haste."

"Right!"

Without another word, Renner dashed off down the hall.

He hurried, pulling up alongside her.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

Her eyes briefly glanced his way, then turned back to the hall ahead.

"Yes. I remembered some urgent business. A little payback for the Nation of Darkness. We must reach my father at once. To his chambers!"

"Right!"

She handed Razor Edge to him on the way to the king's quarters.

Here, too, there were no knights.

Renner never broke stride. She rammed her way through this door as well.

Ramposa III looked up in surprise.

"Renner, what—?"

No one had ever entered his quarters this loudly, least of all his daughter. His words died in his throat.

When the king's gaze shifted from the princess to him, Climb bowed his head apologetically.

"Oh, there you are, Father! I just thought of something ever so important," Renner said.

She'd been half running the whole way here but didn't seem to be out of breath at all. Neither was Climb, but he had almost never seen Renner run before, so it struck him as odd. But they hadn't been going all *that* fast, so maybe it was nothing.

"What is it, Renner? Why throw the door open like that?"

"That hardly matters now."

Renner was speaking slightly faster than usual.

"Fair enough," Ramposa III said, shaking his head. "What brings you here, Renner? You said it was important?"

"Yes! You see—" Here, she tilted her head adorably. "Why are you here, Father?"

"You're aware he locked me up?"

"Oh, my brother?"

"Yes. That fool, Zanac! Both my sons, dying before their father..."

The king's face twisted up in grief. Seven days ago, their armies had set off, and everyone knew by now that none had returned alive. Their fates were beyond imagining, but it took very little thinking to understand what their disappearance meant.

"...I was freed yesterday and knew I had much to prepare before the King of Darkness arrived. I was busying myself with those tasks. The knights did offer to help, but I ordered them to leave. I can only hope they made it out in time..."

Climb knew full well those knights had joined the last stand at the castle gates but said nothing. Renner also held her tongue on the matter and spoke about something else.

"You were getting these ready?" she asked.

"Precisely."

On the table lay the king's crown, several treasures, and a number of books.

"...But why are you still here, Renner? Did he... not urge you to flee?"

"I could say the same to you, Father."

"I'm going nowhere. He was still but a prince! This is *my* duty. Yet he—mm? That

sword..."

Ramposa III's eyes had locked onto the blade at Climb's hip. He glanced behind them, then turned to Renner.

"What happened to the man you hired? The one as strong as Gazef?"

"Brain left. Said he was going to defeat the King of Darkness."

"...I can't imagine that happening. But if that's true, why leave the sword behind? With that in hand, perhaps..."

"It never would've made a difference. Not against someone who defeated our captain so easily. And frankly, at this point even if someone did slay the King of Darkness, it would not matter."

"Yes... yes. Right you are. There is no point if the Nation of Darkness's armies do not withdraw." The king glanced out the window, then added, "You asked why I remained here. I did so because I thought there was a need for history to record that the crown officially bowed before our conquerors. To meet my end in a manner befitting the last king."

Ramposa III looked very tired. He undoubtedly was.

"Climb, the crown commands you to take Renner with you and flee. I am aware that will be difficult, but there are hidden passages leading from the palace out of the capital. If you use those as the Nation of Darkness's armies pour into the castle, perhaps you will manage to slip away to safety."

"...No need for that, Climb," Renner said.

The king and princess had never given him contradictory orders before. This was the very first time.

Climb considered it briefly but chose not to move. His fists clenched tight.

He did not want Renner to die. But obeying her wishes was more important. If he was going to go against her, he would have forced her to flee with Evileye.

"Climb."

“Climb.”

When he didn’t move, both spoke his name as one. But the emotions in their voices were diametrically opposed.

“Father, Climb belongs to me. He will not obey your orders.”

“Yes, it appears so. I feel that if you were truly loyal, you would take her away from here, Climb. There is meaning in preserving the Vaiself bloodline. If you can take her away from here, she is yours.”

Climb’s eyes went wide.

The offer was so tempting, he was momentarily swayed. He had certainly dreamed of such a thing. There were many moments when he found comfort in thoughts of her.

But he had already chosen to be Renner’s shield, to die as her shield.

“I do not deserve it,” he said, like choking up blood. “The offer is most appealing, but I must refuse.”

When he glanced in Renner’s direction, he discovered a mysterious smile on her face. Perhaps approving of this display of loyalty.

“And I came rushing here for a reason, Father. Hand me the crown.”

“But why?”

“Our family’s historical treasures, the crown included, must not be given to the King of Darkness.”

“.....The man would destroy our kingdom. Why would we not offer up this storied crown? As long as it exists, our family’s history will live on. That is why I brought it here from the treasury.”

“I think we should hide it somewhere in the city. And tell the King of Darkness this: *All symbols of the royal family are hidden within the city. If you destroy the place, you will never find them.*”

“...Ah. That is certainly... a good idea. If he desires the crown even slightly, perhaps it

will stay his hand. My life is of no consequence, but we should take all measures that might spare the lives of our people."

Ramposa III removed the crown from his head.

"Father, not that one." She pointed at the table. "The ceremonial crown used during coronations."

"Oh. Oh, right."

"What else have you brought... the scepter, the coronation jewels, and the seal. Everything that symbolizes the authority of the crown and the kingdom. Can I take them all? The more cards we have the better."

"...Mm, very well. Go ahead."

"Climb, can I ask you to hide these?"

"Of course, Lady Renner. But where should I hide them?"

"Don't worry, my brother and I discussed it already."

"What? You and Zanac?!"

"Yes, Father. This was actually his idea. We've already decided exactly where these should go. Although I do worry he might have been fed the idea by Marquis Raeven..."

"He thought that far ahead," Ramposa III whispered to himself, tears welling up in his eyes.

"Climb, you know the warehouse district that was pillaged during Jaldabaoth's attack? We have a little storehouse there."

Renner detailed the route, but it was rather complicated, and he was less than confident he would find his way. Perhaps she picked up on that, because she asked her father's permission, took a piece of paper from the table, and drew Climb a simple map. Just the bare minimum to get him there.

"There's a hidden basement inside. Put these there."

“Right away!”

“And when you’re done—”

Climb looked right at her. Hoping she wouldn’t say not to come back. He wanted to be at her side to the bitter end.

Perhaps that got across because she hesitated, then said, “Make sure you come back safe.”

It was not clear how far the Nation of Darkness’s armies had come, but they were likely already in the city and in the process of razing it to the ground. Leaving the castle at all was a risk. But Climb never hesitated. His lady had given him his orders.

“Lady.”

“Please,” she said. “You must come back. Don’t fight. Always run.”

Renner recognized his resolve but clearly had little faith in his skills.

“I will,” he said, nodding emphatically. This time, she believed him.

“Good. Father, leaving the palace now might be rather difficult. Could you tell Climb the way?”

“The hidden passages that lead to the capital streets?”

“Yes.”

“Very well. Listen closely.”

What the king said next was genuinely astonishing. Climb had walked right by these passages countless times. He had no idea anything could even be hidden there.

“Climb, take the time you need. You must be extremely careful so those don’t get stolen.”

“Of course, Lady Renner. Even if it costs me my life!”

“And once that’s done, come straight back here. Even if you see something concerning.

There's no telling when the King of Darkness or his armies will reach this place."

She was using different words but was basically saying the same thing again. Was she just that worried about him? He gave a sharp response, hoping to alleviate her concerns.

"Of course! I'll be back before you know it."

"...Make sure you do. Now please go."

She was wearing her customary smile again. As Climb turned to leave the room, he saw Ramposa III hand her a little bottle.

He could imagine what it contained.

Climb bowed his head and left the room, heading for the hidden passage.

He followed it out into the capital.

The streets were so quiet, it felt like there was no one left alive.

In the distance, he thought he heard a noise like the howling of a giant beast, but from here, he couldn't tell what was going on. The capital was massive. Even if he climbed up the walls around the castle or city, it would likely not give him a clear picture of its scale.

But that wasn't Climb's mission. He ran straight for the storehouse.

He reached it without spying another soul. He'd gone as fast as he could, but it had been quite a distance—and he had kept his guard up the whole way, so it had taken a while to get here.

The storehouse was smaller than he'd expected. As he drew near the door, Climb saw it standing open.

He'd taken out his bell but put it back in his bag and stepped through the open door.

There was nothing inside. Just an empty room.

The scent of dust greeted him. No lanterns and the shutters were closed, but enough

light slipped through the cracks that it was still possible to see in the gloom.

Climb lurked by the door a long moment, keeping one ear focused on the sounds outside.

When he was sure nothing was approaching, he moved to the opposite wall, following his instructions.

Rows of empty shelves stood in a line. He pushed the third set of shelves from the right.

At first, they didn't budge, but he slowly pressed harder, and at last there was a click, and they gave way. The shelves swung open like a door.

The opening yawned black as pitch. This room had no gaps or windows.

Climb donned his helmet.

The enhancement on it allowed him to see freely despite the complete lack of light. The room itself was empty save for a handle on the floor; when he lifted that, it revealed a spiral staircase descending into the depths.

At the bottom of that was another small room lined with shelves.

These, too, were empty. Nothing was stored here. Quite a lot of dust had piled up. This was where he placed the royal treasures.

His task was complete.

Climb went back up the stairs and was outside again.

From here, he planned to run the rest of the way back.

But when he caught a glimpse of the castle up ahead, he gasped.

It was *white*. The castle itself was surrounded by thick walls, but these, too, had been turned white—the whole structure was sparkling in the sunlight.

A stranger to these lands might have thought it beautiful, but anyone who lived here knew just how abnormal it was.

"Oh! G-good, you weren't crushed. Um... it's not safe to be here."

A child's voice.

He looked up and saw a little girl sitting on the storehouse roof. She carried a black staff and had dark skin—likely a dark elf, judging by her appearance.

"And you are...?"

".....Er, u-um, well. I was planning on destroying everything here, so, um. You'd better get going before you get caught up in the aftermath."

That alone told him who this was.

This girl was from the Nation of Darkness.

His hand reached for his sword, but then he stopped himself.

She might not look strong, but he couldn't imagine she was here alone. What's more, she'd made it this far into the city. Best to assume this was no ordinary child.

*Maybe* he could win, but the noise would definitely draw in the Nation of Darkness's undead—and lead them straight to Renner. His mission was not to fight the enemy but to be by her side.

And she had insisted he come right back.

He almost looked at the warehouse again but forcibly kept his eyes looking anywhere else. If he couldn't seal this girl's lips, then he had to avoid arousing her suspicions.

Climb turned around and bolted. He was worried she would take this opportunity to hit him from behind. But more than anything, he was driven by a need to get back to Renner as fast as he could.

As he rounded the first corner, he heard buildings collapsing behind him. He wanted to look back but immediately pushed that thought out of his mind.

No one seemed to be coming for him, and after a short while, he safely made it to the secret passage. He looked around one more time to see if anyone was following him and saw black smoke rising toward the sky.

"The city's burning?"

Buildings blocked his view, so he couldn't be sure where the fires were exactly, but smoke was pouring out from quite a few places.

That girl had not been a scout; there were already quite a few Nation of Darkness armies in the city, ransacking it.

Yet—he could hear no screams.

Climb pushed his doubts out of his mind.

There was no time to question it. He had to get back to Renner and report his duty complete. Then all that was left to do was serve at her side until the end came.

Climb raced down the hidden passage into the palace.

It was quiet here, too. He didn't know why.

The castle outside had looked frozen solid. The Nation of Darkness must have attacked. The few remaining knights should be busy manning the defenses.

He was some distance from the site of their last stand, but he should still be able to hear the clash of blade upon blade. And yet...

*It's quieter than it was before.*

This silence was genuinely unsettling. A desolate stillness had settled over everything, like there was no one else in the world, let alone the palace.

Climb ran to the king's room, intentionally making a bit more noise than usual. He considered stopping to knock politely but decided to skip the formalities and charged inside.

The room was empty.

No sign of Renner or the king.

There was a room next to this one. Wondering if they were in there, he took a step forward—and spotted a note on the table.

The same kind of paper Renner had used to draw the map.

Climb picked it up and looked it over.

It was in Renner's handwriting. She'd scribbled a note, telling him to head to the throne room.

Climb raced out the door.

He drew up short as he neared the throne room entrance. He'd spotted figures on either side of the entrance—and neither of them was anyone he'd ever seen within the palace before.

Women far too pale to be human.

Clearly agents of the Nation of Darkness. They obviously saw him coming but showed no signs of aggression. They didn't seem interested in him at all.

Should he draw his blade or keep it sheathed?

When he hesitated, one of the women spoke.

"Go in. You are the last human in the palace."

With that, she settled back into a bored silence.

The ominous phrasing made his hair stand on end.

He ran between the women standing guard and burst into the throne room.

There were so many things to take in that his mind spun.

That was not Ramposa III on the throne. It was a skeletal monster, death incarnate—Ainz Ooal Gown, the King of Darkness. He was flanked by a man with a tail and the Nation of Darkness's prime minister, Albedo. There was also an insect-like monster seemingly made of ice attending him.

Not far from them, Ramposa III was lying facedown, immobile. His clothes were stained dark red. Renner was sitting on the floor nearby, her clothes drenched in blood—and Razor Edge lay on the ground beside them.

The sword's blade was covered in blood. Clearly, this weapon had been used to slay the king.

"Princess!"

"Climb."

Everyone not human laughed. Was it mockery?

He moved in front of Renner, his sword drawn. They would both die here. But it was his duty to protect her until he did.

"That is not how one behaves in the presence of Lord Ainz. **On your knees.**"

Climb went down on his hands and knees. It was impossible to disobey. His body obeyed before he even realized it. He could sense someone behind him, doing the same thing.

Renner.

He remembered how Lakyus had acted under mind control, and it suddenly all made sense.

"You used this to control Lady Renner?!"

A tragedy had unfolded here. He could see in his mind a charmed princess, forced to kill her own father. Rage coursed through him, but he couldn't move a single muscle. It was like his body didn't belong to him.

"Oh, I remember him. You were there for the duel with Gazef Stronoff. Release him from your influence."

"Yes, my lord. **You are free.**"

The bonds vanished. Climb rolled sideways, grabbing Razor Edge from the floor before rising to his feet instantly. Getting his breath under control, he raised the sword, facing the King of Darkness.

He knew this would mean nothing. The King of Darkness had slain the captain so swiftly, he hadn't even seen what exactly happened. But he was Renner's shield, and it

was his duty to always stand between her and death.

The King of Darkness rose from the throne and slowly moved toward him.

"Be grateful," he said. "I am king, but I will grant you the honor of a duel. Should I win... I'll take that sword."

The king moved slowly, seemingly oblivious to any threat.

Anger washed over Climb.

It was all *his* fault.

If not for this monstrous king, their lives would have been peaceful. No one would have had to die.

"—And the princess would never have had to grieve!"

This seemed to amuse the King of Darkness.

It was possible that even if he swung, his blade would go nowhere. He remembered how the captain had died without knowing what had killed him.

What was his best move?

Climb gripped Razor Edge tight—

And when the King of Darkness took another step forward, Climb threw the sword as hard as he could.

Even the King of Darkness had not expected that.

He batted the blade aside, but this left him off-balance.

Climb leaped at him, fist balled tight, and swung as hard as he could.

His punch connected with the King of Darkness's head.

"Climb!" Renner shrieked.

Skeletons were supposed to be weak against blunt damage. Sadly, it was his fist that seemed the most hurt.

The King of Darkness appeared to feel no pain at all.

“If this were a story—”

The king’s hand snapped out and grabbed the front of Climb’s armor. He tried to get away but couldn’t free himself.

“—these powerful emotions you’re feeling would have awakened the hidden power within you, allowing you to defeat me.”

The King of Darkness lifted Climb into the air. His desperate struggles were in vain. It was like punching a brick wall.

“However, this is *reality*. A plot twist like that will never come to pass.”

Climb was flung aside, his body hanging in the air for far too long before he finally crashed to the floor. His back hit the ground so hard it forced all the air from his lungs.

Climb scrambled back up and looked toward the king, who had not bothered to take a single step after him. As if no one this strong needed to pursue their opponent.

“You will die here. You are not worth saving. You lack any special talent or skill. But do not despair.”

The King of Darkness didn’t even seem to be looking his way. His eyes seemed to be staring into the distance.

“This world is hardly fair. Inequality begins at the moment of birth. Some are born talented, and others are not. Even the circumstances of birth are unequal. Some families possess great wealth, and others do not. What’s more, the personalities of one’s parents or siblings can make all the difference. Those lucky few lead blessed lives, while the rest are subjected to lives of deprivation and misery. Yet, let me say it again—this inequality is not worth lamenting. Why? Because death awaits all. And by death—I mean *me*. I am the ruler of death, and my mercy brings equality to this unfair world.”

Climb understood little of this rambling, but he was being told to embrace death at

best.

It was too much.

The King of Darkness had just declared himself death personified, and that fact alone threatened to consume Climb.

How could he challenge that?

He'd always known there was an insurmountable gulf between the king who could slay entire armies and a lowly warrior of no particular skill. But it was far greater than he'd ever imagined.

The scale was so vast, it was like an ant gazing up at the sky above.

But it had never been his desire to win, and he never believed it was possible for him. His mind had only ever focused on one thing—to serve as Renner's shield until he could do so no more.

That gave him courage.

The flames in his heart no longer flickered.

Yes.

All for Renner.

The girl who'd saved him that day in the rain.

The girl who'd made him human—

“...Ah. *Those* eyes.”

He didn't know what the King of Darkness meant by that.

Perhaps he'd realized Climb still had fight left in him. Yet, the King of Darkness turned his back, leaving himself exposed—and then he picked up Razor Edge from the floor. He tossed it to Climb.

“Pick it up.”

The King of Darkness raised a hand, and a black sword appeared in it. Judging from the length, it was a kind of longsword.

Not taking his eyes off the king for a second, Climb picked up Razor Edge. He had no choice. He remembered Gazef's fight—or rather, what the King of Darkness had said just before it. If a weapon's enchantment was too weak, it could not even scratch him. But this sword had been imbued with enough magic to kill him.

His first attack had proved his armor—the magic armor Renner had given him—was sadly not strong enough to penetrate that defense.

"Climb..." Looking worried, Renner took a step toward him.

He managed a faint smile and whispered, "Princess, I'll buy you some time. If I... then make haste."

She must have caught his meaning. Renner nodded.

He moved a step away from her, raising Razor Edge.

"Have you said your sweet partings?"

"Tell me. When I am dead, is she next?"

The King of Darkness said nothing.

That struck Climb as odd. Why fall silent here? But his doubt was washed away by a tiny chuckle from the king's skull.

"Which answer would hurt you most? I suspect it must be no answer at all."

"King of Darkness!!"

He swung Razor Edge hard, and the King of Darkness easily blocked it. They exchanged a number of blows, but Climb could not even make his foe budge.

The king also didn't attempt to fight back. He was *toying* with Climb. Like an adult humoring a child's tantrum.

But that was how Climb wanted it.

He raised Razor Edge high, putting all his willpower behind his next blow.

Like he had before, the King of Darkness moved the black blade to block it.

*Here.*

This was where he would risk it all.

Climb activated a martial art. And not just that—he relied on the power of his ring as well. For one instant, Climb's power received a massive boost.

The blows before had taught the king how Climb fought. That meant *this* blow would come as a surprise.

He made it look like he'd put his back in it—but actually pulled his swing. It was easily blocked—but Climb was already pulling away to aim a swift stab at the red orb in the king's belly.

He had long suspected that this was the King of Darkness's weakness.

Even if it wasn't, shattering that orb should do some damage.

“—Hnk”

“—Interesting. A good hit!”

Climb had put everything he had into that strike—and the King of Darkness had caught it with his bare hand.

Searing heat enveloped Climb's shoulder. He could feel something seeping out there. A moment later, that heat became pain.

Climb leaped back. His shoulder had been lacerated.

The King of Darkness had cut through Renner's gift like butter. Still, it didn't seem like there was a gear-breaking effect, so the armor wasn't falling off him.

His arm still moved. But his best bet had come up empty.

He had to assume he was not going to do *any* damage here.

"Can Razor Edge destroy a World Item? A potentially fascinating experiment. If it could scratch this, that sword's value would be immense. Still..." The King of Darkness tossed his sword aside. It vanished into thin air. "That can wait until I've killed you."

He was switching to magic.

Climb almost smiled. The King of Darkness resorting to magic against a foe of his ilk.

Nothing good would come of giving him time to cast.

Climb charged in. He heard the words "Grasp Heart" and then the sound of something tearing inside reached his ears. The pain was immeasurable.

"Well done."

And then—

—his vision—

—went—

—dar—

•

"If you'll excuse me, woof."

An unfamiliar voice and the sound of a door slamming shut.

That was what woke him up.

He was sure something had happened—but exactly *what* escaped him. Those thoughts slipped away like memories of a dream in the morning.

He had no strength in his muscles or bones, like everything had melted. He could barely turn his head.

With great effort, he looked around.

Renner's chambers were the most luxurious rooms Climb had ever seen, but this place

was even fancier. He was certain it was impossible to forget a room like this, so he clearly wasn't in the palace.

What had happened to him?

Why was he alive?

And most importantly, where was his mistress?

He couldn't move, but he could sense someone else was here with him.

"Ah..."

He tried to call out, but his voice failed to form into words. Yet, that alone was all the room's occupant required. He could hear her rushing over.

"Climb! You're awake!"

He couldn't answer. Every part of him felt weak, and he didn't have the strength to speak. But that wasn't what stopped him. Too many emotions were washing over him, and no words came to mind.

Tears ran down his cheeks.

Oh. It was all a nightmare.

A horrible dream where the Nation of Darkness attacked and Renner faced certain death.

"Ah... y..."

"Yes, it's me. Renner."

The same smile as always.

No—he'd seen her smile often enough to know. This smile was a little bit different.

Had something happened?

Climb's eyes shifted around, spotting something strange over Renner's shoulders.

Black wings.

Like a bat.

They were flapping.

Fake? No, those were far too real. He could not convince himself otherwise.

Renner's smile faded. She realized the source of his shock.

"These... well, the King of Darkness *changed* me. I'm not human anymore. I'm a demon."

Climb's eyes went wide.

"Rrrrr..."

"A shame, I know. I alone survived."

He wanted to refuse this, but all that came out were groans.

Tears flowed freely from his eyes.

Renner gently wiped them away.

Climb shook with emotion. She might look different, but Renner's heart was still hers.

"And... I'm sure you're wondering why you still live. Before I answer... Climb, will you do me a favor? I'm a demon now, and I'll live forever. But I can't face eternity alone."

She leaned closer.

"Climb, will you become a demon with me?"

No time to hesitate. All of him already belonged to her.

His body could barely move, but he forced it to nod.

"Thank you! And there's your answer. I promised to serve the King of Darkness. And in return, he brought you back to life."

Climb's eyes went even wider.

"Don't look so shocked. I don't think it's a bad deal. This way, I don't have to be alone. Climb, will you swear loyalty to the King of Darkness?"

"I... do."

This time he did hesitate, but if Renner had sworn loyalty, then he would, too. No—he had no choice *but* to swear.

"Thank you, Climb. I'm sure the King of Darkness will test you, see if you are truly loyal. That won't be easy for you. Or for me..."

"Not... a prob... lem."

"...Thank you again, Climb. That's enough talking for now. Get some rest. I'll look after you."

Renner smiled and moved away.

"Sleep now."

He could not see where she went, but he heard a door open and close.

Climb went limp.

And sleep soon came for him.

Like sliding into a bog, Climb passed out even as the tears kept flowing. The emotions they contained were too convoluted for even Climb to explain.

Outside the bedroom, Renner moved to the next room over and hastily knelt before the woman on the couch.

"Lady Albedo," she said, bowing her head. "Pray forgive my tardiness in offering words of gratitude. For the poison you supplied and the performance in the throne room—His Majesty honored us with his cooperation, and I cannot thank him enough."

"Heh-heh. No matter. You need not trouble yourself over it. We spare no effort to acquire worthy talent."

“Thank you, Lady Albedo.”

But she had put a slight stress on the word *worthy* that made Renner shiver. Albedo mostly likely caught that but let it pass without comment. Yet, her eyes bored into the back of Renner’s head.

“..... Heh-heh. No need to be so tense. The events in the kingdom proved your skills. To me and to Demiurge.”

Ninety percent of what had happened from her first encounter with Demiurge to the ultimate destruction of the kingdom had been Renner’s proposal, and she felt confident she had done her part in guiding events. When the plan had shifted to the wholesale slaughter of the kingdom, she had certainly worried they’d cut her loose, but everything else that had happened fell well within the allowable range of error.

“We ask only that you apply those skills to the benefit of Nazarick—working directly under me.”

“Of course, Lady Albedo.”

“Lord AinZ has sung your praises, so it would never do to disappoint.”

She caught a minor—almost imperceptible—shift in Albedo’s tone.

Renner kept her head down, saying nothing. She’d deemed that the wisest choice.

“But first, let us give you a reward worthy of the next few thousand years of your hard work.”

She heard a *clunk*. Something placed on the table.

“A second Seed of Corruption, same as the one you used. You need merely prepare the sacrifices. Take care of it once he’s recovered his strength. Magic would hasten his recovery, but as you wished, we have done no such thing.”

“Thank you, Lady Albedo. Please convey my gratitude to His Majesty as well.”

“Renner, I will say it one more time. Do not disappoint us. We are giving him to you as a gesture of faith in your labor to come, not because we deem him valuable as a hostage.”

Her tone was soft, almost warm. Renner bowed her head even lower.

"...Understood, Lady Albedo. I shall return this generosity with work equal to—no, in excess of the reward."

With a light laugh, her superior rose to her feet and walked away.

Renner did not look up until she heard the door close. She let out a long breath that disguised a faint hint of fear.

She had made it past the final checkpoint.

Albedo *was* a demon, after all. It was a relief to find she had not been getting Renner's hopes up only to relish snatching them away at the last possible moment. But Renner was perfectly aware she could never assume she was safe.

She was not here because they trusted her. She had gained all these boons merely because they thought she would be useful to them. Renner would have to work hard and prove she had more value than they expected, or it would not end well for her.

She was in the monsters' den now. And she was painfully aware there was nothing she could do to oppose them. Yet, that alone was hardly enough.

Renner had been forced to supply a *weakness*. Several in fact. It was like wrapping a leash around her own throat and handing the end to them. A clear demonstration that she was their dog and they were her masters—that they held her in their thrall. Without that, there would not even have been a *show* of trust.

Hence, the performance in the throne room.

Climb was Renner's greatest weakness—and to that end, on her first meeting with Albedo, she'd spent some time describing just how important he was to her. By *not* letting him see the truth of what had happened, she'd placed a collar on herself.

And she'd demonstrated exactly what value he had as a hostage. She'd had an ulterior motive, and they'd clearly known that from the beginning. This had actually worked in her favor, so she was not concerned about it.

Only one thing had not gone according to Renner's plan.

She had never imagined the King of Darkness himself would take the stage.

*He is truly terrifying.*

Each time Renner thought about Ainz Ooal Gown, a shudder ran through her.

He had not left the performance in the hands of his prime minister but played the clown's role himself—did that mean he had that high an opinion of Renner's potential? By deigning to dance in a farce of her own invention, the price was all too clear.

And Albedo did not approve.

She worshipped the man and did not appreciate seeing him debase himself like that. And by allowing that to happen, Renner had earned her enmity.

*It's even worse if she voiced those objections and he insisted on taking part. If I show even a hint of incompetence, she'll have me eliminated.*

Her original plan had been to demonstrate a high level of skill and leave something in reserve just in case. But because the King of Darkness had joined the play, she was now in no position to hold back.

*...That must have been his plan all along. When the man in charge is too brilliant, it makes things hard for those beneath him.*

Yet, there was a smile on Renner's lips.

Once, her dream had been far smaller. Meeting them had allowed it to swell until it grew into the miraculous fantasy she now lived.

What a stroke of luck that the price had merely been one kingdom.

She was ready to dance.

To burst into song.

To give voice to the joy bursting out of her.

She thought the sheer bliss might drive her mad. She was only half sure it hadn't already.

Demons lived lives eternal. And if that life was inside this tomb, she was safe from all external harm.

Renner turned to the door behind her. To the boy on the bed inside.

“Climb, we’ll be together *forever*. We’ll have to start by exchanging our firsts—let’s do that *today*.”

Her eyes were blank and unfocused.

“Or should we make it even *more* special? Stop just one step before and build the anticipation? Mm-hmm-hmm. I’m not sure I’ve ever had such a hard time deciding! Oh, how am I this blessed?!”



## Epilogue

# EPILOGUE

Elias Brandt Dale Raeven stepped out of the carriage, staring wordlessly at the devastation. It chilled his very soul.

Before him lay a mountain of rubble.

It was hard to believe this had once been the royal capital. He would rather believe his eyes deceived him. But he was not that lucky. They saw only truth—this was the outcome of the war.

His face twisted in pain.

How much work had gone into demolishing this once-great city? How much time had it taken?

He could not even begin to imagine. The fact that it had been possible at all spoke to the power the King of Darkness held.

Footsteps approached from behind, and a voice said, “Marquis...”

It was a noble of his faction who had traveled here with him. A baron by title, but Marquis Raeven valued his skills highly and had been pulling strings to get him a better rank.

So when the King of Darkness’s retainer had asked for the names of nobles who were talented, this baron’s name had been second on his list. That promising man’s voice was now feeble, shaking with fear. Undoubtedly sharing the marquis’s horror at the desolation before them.

Marquis Raeven turned around, ensuring all twelve aristocrats had emerged from the ten carriages.

“Time for our audience,” he said.

No one argued. No one dared. The King of Darkness had summoned them, so here they were. They were hardly in a position to back out now. None of them was so bold—or

so reckless.

But they hadn't been told a specific location. The instructions merely mentioned "the capital."

Marquis Raeven looked around and found a single building still standing in the distance. The palace. The castle around it had been reduced to rubble.

Someone had likely cleared a path through the heaps of ruined masonry to afford them a view of it from here.

A single forlorn building in a sea of shattered stone. Marquis Raeven would have imagined that would seem like salvation. Instead, it felt horribly *wrong*, and he shuddered at the sight.

If he had a choice, he would never have dared approach. Unfortunately, the King of Darkness most likely waited within.

"We walk from here."

Their carriages had stopped at the remains of the city walls. The palace was quite some distance away. Their carriages would get them there far faster, but they had to avoid even the implication of disrespect. Remaining in their carriages was not worth the risk. The nobles had gathered early enough and would reach their destination at the appointed time. They could afford to hike the rest of the way.

They began picking their way forward.

"This was the main road...?" someone murmured behind him.

The road itself was free of rubble. As if it had been swept clean.

Put another way, nothing but the road itself remained intact. The houses that lined it, the city walls—everything had been utterly destroyed, leaving only scorched earth behind. On their journey to the capital, they had passed scores of towns and villages that had met the same fate, but no place had been as thoroughly leveled as this.

"Marquis, the people—"

"Don't."

Clearly, he'd been concerned for the plight of the populace. But Marquis Raeven had not heard a word about any evacuations and spotted no camps outside the razed city. Their fate was clear.

He glanced at the leveled buildings to one side. How many people were buried beneath those stones? It felt like he was walking through a giant graveyard.

Marquis Raeven stopped breathing through his nose. He did not wish to catch the stench of death. It was downright odd that he had not already—perhaps the smells of char and dust were simply stronger.

They walked farther, but the palace was still a long way off.

The sight must have been pulling at their minds. He heard someone whisper, "The mad king."

Marquis Raeven spun around, yelling, "Hold your tongue!"

He scanned the group, eyes like daggers. One was looking ashen, his cheeks quivering.

Life in the aristocracy had taught each and every one of them to stifle their emotions, to wear a pleasant mask in every interaction. But this scene of desolation had proven too much.

He sympathized. Inside, he felt the same. But here, with whom they were about to face, this was unacceptable. He could show no mercy.

"You are all men of talent. This is why I spoke on your behalf. In return, I ask that you do not let a careless slip of the tongue make all my efforts be in vain. I need no apology, no gratitude. Simply understanding."

No response came, but he hoped he had made his point.

"Marquis, walking in silence allows our imaginations to run wild. The stress cannot help but boil over. What say we talk of happier things?"

"...An excellent suggestion. Have I mentioned I'm expecting another child?"

The others offered congratulations. The last few months had taken a toll on them all, and this had been the one bright spot for him. That was why he had informed them of

it several times already.

He could talk for ages about his children, but it was not the most constructive topic.

But in the hopes of lightening the mood, he allowed himself to bring it up once more. Before he knew it, they were halfway to the palace already.

Perhaps—no, almost certainly—he had rambled on a bit too long.

He still had plenty more to say, but perhaps he should wrap it up. Marquis Raeven made a show of clearing his throat.

Several nobles had obviously been letting it go in one ear and out the other, and this got their attention once again.

“We shall have to discuss my children further on the road home. For now, we must talk of what proposals we should make to His Majesty, the King of Darkness, so that my children might lead happy lives.”

They had debated this on several occasions prior. It was time they reached a conclusion.

Marquis Raeven looked around, making sure there were no Nation of Darkness soldiers in sight.

“The first concern on all our minds was that the King of Darkness is undead. While our mortal lives are fleeting, he will rule for all eternity. There is a chance that our grandchildren or great-grandchildren will forget his glory and earn his wrath.”

“An all-too-likely concern. Perhaps the next few generations will be sound, but beyond that...”

“Fools inherit households often enough.”

“...But perhaps their flaws are not of our concern. If they wish to destroy themselves...”

This got a gasp of surprise from those who took pride in their lineage, but the speaker was a woman whose father had been the first to earn a title. He was now ill, and she was here in his stead.

With no history of nobility, her words drew several frowns.

"From the sight before us, my fear is that it will not be just *their* houses that will fall," Marquis Raeven said. Her expression grew grim. "We will do what we can. Commission paintings of this tragedy and inform our children of what happened here. And plead with the King of Darkness to leave this site as it is."

"Will they not build a new capital here?" the man on his right asked.

But the man on his left shook his head. "Not after leveling it to this degree. I find it hard to believe they see a future of anything here."

This aligned with Marquis Raeven's thoughts on the matter. But the King of Darkness had powers far beyond those of mortal men. Perhaps he had simply believed he could build a better city if he wiped the slate clean.

But pondering on that would get them nowhere.

"What about hostages, Marquis?"

The most unpleasant topic.

He bit his lip.

There was no telling if the King of Darkness would demand any hostages. But it might make a better impression if they offered some, rather than waiting for that demand to come from on high.

Marquis Raeven debated it internally and then settled on an answer.

"I'll suggest it myself."

They would volunteer hostages to him. More than a few here were loath to do so. But none dared allow that to show, let alone argue with his choice.

They reached a final verdict on several more points of discussion, and by then the palace could be clearly seen.

There was a pile of rubble blocking the entrance and an undead seated upon it.

The Nation of Darkness's prime minister, Albedo, was standing next to him, speaking. Her face turned, spying their approach. The nobles were still a long way off, but they broke into a run.

As they drew closer, it became clear just what the King of Darkness was sitting on. Or rather, what it meant. It was certainly a pile of rubble—but not *just* that.

At the top of the heap was a glittering object—a crown.

This was a throne made of rubble. A symbol of the kingdom's demise.

It was not clear immediately where this rubble was sourced from, but it was likely all locations of note.

Terrifying.

That a monster would even think of doing such a thing, let alone make it a reality.

They ran as fast as they could and nearly toppled to their knees. Desperately trying to catch his breath, the marquis called out, "Your Majesty, we have arrived."

Even with his head down, Marquis Raeven could feel the King of Darkness observing them.

"Raeven, was it? Welcome. Still, um... please catch your breath. You're rather sweaty."

"I—I apologize for the undignified display."

The King of Darkness's tone was shockingly pleasant. Which was all the more terrifying.

The word *trap* floated across Raeven's mind, but he decided their undignified state was worse and proceeded to mop his brow with a handkerchief.

"You've come all this way, and perhaps I should commend your efforts, but I am no fan of idle chatter. Let's get this over with."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

What else could they say?

"My—the Nation of Darkness's armies will proceed to destroy the lands of nobility to the west and south and then return home. You will continue to oversee your own lands. We may relocate some of yours in the future, but at the moment we have no such plans—right, Albedo?"

"As you say, Lord Ainz."

"There you have it. Albedo will inform you of any details specific to your territories. Until then, continue to abide by the laws as they presently stand."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Not just Marquis Raeven but all noblemen present spoke as one.

"Any questions or concerns?"

"None at all! However, as proof of our loyalty, we did prepare a number of proposals."

Saying this much took all the strength he could muster and left him nearly puking blood.

The King of Darkness turned his head, staring into the distance. Perhaps displeased that a lowly human dared do anything but agree.

Fearing he had incurred the undead's displeasure, Marquis Raeven felt like molten lead were pouring down his gullet. In a corner of his mind, he remembered seeing this same mannerism on the face of a subordinate when he'd brought new papers just as they thought their task complete.

The silence lasted but moments yet felt eternal.

"Mm, well, then mention them to Albedo later," he said at last. "We're done here. Oh, we'll be leaving this place as is, so that we can point to it as proof of what happens to fools who act against us. But it would never do for it to become a breeding ground for pestilence. We'll be casting a number of spells to burn the place clean. Let no one enter lest they get caught in the fires."

"Understood, Your Majesty!"

"Albedo, call Crimson here and have him purify the place with fire. Leave the palace

exterior alone in pristine form. And have the furnishings brought to E-Rantel."

"At once, sir."

No one dared ask who Crimson was. There were things you were better off not knowing, and everything related to the King of Darkness qualified.

"The kingdom will soon be utterly annihilated. Raeven, I ask your opinion. Will word of the futility of defying me spread far and wide?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Word of what befalls anyone foolish enough to defy the King of Darkness will travel across the lands and last through time immemorial."

With his head down, he could not read the king's expression—and the undead creature had no skin to emote with to begin with. But his tone of voice took on a trace of delight.

"Excellent. Then it was well worth the effort. I am pleased."

That was his takeaway from the slaughter of eight million kingdom citizens. Raeven was sick to his stomach. He prayed that a hero would one day rise up to destroy this evil overlord.

•

"I did nothing wrong."

Phillip had spent the last few weeks repeating these words.

His actions could not possibly have provoked that war. It was all a plot by the Nation of Darkness. That was the only explanation that made sense.

He'd been manipulated.

His domain not flourishing and his plans not working out? That had all been part of *their* nefarious scheme.

*They pulled all the strings! Bribes, rumormongering! It's so obvious!*

Phillip sat up in bed and reached for the table next to it. He grabbed the bottle sitting

there and shook it. He could tell it was too light and, from the sound, guessed there were only dregs left inside.

“Tch.”

He glared around the room.

The floor was covered in empty bottles. It probably reeked of booze, but Phillip’s nose was long since deadened to it.

He grabbed a random bottle off the floor and raised it to his lips, but nothing came out.

“Damn it!”

He tossed it aside.

It shattered, which only aggravated him further.

“Hey! I’m outta booze!” he yelled, but no one brought more.

There should be a maid on duty—a gift from Hilma—but come to think of it, he hadn’t seen her in ages.

“Bring me booze!” he roared, lurching to his feet.

He staggered, muttered, “Whoops!” and steadied himself on the bed. This was likely less that he was drunk than that his body had grown weak from spending so long holed up in his room.

Phillip picked his way to the door.

“Hey! Where is everybody?!” he yelled, kicking the door. He didn’t punch it—he didn’t want to hurt himself.

No response. Clicking his tongue again in frustration, he opened the door.

“Can’t you hear me?!” he yelled. “I said I need more booze! Bring it here!”

Still no answer.

Infuriated, he stormed out of his room.

The whole house was silent.

When Phillip had taken over the manor, his father and brother's family had moved to a secondary building. Only servants lived here.

They called it a manor, but this was a small baronage. It was not a long walk from the bedroom to the dining area.

When he opened those doors, his eyes widened in surprise.

There was a pale woman sitting on a chair.

"Oh, you're awake," she said. "I was starting to wonder if I would have to go to you."

Albedo, prime minister of the Nation of Darkness. The same faint smile she'd worn when they first met. As if she bore no grudge for what he'd done.

*Hmm, he thought. So they really don't care.*

Naturally.

If they really objected to it, they would've invaded his lands first. But they had done nothing of the sort. That made it all perfectly clear to Phillip. It was thanks to him that they'd been able to start a war with the kingdom. Perhaps she was here to express her gratitude!

No, no, she likely had no idea. No one knew what Phillip had done.

He returned her smile.

"A-an honor to have you here, Lady Albedo. Modest though it may be! I can't believe my servants allowed you to wait. I must have words with them later"

Albedo looked momentarily stunned, then managed a half smile.

"I'm almost impressed. A genuine achievement of some kind... heh. I came to wrap things up here, but I *did* bring you a present. Care to open it?"

She gestured to a white box on the table. It was a good twenty inches wide.

All that time spent in bed, quivering in fear, had clearly been a waste. Phillip reached for the lid. A pleasant aroma filled his nostrils. Wondering what treasures lay within, he opened the box and beheld the contents.

Baron Delvie and Baron Loquillen. Or at least, their severed heads.

Their faces were contorted in visceral pain.

“—Eek!”

Phillip froze on the spot.

“You really did smear mud on my face,” Albedo whispered. “I knew I had found an idiot, but I still failed to imagine you could be *this* stupid.”

He heard a *clunk*. Albedo had risen to her feet.

Still smiling. But even Phillip understood now.

She was *livid*.

He had to run.

Phillip turned around to do just that but, in his haste, tripped over his own feet and went crashing to the ground.

He heard footsteps coming closer.

“Let’s get going.”

“No! No! No! I don’t wanna!”

He curled himself up, stubbornly resisting.

“Stop acting like a spoiled brat.”

She grabbed his ear and pulled. It hurt so much, he thought it was about to tear off.

“Ow! Ow! Stop!”

“Then walk on your own feet. Come now—up you go.”

He grabbed the hands on his ears and tried to pull free, but as thin as her arms looked, they were far stronger than his.

“Ow! Ow!”

She pulled him to his feet.

His vision blurred with tears, Phillip tried to swing his fist toward her face, but she easily caught his hand before it landed there. And—

“Aughhhh!”

—she squeezed with such force, he thought she was trying to crush it. His fist cracked.

“...If you walk with me like a good boy, I won’t have to crush your hand. Understood?”

“I understand! I do! I’ll walk—please stop!” She released him. “But why? What did I ever do?”

He was so miserable, the tears just wouldn’t stop.

He’d worked so hard. Nothing had gone right, but he didn’t deserve this.

Why was he being subjected to such violence?

Why was no one coming to help him? Had they sold him out to the Nation of Darkness in return for their own safety?

Cowards.

They were all cowards.

Albedo showed no pity for his tears or the pain in his ears and fist. She simply started walking away, still pulling on his ear. He was forced to follow.

Out through the front door.

“—Eeeek!”

When he saw what was waiting out there, he couldn’t help but shriek.

There was a forest outside his manor.

But unlike your usual forest, it was not made of wood and leaves.

These trees were far more ghoulish.

Stakes from which grew hands and feet.

Or perhaps humans from which grew stakes.

Impaled.

All his villagers impaled upon wooden spikes.

Young or old, male or female. So many stakes he was not sure if even a single villager had been left alive.

Every one of them had a stake forced into their crotch and out their mouth.

Every face twisted in agony, blood pouring out of every orifice, pooling at the base of each stake.

When had this happened? How could it have happened without him noticing?

“You’re not dreaming. We cast a spell on your room to shut out the sounds. It was very quiet, wasn’t it? If you were a little smarter, you might have realized how strange that was, but given your track record, I’m sure you had no idea.”

Phillip grabbed Albedo’s hand again, doing everything he could to free his ear. She just leaned in close, whispering.

“We *did* consider encouraging the villagers to lynch you, but that would be so *dull*. The man I most respect—Lord Ainz—values practice and training. So I thought I’d use you to practice *extracting* information. That way you might actually be useful to me!”

Her smile looked like a gouge running across her face—the sight of which made

Phillip's mind try to escape.

"Oh my. He really is... Well, fine. Your father *did* ask me to make sure you suffered as much as everyone here. And I plan to keep that promise!"

But those words never reached Phillip's ears.

•

Albedo was off to settle unfinished business, so they split up, and Ainz returned to his office alone. Once there, he spoke to the maid on Ainz duty today.

"I'll be in my chambers considering the next steps the Nation of Darkness should take. You remain here and ensure no one enters."

She glanced at the maid by the door. Such tasks were normally for the maid on room duty, and any maid on Ainz duty was supposed to remain by his side. They were quite keen on reminding him of this.

So he took steps before they could.

"I have to plot out the next few millennia. Having anyone with me would be a distraction. Understood?"

"Yes, Lord Ainz! I'll learn to be completely unnoticeable!"

That was not at all what he'd meant, but he let it drop. Thinking on it any further seemed exhausting.

"Excellent. But since you aren't yet, remain here."

"As you wish, Lord Ainz."

Leaving her in his office, Ainz headed directly to his bedroom.

And then he promptly dove onto his bed. He had no physical fatigue, but his mind was in tatters.

The soft bed wrapped him in its embrace.

It was a truly magnificent dive.

Had there been judges present, they would have given it full marks for flight time, distance covered, touchdown positioning, and landing posture.

This was the result of untold repetition and practice. Ainz dove into his bed every time the stress got too much for him.

He sighed.

It was an extremely middle-aged-man-on-the-brink-of-collapse sigh. A magnificent example if he did say so himself. You could poll a thousand people, and every one of them would say, *Dude needs a vacay*. This, too, was the result of endless practice.

Ainz began rolling back and forth on his bed.

He'd come direct from the ruins of the capital. There was still dust on him. Perhaps he should have hit the slime bath first, but he hadn't been able to summon the energy.

*I'm bone-tired...*

Had he played the villain well? How could they fight the platinum armor? There was so much he had to think about or improve upon, but at least one big task was off his plate.

—Or not.

This success was but the first step in a much larger project. It would only get worse from here. Mass destruction was easy; from here on out, the devastation would be delicate and surgical, followed by the incredible challenge of *building*.

Until now, the Nation of Darkness had been a small territory—the vastness of the Katze Plain aside—with a large vassal state. Things were different now. Their territory was far larger. And that would clearly create no end of problems.

Naturally, Albedo would be the one frantically busy with domestic affairs, but the biggest problems would likely be brought to his attention. Problems far more critical and difficult than anything he'd faced before. Ainz did not believe for a second that he was up to the task.

He had no idea what Albedo and Demiurge were thinking, but they'd brought some batshit crazy girl named Renner to Nazarick, claiming she was brilliant. She was a complete outsider and had no connection to *Yggdrasil* at all. She was capable of seeing Ainz with clear eyes, unclouded by her settings, and had a mind supposedly every bit as impressive as Nazarick's two geniuses.

Could he maintain this charade in front of her? Continue to play the role of Ainz Ooal Gown, absolute ruler?

“———Can I just leave?”

He had never meant anything more in his *life*.

Ainz was fully in the mindset of an office drone knowing his career-ending blunder would be discovered first thing tomorrow.

*I've been just barely hanging on for a while now. Maybe it's high time everyone learned I'm incompetent. I thought I was ready for that!*

And yet—

*Now that the moment has come... I'm terrified of how they'll react. Damn it! Clearly not enough for the emotional stabilizer to kick in.*

Ainz's own abilities were telling him this was no big deal.

He thought about it. Then thought some more. Then reached a conclusion.

“———Okay, let's run for it.”

Maybe not right away. He couldn't just drop everything and vanish. He hadn't created any documentation to pass on, and he had never been the kind of person who'd just use all his paid leave the month before retirement and never come back.

Plus, if he openly admitted he was running away, that would earn him nothing but withering contempt.

He needed a compelling *reason*.

But what?

Ainz ransacked his empty skull for an answer.

*Oh!*

Inspiration struck.

He had repeatedly written up and discarded plans for paid time off. But what if he led the way? If he was the first to take a vacation?

Get out of Nazarick for a while. Relax. Leave everything to Albedo in his absence. That was much safer than involving himself in the grand scheme of what was to come.

She might insist that he outranked her and that his input was necessary. In which case, he could just say, *We've already run a simulation on what to do in the event of my death. This is the next step. We'll act as if you're unable to contact me and you're forced to decide everything yourself, Albedo.*

Ainz pumped a fist. It was *perfect*.

Just one thing—

*Where do I go?*

He could pop by the Empire, strengthen his friendship with Jircniv.

Investigate the mountains around the dwarf country.

The Sacred Kingdom—

*Too unappealing, ruling that out.*

There were several tempting prospects.

But then Ainz remembered something.

*What about making some elf friends for them?*

Aura and Mare. He had been working them very hard for their ages. It had bothered him for a while. That had been perfectly normal in their old world, but Yamaiko had always insisted it was *wrong*.

So perhaps he could take the two of them with him.

*That doesn't sound half bad. It could be a lot of fun even! It would set a precedent for the floor guardians to take vacations and test how well we can cover for their absence.*

He had long been concerned about the mountainous workload on his floor guardians. This might help uncover solutions to that.

“Okay!”

Once he had his pile down to manageable size, he'd take the kids to the elf country and make them some friends.

His mind made up, Ainz got up and headed for the bedroom door.

**OVERLORD**  
Character Profiles



## RENNER THEIERE CHARDELON RYLE VAISELF

GROTESQUE

The Golden Princess

Position —— █ (future)

Residence —— A room on Nazarick's ninth level

Race Levels —— Imp —— 1 lv

Class Levels —— Actress (ordinary) —— 4 lv

Genius —— 5 lv

Birthday —— 7 Early Fire Moon

Hobby —— █ with Climb

{ personal character }

The happiest woman in the world. She's made all her dreams come true by sacrificing the happiness of most of the kingdom's populace. She feels absolutely no guilt about doing this but does seem to still be capable of gratitude. The same way someone might be grateful to the food they eat. Genius is a unique class that allows her to exchange those levels to acquire or boost any base or ordinary class. However, she can only have one alternate class active (presently) so she mostly has it stuck on Princess. A very rare class that only a handful of people have.

## ZANAC VALLÉON IGANA RYLE VAISELF

HUMANOID

The last king of the Vaiselfs

Position —— Vaiself royal prince

Residence —— Ro-Lente Castle

Class Levels	King (ordinary)	1 lv
	Prince (ordinary)	4 lv
	Charisma (ordinary)	2 lv
	Fighter	1 lv

Birthday —— 14 Late Water Moon

Hobby —— Eating, sleeping, staring at nothing



{ personal character }

His elder brother was destined for the throne, so his position in the royal family was never very secure. Few nobles supported him, and he had close ties to almost no one in the palace. Yet he never let that stop him from devoting his energy to safeguarding the future of the crown. If he, Renner, Raeven, and Gazef had worked together, they could have fended off the Empire and made the kingdom strong again. That might sound impossible, but if Nazarick had not appeared and Barbro had died before his coronation, that was what would have come to pass.



## AZUTH AINDRA

HUMANOID

Performative adventurer

Position —— Leader of the Drops of Red

Residence —— Argland Council State, suite at the Dragon's Breath

Class Levels —— Fighter ————— ? lv

Sniper ————— ? lv

Athletic Master ————— ? lv

Etc.

Birthday —— 15 Late Water Moon

Hobby —— Drinking good liquor  
(he's a lightweight, though)

{ personal character }

His formal name is longer (he has been knighted), but this is the name he prefers. His personal fighting skills are mostly on the low end of adamantine adventurers and definitely the lowest on his own team. And because his classes are built around the use of his power suit, outside of it he isn't particularly impressive. He's very reliant on that suit, but even so, he made it to orichalcum on his own, so he isn't exactly weak.

## ZEYNDELUX VAISHION

GROTESQUE

The Platinum Dragonlord

Position —— Too many to pin down

Residence —— Too many to pin down

Class Levels —— Primitive Caster ? lv

World Connector ? lv

Over Dragon ? lv

Soul Adorer ? lv

Birthday —— On a starry night

Hobby —— Watching the world



{ personal character }

Top-class dragonlord. Has killed players before. Mild-mannered and merciful by nature but always keeps an eye on the big picture. Ready to spill blood when the need arises. Cooperates with a group of dragonlords when their interests align, but his ultimate objectives differ, and they don't really get along. Has several bases of operation and is experimenting with creating organizations around the world. The Council State itself is one such experiment. He holds the most sway out east, where a bosom dragonlord manages things. Any final battle with Zey will likely take place there.



## GROTESQUE

Angel Puppet, Nazarick's Troublemaker



{ personal character }

Not the best social skills and difficult to get to know. Would not say a word in front of someone he didn't know but a real chatterbox whenever the topic of conversation touched on one of his passions and inflexible in the extreme on his opinions. Once he considered someone to be a friend, he would come on strong, dumping all sorts of trouble on their lap with a confident smile, certain they wouldn't stay angry. Never meant any harm, but most of the guild did not have a high opinion of him. He was bad enough to draw even Momonga's ire.

# AFTERWORD

It's been far too long, but this is Kugane Maruyama.

The rest of this will discuss the narrative, so if you haven't read it yet, be warned.

Looking back at the release date for Volume 13, it was April 27, 2018. And now it's March... Well, at the moment I'm writing, the year hasn't changed yet, but the projected release date for this is March 2020, so nearly two years have passed. Hence the greeting above.

The fact that I squeezed it out in just under two years is down to my hard work—can you feel it? No...? (Hangs head.)

But even *almost* two years is a very, very long time. I'm sure a lot happened in your lives and a lot has happened in mine. We even changed the way we count years in Japan!

I had a wide variety of jobs on my plate, so it doesn't really *feel* like that big a gap since the last volume, but if you've all felt like you've been waiting *forever*, then... Well, if you look at it the right way, what greater source of joy could there be?

It means you are all deeply enjoying *Overlord*.

At any rate, Volume 14. The kingdom has been a frequent setting since the first volume. Quite a lot of characters meet their ends here—some survive and some do not. I imagine many of you expected as much. But in fact, as I was writing, I discovered that *some* characters actually did manage to escape their dooms.

You know who I mean. As I was writing, I thought, *Would they really die in such a dumb way?* And this is the result. And after I was hell-bent on dragging them under and exterminating them.

What a pity.

But my own feelings on the matter aside, we've lost some good ones today! And if you feel that way, then I am pleased. That's why they got so much screen time!

But let's wrap this up.

Thank you to my readers and everyone who's helped me.

Three more volumes left, so I hope you'll also join me. Only one more country left!

And if you've finished reading my longest volume yet—good work.

Get some rest.

December 2019

KUGANE MARUYAMA

# 2020



Afterword by so-bin

IT'S STILL JANUARY  
AS I WRITE THIS, SO IT  
FEELS LIKE A NEW YEAR'S  
GREETING. LET'S MAKE IT  
ANOTHER OVERLORD YEAR!

so-bin

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