

OVERLORD

15

The Half-Elf Demigod
Part I

Kugane Maruyama
Illustration by so-bin

OVERLORD

- オーバーロード -

- VOLUME 15 -

The Half-Elf Demigod Part I

-AUTHOR-

Kugane Maruyama

-ILLUSTRATOR-

so-bin

[YEN PRESS]





OVERLORD

Volume 15: The Half-Elf Demigod PART I

Kugane Maruyama | Illustration by so-bin



COPYRIGHT

OVERLORD
VOLUME 15
KUGANE MARUYAMA

Translation by Andrew Cunningham
Cover art by so-bin

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

OVERLORD Vol.15 HALF ELF NO SHINJIN JO

©Kugane Maruyama 2022

First published in Japan in 2022 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2023 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress
twitter.com/yenpress

yenpress.tumblr.com

instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: March 2023

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Ivan Liang

Designed by Yen Press Design: Wendy Chan

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Maruyama, Kugane, author. | So-bin, illustrator. | Balistreri, Emily, translator. | Cunningham, Andrew, translator.

Title: Overlord / Kugane Maruyama ; illustration by So-bin ; translation by Emily Balistreri ; translation by Andrew Cunningham.

Other titles: Ōbārōdo. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2016-

Identifiers: LCCN 2016000142 | ISBN 9780316272247 (v. 1 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316363914 (v. 2 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316363938 (v. 3 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316397599 (v. 4 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316397612 (v. 5 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316398794 (v. 6 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316398817 (v. 7 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316398848 (v. 8 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316398862 (v. 9 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316444989 (v. 10 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316445016 (v. 11 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316445016 (v. 12 : hardback) | ISBN 9781975311537 (v. 13 : hardback) | ISBN 9781975323806 (v. 14 : hardback) | ISBN 9781975360566 (v. 15 : hardback) | ISBN 9781975360566 (hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Alternate reality games—Fiction. | Internet games—Fiction. | Science fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Science Fiction / Adventure.

Classification: LCC PL873.A37 02313 2016 | DDC 895.63/6—dc23

LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2016000142>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-6056-6 (hardcover)

978-1-975-36057-3 (ebook)

E3-20230217-JV-NF-ORI

CONTENTS

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

Chapter 1 Arranging a Paid Vacation

Chapter 2 Sightseeing, Nazarick-Style

Chapter 3 Aura's Toughest Task

Character Profiles

Yen Newsletter

Prologue

PROLOGUE

The head of the Theocracy—the high priest superior.

The six high priests, each in charge of their respective denomination.

The heads of the judicial, legislative, and executive branches.

The chief of the magic research facility.

The highest-ranked military officer—the generalissimo.

Together, these twelve formed the supreme executive agency.

All the highest authorities in the land had gathered to chart the course their country would follow.

The room was neither gaudy nor especially large. The faces at the table were somber and reserved.

This assembly was not prone to mirth or good cheer even at the best of times. Yet, they had long served the Theocracy together and knew one another well enough to allow the occasional dry witticism. However, the mood was rarely *this* somber. Today, no one present seemed inclined to ease the tension.

“The Nation of Darkness has begun their invasion of the Re-Estize Kingdom. More accurately, they did so long ago. Truly terrifying. The people of the kingdom themselves went a full month without even noticing. Our eyes and ears, the wind and the water—were crushed completely. Were it not for Star Reader-Second Sight, it would have taken us far longer to catch on. The kingdom’s fate is already sealed. There is little time left. We must redouble our efforts to recruit their adventurers.”

The high priest superior’s eyes turned to Raymond Zurg Laurencin, the high priest of earth.

“We’re doing what we can,” he said.

"It would be a shame if the Nation got their hands on the kingdom's magic items," the research chief said. "Is there nothing we can do? Especially their greatest treasures. The Amulet of Immortality. The Guardian Armor. The Gauntlets of Vitality. And—" He paused dramatically, counting them off on his fingers. They needed to understand the last was the most vital of all. "—Razor Edge."

"Impossible. We don't have the resources. Too few hands to play, and we've got to get our people out, besides."

"The Nation is invading," the generalissimo declared. "After the old chief warrior fell, did his equipment not pass to his probable successor, this Ung... la... fellow?"

"Brain Unglaus," the chief replied. "That's most likely what happened and exactly why we should snatch him up as well. What fool would ride a horse off the edge of a cliff? He may not be pleased at first, but he'll be grateful in the end."

"Our investigations suggest he is not that sort of man."

This came from one of two female members of the assembly, the high priest of fire, Bérénice Nagua Santini.

"You have a high opinion of him?" asked the other, the minister of justice.

"We do. The high priests consider him a man of character—and thus deemed him unlikely to accept our offer. Our orders are to avoid making contact at all."

"Just like his predecessor, then. Unable to see the big picture, slaves to illogical emotion. I will never understand their ilk," the minister of legislation said with a sigh. This earned him several disapproving looks, and he hastily added, "I beg your pardon. That was out of line. Just... from my perspective, throwing your life away does nothing to safeguard the future of mankind. And no matter what anyone says, I will not yield on that."

"Nor will we argue it," replied a gentle voice. The source of that disapproval was Dominic Ire Partouche, the high priest of wind. "I only ask that you remember we all have things we will not yield on. This is his."

"Are you of the same opinion, Master Guelfi?" the research chief asked, unsatisfied.

A man who resembled an old, withered tree nodded. This was Zinedine Delan Guelfi,

the high priest of water.

"Then I have nothing further to say on the matter."

"I am pleased by the talent we *have* assembled, but tell me, how fare our new recruits?"

Several adventurer teams had already joined the Theocracy. Mostly mythril or above, but some lesser teams had also been invited because the Springwater Scripture's intel suggested they had bright futures ahead of them.

"Pretty terri—not great." Yvon Jasna Delacroix, the high priest of light, was in charge of getting them settled. "All of them came of their own volition and many feel like they've abandoned their people. It's left one hell of a—I mean, it has become quite a thorn in their hearts."

Someone suggested Yvon could speak freely, and he snapped, "I know how to watch my damn words!" Then hastily corrected himself. "I mean, of course I know when to mind my tongue."

When it was just the high priests, his language came and went, but they knew one another better than the members of the greater assembly.

"In any case, we thought it best to give them an outlet."

"Specifically?" the minister of justice asked.

"If these thorns are born of a failure to save their people, then saving others will help them heal," Raymond said. "The plan is to ship them to the Dragon Kingdom and have them fight the beastmen there."

Several people were nodding.

Their intel said the Dragon Kingdom had approached the Nation of Darkness and purchased undead from them. Extremely powerful undead.

Left neglected, the Theocracy's influence would steadily wane while the Nation's rose. Dispatching the adventurers would help avoid that. But a concern was voiced, too.

"If we send former Kingdom adventurers where we can't watch over them, they might let it slip that we were moving in the shadows during the war between the Nation and

the Kingdom. Wouldn't it be wiser to keep them within our borders?"

"I wouldn't worry about that. They know full well what's going on, which is precisely why they feel ashamed about abandoning their home in its time of need. They'd never do anything that would benefit a nation so cruel. Unless, of course, someone uses a mind-control spell to force the information out of them."

"I'm less worried about that than the Nation finding out we have casters capable of using teleportation spells."

"...That's a good point."

"We told *them* we were using magic items, but there's always a chance they noticed we weren't. Even if we order their lips sealed, there's no telling how word might get out. Perhaps it's best to avoid revealing one of our key cards to the Nation of Darkness."

Coughing, Zinedine Delan Guelfi spluttered, "Mm-hmm... Sorry, I get your point, but I also think that it could have a deterring effect. If they get a hint of what we're capable of, they'll likely exercise caution and avoid taking any rash action."

"I agree with the master. The Triad Caster demonstrates just how well that works. No reason for us to sweat about every potential leak."

"Oh? How many truly know anything about him? For all the stories about the Empire's great caster, few—if any—contained specifics about what he could really do."

"And those who do know seem unlikely to be that fussed about mere Teleportation."

Opinions flew, but it soon became clear no consensus was possible, so the assembly went with the majority vote. The final verdict approved sending adventurers to aid the Dragon Kingdom.

The Theocracy viewed the newly scouted adventurers the way they would any mercenary—they expected little in the way of loyalty. The assembly here didn't particularly care if these adventurers chose to settle permanently in the Dragon Kingdom. They had escorted them out of the Re-Estize Kingdom to minimize the untimely loss of powerful members of the human race—not to bolster the Theocracy's own forces.

"If we could just find a means of producing fifth-tier scrolls, we could use Teleportation

all the more often.”

“Centuries of work without success. That research will demand far more time.”

One of the Theocracy’s most closely guarded techniques was the production of fourth-tier scrolls. No neighboring countries had this capability. They had several such secrets, all developed over untold hundreds of years to safeguard humanity, to allow them to overcome more naturally gifted species.

For instance, they had successfully created a potion they called Gods’ Blood. Unfortunately, it was the opposite of cost-effective, so research and development continued to this day.

“Tell me, why has the Nation of Darkness chosen genocide? Supplies bound for the Sacred Kingdom were stolen, true, but this is hardly a proportional response. What does our military make of it?”

“First, it could be a show of force,” the generalissimo said, holding up a finger.

This earned several nods.

“Second, well... they *are* undead.”

“Driven by their hatred of the living and what have you? I don’t buy it. Even if they were waiting for an excuse to go to war, it doesn’t line up with the King of Darkness’s past behavior.”

“Yes, the military leadership believes that possibility is not high,” the generalissimo said studiously.

This earned him a chorus of boos. “Then quit beating around the bush!” “You’re just copying Raymond’s stunt!” “This is hardly the time or the place!”

“Ahem. The third theory is the one we deem most likely.” He held up a third finger. “They’re attempting to create an undead spawning ground, like the Katze Plain.”

“Oh...”

Several voices groaned.

The Theocracy had many faith-based casters, and the country's highest authorities knew the implications of his words all too well.

A vast, corrupted land. It seemed entirely plausible that a new source of undead was a worthwhile goal. If they were talking about anyone else, that would be practically impossible, but they were dealing with an undead king—the ruler of the Nation of Darkness could take full advantage.

Rumor had it he'd already placed the Katze Plain firmly under his control. Perhaps that had proven a wise decision and informed this latest move.

"In that case... we can surmise what their next step will be."

"Meaning?"

"This unclean land lies between them and the Council State. With a shield raised in that direction—"

"Their blades turn to *us*."

A grim silence settled over the room. Each quietly compared the two countries in terms of their own field. And of course, their respective militaries.

Every face looked distraught. None could maintain their composure.

Given the information that had come to light at the previous meeting, there was only one conclusion. Everyone knew that the spell the King of Darkness had used on the Katze Plain was too powerful. Too evil.

That would be impossible to withstand, not with all the Theocracy's secrets, not even with the demigods in play. And they had not even begun to plumb the depths of what the Nation could really do. The further they dug, the deeper that abyss might run.

"No matter how many troops we have, it won't be enough. An alliance with the Council State is our only real option."

"They *might* send reinforcements when the time comes."

A sneer appeared on every lip.

Even if they came, those reinforcements would never be enough to save them.

They knew better.

Principles, positions, purposes—none of those things aligned. Their two countries could never truly work together. Perhaps a signed alliance would get them some paltry aid, but it would almost certainly not move the Platinum Dragonlord himself.

Whichever of them collapsed first, the survivor would have to bear the brunt of the Nation's might alone. To avoid that fate, the smart play would be to fully commit to a united front. But what if—hypothetically speaking, of course—their coalition *did* manage to invade the Nation and secure a lasting victory? The moment that happened, the Council State and Theocracy would be potential enemies once more.

Considering the post-war situation, you'd have to maneuver your ally into committing as many troops as possible to the Nation assault. And the increased flow of people between the two countries due to the alliance would make their respective espionage efforts all the more intensive.

An alliance with the Council State simply could not be trusted.

It was easier to believe the Theocracy could go it alone.

Even if tensions with the Nation of Darkness exploded into armed conflict, it was best to avoid an all-out war. The risk of mutual annihilation left the Council State free to claim any land that became vacated.

A three-way balance was ideal, but that required they be evenly matched in the first place.

“Bending the knee to the Nation of Darkness is an option. Bide time for decades, centuries, then destroy them from within. By then, we’d know everything about their inner workings.”

“The Empire became a vassal state. They might be willing to consider the offer. Based on how they treated the Empire, it might not be all that tragic.”

“But would our people accept it?”

“Unlikely. No average citizen would want that. We might lose control entirely.”

“Fools are easily suppressed.”

“Let’s not get extreme! That’s a last resort. Remember, the masses are by and large in the dark about all this.”

“Then should we share what we know? History shows too much information often leads to uprisings. That’s precisely why we have restrictions in place!”

“Don’t squabble. The Nation might topple the capital, but their focus won’t be pacifying the populace or governing occupied territory. We’ll have time to—”

“We can’t say that for sure. They’ve completely obliterated any number of cities and towns. They might do the same to our capital.”

A great many people lived in the city. Massacring every last one was a tall order, but the Nation had done worse.

“The undead do loathe the living.”

“...We may have grown overconfident when E-Rantel was taken without excessive bloodshed.”

“The Nation of Darkness has made the Empire a vassal state, and they already influence the Sacred Kingdom as well as the Dragon Kingdom. And now they’re annihilating Re-Estize. We have to assume we’re next. Surrender or die. A trite cliché, but there’s no escaping the reality of the situation. If we’re going to face them at all, we have to solve our *other* problem.”

“Indeed. We have to end that rotten elf. There’s no telling how relations with the Nation of Darkness will turn out, but only a fool wages two wars at once.”

They had been devoting a great deal of resources to eradicating the elves long before the Nation had appeared. And it was a big part of why they’d been unable to address their newest problem.

“Given the Nation’s overwhelming might, finding ourselves in a head-on fight with them would be a worst-case scenario, but it’s our job to prepare for that and grab for the snake in the grass. That means bringing the war with the elves to a quick conclusion.”

"I doubt the Nation will take a stab at us while they're busy mopping up the kingdom, but if we act in haste, they might feel threatened and retaliate. We need a diversion. Consider summoning some undead near the border, making it seem natural. That should allow us to marshal our forces."

"Yes... but we should also try to preserve as many humans as we can."

Several grave nods followed that admonishment.

"Evacuate a portion of the population. To our land of hope. Or the remnants of despair."

The Theocracy had nowhere to turn, no one who would take in their people. But they could not leave them adrift.

There was just one place of refuge beyond their borders. A hidden village of sorts. The place where, six hundred years before, the helpless tribe known as humans had taken shelter, cowering.

This place was guarded by the Dustfallen, one of the six scriptures.

"...If we're evacuating the borderlands, we'll need to start prepping right away. Who's going?"

"It can't be random. We'll all stay behind, of course. Each of you pick a representative and have them choose the rest."

"No, you should go, Laurencin."

"Why?"

"In the event we are wiped out... you were once in the Black Scripture. You can protect and educate those left behind."

"My strength is not what it once was. Those at the top should remain no matter what. If I do not, who would place their faith in me?"

"Still..."

"No..."

“I believe...”

As the argument grew heated, the high priest superior spoke.

“This passion serves no one. It is a vital question, but we do still have time.”

No one argued.

“Very good. Now, to the most pressing issue. The elves themselves—they, we can spare. But that damnable elf king must be cornered and—”

Like a man possessed, his face twisted with rage.

Raymond nodded.

“We’ll give No Death–No Life her shot.”

“Mm. Even if the Platinum Dragonlord learns she’s left our borders, he won’t complain too much once he hears the reason. I’d prefer to make the elf king suffer like no mortal ever has before he dies—but her happiness takes precedence. See it done.”

“As you wish.”



CHAPTER 1

ARRANGING A PAID VACATION

1

Ainz read the last of the documents in the binder he was flipping through, turned back to the top page, and stamped the corner with his personal seal. After a moment's hesitation, he followed that with a stamp of approval. With that, the contents of the binder—a solution to what Ainz considered to be a political concern of the highest order—were now ready for Albedo to staff and put into action.

Lumièlle was waiting at his side, and he handed her the binder. This completed his work for the day.

Ainz looked at the clock.

The hands showed half past ten.

Ainz began work each day at ten exactly. He had been working for only thirty minutes, but this was typical these days. From the get-go, his duties usually occupied him only until noon. Now they took even less time.

When he'd been working in the trenches as Satoru Suzuki, he'd never dreamed of starting work this late in the day—barring outright tardiness. But that was Satoru's idea of normal. Employees at the megacorps might well find themselves starting far later in the day. According to Ulbert, having regulated hours at all was a luxury.

People in this world—villagers like Enri and Nfirea—rose with the sun and worked until it slipped back under the horizon.

The average city dweller was much the same but rose a little later and stayed up awhile after dark. Having a source of light made all the difference. But the nobility, with their many magic lamps, often stayed up very late—and slept in to compensate.

The ten o'clock start time was hardly the Nazarick standard.

Nazarick was the sweatshop to end all sweatshops.

Take the regular maids; they were split into morning and evening shifts, working long hours as a matter of course. Cocytus's minions guarding the ninth floor were much the same. Their downtime was poorly defined, as there weren't any regular breaks at all. No snack time, no cigarette breaks.

Yet, most of the staff had no complaints about this treatment.

Hoping to cultivate a positive work environment, Ainz had discussed the matter with the regular maids.

The result had convinced him they were all off their rockers. Or perhaps, put more diplomatically, they were a very dedicated bunch.

When they mentioned with absolute seriousness that there were items preventing fatigue that would let them work indefinitely, Ainz had felt a chill run down his spine. When asked if they had any complaints, the few who did... asked to be allowed to work *more*.

Since then, he'd enacted some reforms.

Maybe he was simply forcing his values on everyone, but he felt duty-bound to take employee welfare seriously. And his reforms started with the regular maids.

They were extremely low-level to begin with. It helped that they all *looked* like beautiful young women. He didn't wish to show favoritism but couldn't help being softer on them than, say, Cocytus.

If Ainz gave an order, almost everyone in Nazarick would obey it. But careless commands could dampen their motivation.

So he had to sell them on it.

This was his pitch:

Someday, the regular maids might find themselves in charge of human workers. And basing their orders on their own routines could result in their overworking those humans, which was bad.

They had reluctantly agreed to reduce their working hours and increase their free time.

Before, they had been given a single day off after forty-one days of labor. He'd doubled that!

They now had *two* days off.

Ainz felt like this was not a significant change, but changing too much too quickly would be pushing his luck. He'd taken the hint and been forced to compromise here.

His goal was a full-fledged vacation system—paid time off, summer breaks, holidays—the works. He was a long way from making it happen.

Why was he pushing to implement these reforms despite NPC opposition? Satoru Suzuki had never once received such benefits, and perhaps he'd always had a yearning for them.

Currently, he was trying a different tactic.

Ainz himself was not working much. He had hoped that seeing Nazarick's head honcho slacking off would cause a sea change in the mindset of those beneath him—convince them they were *allowed* to work less.

Naturally, half his motivation stemmed from his conviction that the more active a role a man of his mediocre talents played, the worse things would go for Nazarick.

But this tactic seemed doomed to failure.

Nazarick's denizens *had* changed their mindset. They believed it was only natural for Ainz to do nothing, and they should work *extra* hard instead.

Ainz had never done much beyond rubber-stamping things, and now he had even less to stamp. That was probably a net win. He was not a gifted man, and piling work on his plate would do Nazarick no good at all. But he felt bad for whoever was picking up his slack.

Sigh...

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see two maids watching him intently. Their gazes were a force to be reckoned with. One was on Ainz duty, while the other was assigned to this room. If he made the mistake of meeting their eyes, they would immediately ask what he wished done, so he had learned to avoid that.

They don't need to be that serious. I'd much rather they relax. They're so tense, it's turning my stomach.

When was the last time he'd seen a maid smile? Ainz wondered. With another internal

sigh, he spoke to the maid at his side.

“Lumièlle.”

“Yes, Lord Ainz?”

“Just to be sure, that is the end of my work today?”

“Yes, Lord Ainz. That will be all.”

She was on Ainz duty for the day, and in Albedo’s absence, the regular maids now performed secretarial duties for him.

There were no audiences or negotiations on today’s docket.

But there was always the possibility something might crop up. He could never really relax. When Entoma was forced to Message him about an unexpected turn, it was always a headache and left him nursing an upset stomach.

“Ah...”

Ainz’s gaze shifted to the other desk in the room.

Albedo had been very insistent that it had to be in here, but she was currently away.

Most of the time, she worked with him, but only a few days had passed since they had toppled the Re-Estize Kingdom capital, and she had her hands full, running all over Nazarick or overseeing operations out in the field. He hadn’t seen much of her.

He’d asked the maids how she was faring and heard that she was pretty strung out. Because she had too much work or because she hadn’t seen him?

If it’s the latter, I’ll have to make time for her.

If that was all it took to improve her mood, he was happy to oblige.

“.....”

No one here spoke unless he did, so the room was extremely quiet.

Deep down, Ainz would prefer to work somewhere filled with idle chatter, but the last few years had made it clear he could never expect that from them.

It was very isolating.

Am I going to spend the rest of my life being waited upon? I suppose that comes with the territory. But I will have to make a few improvements.

Ordinarily, Ainz had plenty with which to fill his free time.

Horse-riding practice.

Pretending to read academic books while actually reading business manuals. Or books on politics. He didn't really retain much, likely because he was mostly skimming them. Hopefully not because his skull was literally hollow.

Performing magic experiments.

Lately, he'd added doing weapons practice with Cocytus or training with Pandora's Actor to the menu.

"Okay..." he said, as if talking to himself. This was intentional.

He'd waited long enough.

He had a plan to help Aura and Mare make friends. This would require some prep work.

What kind of friends would they make? Other dark elves seemed the most likely; barring that, some other variety of elf. Even with the changes he was hoping to bring to the world, having their first friends be lizardmen or goblins seemed like a big ask.

Best to start closer to home.

His gaze turned to Lumièlle.

"I'm headed to the sixth floor. Accompany me."

"As you wish, sir."

She would come with him whether he said to or not, but it seemed better to be specific.

Ainz used the power of his ring to transport them both to the sixth floor.

One word from him and Lumière would bring anyone he wished to see to his office, and as Nazarick's supreme commander, perhaps summoning those he wished to meet was the proper way to do things. He had chosen not to do so in the hopes of handling things peacefully. If there was a possibility of tension, it was best he go in person and demonstrate sincerity.

A summons was inherently discourteous. A personal visit projected camaraderie and showed how much he valued them. And having the boss on your home turf turned up the heat, which made it a little easier to conduct his business.

He was here to meet three elves. They'd been taken prisoner when the adventurers who'd been lured into Nazarick itself had been wiped out.

Perhaps I should have pried more information out of them when they were first placed here, but... that didn't seem very possible back then.

A few years had passed. At the time, he'd heard the bare minimum—no personal information about the elves themselves or their homes. Ainz had been attempting to act the part of a friendly undead who'd freed the elves from the horrors of slavery. Had he attempted to wring details about elves as a species and where they'd come from, they would never have believed he was saving them out of goodwill.

But would they react the same way now? Probably not.

The Great Tomb of Nazarick was no longer a monolith.

Nazarick—and the Ainz Ooal Gown Nation of Darkness—had brought in all manner of other species, so it made perfect sense that they'd been looking to open diplomatic channels with the elves' homeland and looking for information on the subject.

Now, I can make all sorts of excuses. The twins aren't being rough with them or anything... so hopefully they'll open up to me. Well... let's not expect the world. If I'd thought of this back in the day, perhaps I could have given better instructions...

He shook off the thought. He didn't want Aura and Mare pretending to be nice to these elves just because he'd ordered it. Yet, he would never hesitate to order Demiurge or

Albedo to do the same thing...

Like when he'd compared the maids to Cocytus, his judgment was swayed by appearances. He knew that was wrong but could not free his mind from those biases. At his core, he was just an ordinary man, after all.

With Lumièlle on his heel, Ainz headed down the darkened passage. A heavy portcullis stood at the end. Shafts of sunlight streamed through the bars.

Beyond lay the sixth floor's arena.

He could use a ring to move himself near the twins' domicile but had avoided doing so because—

The portcullis shot upward like it was fully automated, giving him déjà vu. He'd come here on his first day in this world and been greeted by this same tiny figure.

"Lord Ainz, an honor to have you!" a girl's bright, cheery voice said.

"Mm. Aura, I had some business here—and could use your help."

It seemed Aura was on guard duty today. A stroke of luck.

As the Nation of Darkness expanded, each floor guardian had a lot on their plate. They were spending more time outside of Nazarick. But Albedo, Demiurge, Mare, Aura, Cocytus, and Shalltear were careful to ensure that two or three of them were always within the tomb itself.

Albedo, Cocytus, and Shalltear spent the most time here, but Cocytus had the lizardman village to check on, and Shalltear was in charge of the dragon messengers.

And when they were away, someone else would stay.

Ainz had never demanded they observe this informal policy.

Once, he had placed Cocytus in charge of Nazarick security, with Shalltear serving as his backup. But the scale of their holdings had changed a lot since then. Personally, he felt they needed only *one* floor guardian staying behind and was totally fine with having everyone else out and about.

But he was reluctant to actually voice that thought.

The guardians were acting of their own volition, and he was afraid that if he said anything, they'd take it as gospel and overrule their own opinions. He wanted to respect their autonomy.

Albedo and Demiurge were far smarter than Ainz would ever be, and they'd signed off on it, so his opinions were moot. Conclusions reached by his guardians would likely be far superior to whatever his inferior mind spat out.

"At your service, Lord Ainz! What brings you here today?"

"Mm."

She was all smiles, but his grunt was rather somber. There was no real meaning behind that gesture of gravitas. He could simply have done his usual authoritative grunt. But he had qualms about the potential for success in his endeavor, and those worries weighed upon him heavily.

The effect was immediate. Aura's smile vanished.

Uh-oh. She had definitely read too much into that.

"F—" He almost swore. But that would just make her wonder why he was upset, and if she pried into it, his entire charade would crumble. He knew he would bumble it.
"First, I'd like to meet those elves."

"...To clarify, by *elves* you mean the captive ones?"

Ugh, sorry, my scramble to clean up my mess left you guessing. Please stop looking so concerned. Go back to the smile!

"...Exactly. I'd like to check on their current situation and ask them a few things before deciding on my next course of action."

"Certainly! I'll bring them right here."

He'd seen that coming. Every Nazarick denizen would react exactly like Aura just had. Ainz had the next part of the rationale ready... or perhaps it was more of a rationalization.

"Th-that won't be necessary. I have two goals here."

"...Two? Your great mind considers so many possibilities, even when you're just meeting with captives!"

Her eyes gleamed, impressed. He had just come prepared with certain narrative devices for the twins' benefit, but unable to admit that openly, he settled for not quite meeting her eye.

"First, if I go myself, that will pressure them to a certain degree. The second is not directly related to the elves themselves, but since we placed the Tove Woodlands under our control, quite a few outsiders have begun living on this floor. I was curious how they were getting on and figured I should have a look myself. What do you say, Aura? Do you mind showing me to the area that has undergone the most dramatic change?"

Ainz was basically letting each guardian handle their floor without much direct input from him. That meant he had yet to see any of these changes for himself. That was a matter of trust. If his subordinates were doing their jobs well, then his suggestions would simply be a distraction.

But he was here anyway, so he'd thought it would be fun to have a look. He wasn't sure how Aura interpreted this—but it sure altered her demeanor. She was positively crackling.

"Absolutely. When you said *first*, I knew there must be more!" Aura said, nodding emphatically. "And, Lord Ainz, I would never mind taking your requests. You are the supreme ruler of Nazarick, and no matter where you go, everyone you'll find is working for your pleasure!"

"Oh... Mm, well, I'm glad to hear it!"

"I'm grateful for your kind words. Hmm, I'd probably say the flower field has changed the most, so I'll take you there!"

"The flower field..." Ainz ransacked his memory. "We moved some plant-type monsters there, yes?"

"That's correct. We have a fenced-off area where we transplanted non-sentient plant monsters and an area where the sentient ones dwell. Some of those have occupied that

village we made a while back and are living a lot like humans do. Would you like to see that?"

The village had been built with an eye for having humans live within the walls of Nazarick. If they ever ran across another player, he could insist they had plans afoot for peaceful coexistence even within the tomb. It was basically just a collection of small houses with fields around them—hardly large enough to call a village. But the name had stuck for lack of a better alternative.

"You remember the dryad Pinison?"

"...Yes, naturally."

This was mostly a lie. He couldn't recollect her face at all, more of a general shape. But he remembered encountering someone like that—or rather, he had clear memories of the battle that followed, and his vague impression of the dryad was simply part of that package. Ainz had never been good at remembering names and faces. He'd been the type who scribbled notes on the back of business cards, recording the impressions they'd made on him.

"She's basically the village's mayor."

It sounded like plant monsters were pretty free-spirited, so Pinison was mostly just calling herself *mayor*. But she *had* been the first to reach Nazarick and had helped mediate disputes between later arrivals, so she had a fairly good reputation. At the least, she was functioning as the representative for all the plant monsters from outside Nazarick.

Some of the other plants were stronger than Pinison, so she didn't always get her way, but the twins were backing her, so there had yet to be any significant problems.

Upon arrival in Nazarick, the plant monsters had been welcomed by Aura and Mare—or rather, been shown a demonstration of their combat skills and how all the other monsters obeyed them. Keenly aware that they stood no chance, most monsters were disinclined to argue with the twins' orders.

A lot of monsters had seen Mare give commands to a woodland dragon (a cash store monster) and began wondering if he was actually a god. This had only gotten worse when they saw him make it rain and increase the soil's fertility to a genuinely alarming degree.

"I don't think every monster's started worshipping him. Some of them are perfectly aware it's druid magic. I think a lot of them just admire him."

Aura stopped to think about that one.

Ainz felt like he understood. It was how he and his friends used to see someone kitted out in amazing gear and started calling them a god among players. Maybe mixed with a bit of idol fandom.

"I believe I understand. As long as they're obeying your orders, I see no problem. No matter the means or the motives involved. Mm, yes. What I said."

Ainz was already regretting this. That was not how he should have described their work.

Instead of blithering a bunch of nonsense, he should have stuck to simple praise. *Well done!* would have sufficed.

He glanced at Aura's expression, and she appeared unperturbed, but that could just be a poker face.

I don't want to go around making demotivational speeches! All the business books agree that's counterproductive!

He would have to be more careful with his words. His manner of speaking and tone of voice could also use a lot more work.

"Ahem. I'll have to look at the village some other day. For now, let's stick with the flower field. My apologies, Aura."

Aura hastily waved both hands.

"N-not at all! Like I said, all of Nazarick is at your disposal, Lord Ainz. We'll go wherever you like. It was presumptuous of me to suggest anything at all!"

"N-no..."

Why is she apologizing? Wait, she's been acting out of character since I arrived. Did my awkward fumble earlier provoke some odd misunderstanding? Does she think I'm plotting something?

While his mind scrambled, Aura kept talking.

"If you want to go somewhere, Lord Ainz, then everywhere in Nazarick—nay, the world—is open to you."

Ainz was pretty sure the world had plenty of places that he would be well advised to avoid. Any number of places where only women were allowed, for example. But if he said that here, Aura would likely insist she didn't mind. That would be supremely awkward—for Ainz, at least—so he opted to say nothing at all.

He glanced at Lumière and found her nodding in complete agreement.

Pressing the point didn't seem worth it.

Careful not to let his feelings show, he turned to Aura.

"Then lead the way," he said.

"Yes, sir! Happy to oblige!" She thumped her chest. "How should we travel? Shall I summon a ride?"

"Yes, that sounds good."

"Coming right up!"

Aura turned her head, staring into the distance. Her brow furrowed, focusing. This lasted only a few seconds.

"There are other creatures closer to us, but I decided to call Fen and Quadracile instead. Will that work?"

"No need to ask my opinion on everything. If you deem it best, I will not argue."

"Thank you. It will be a brief wait."

"Understood."

Ainz let his eyes wander around the arena.

If you wanted to enjoy a stroll in Nazarick—or take a break from what the ninth and

tenth floors had to offer—the fifth and sixth floors were just the ticket. If you were lucky, you might catch the glow of the aurora on the fifth floor, but that was a rare sight indeed. The odds of encountering it had been set incredibly low. In that sense, you were more likely to have a good time wandering about here on the sixth. As he was about to.

Ainz smiled, feeling the knot in his stomach ease.

•

With a quick by-your-leave, Aura stepped away from her master and Lumière, taking out her necklace.

The twins' necklaces were a legacy item that let them contact each other. They weren't particularly powerful, but they kept them equipped at all times for the simple reason that the function would not work until they'd been worn for two days straight. Normally, items with downsides like that made up for it in strength, but these necklaces were exceptions. And to make it work, the one activating the ability—the one calling—had to clutch the necklace in their hand, so it was hard to use during any serious combat.

There were no other use limits. They could call each other whenever they needed.

That was the nature of the necklaces—opinions would be divided on whether they were any good at all, and certainly on whether they were worth using a precious item slot on.

“Mare, Lord Ainz has graced us with a visit.”

A moment later, Mare's voice echoed in her head.

“Er, he has? Lord Ainz, in person? Here? What for?!”

“Isn't it obvious? An inspection.”

“Augh!”

“I think he's making sure the domain guardians and the two of us are looking after this floor properly. This time he's just going to look over the new flower field, but best we double-check none of the domain guardians are slacking off.”

"This floor does have the most outsiders on it. Is that why? Or is it just our turn?"

"I think that's the reason, yes." She had already connected the dots. Naturally, it was pure speculation, but it felt right to her. "Lord Ainz said he had two goals, but this is Lord Ainz. It can't be *just* two. So maybe his third goal was to make sure we're giving it our all."

"Oh... with all our new outside work, he wants to make sure we aren't neglecting our most important core duties?"

Aura had some idea why that might be needed.

Once, Albedo and Demiurge had divided everything between themselves, leaving the other guardians—especially Shalltear and Cocytus—to stare in envy. Now everyone had more work taking them out of Nazarick. When they'd crushed the kingdom, their respective might had given them the opportunity to prove their loyalty. And their master might suspect these changes had everyone a little giddy.

No matter what else lay on their plates, they were Nazarick guardians. Defending and managing their assigned floor was an ever-present duty. He must want to remind them not to let all their new assignments distract from that.

But forcing their master to express concern about their work performance was a dereliction of duty. If the other guardians—especially their captain, Albedo—learned of this, they would be in for a furious scolding. Refusing to spell it out was their master's way of showing kindness.

"Maybe the goal is to have us spread word of his inspection, so everyone figures out on their own that they should tighten the reins."

"Sounds right. That would be a fourth goal! I bet there's even more."

Aura didn't know what else there could be. Mare was equally stumped. Maybe Demiurge and Albedo would get it, but the thought of having to ask them was humiliating.

"Anyway, get ready!"

"Um, for what?"

"Oh, sorry! I forgot to tell you. I mentioned two goals, right? The first is the observation, but the second goal is to meet those elves we gave that empty room to."

"Oh, them. They won't shut up about the whole royalty thing. Is Lord Ainz gonna take them away?"

Mare sounded pretty frustrated.

He loved lying around in bed, but those elves seemed to think he needed looking after and fussed over him a lot more than they did Aura. They'd hang his bedding out to air or put clothes on him, sometimes even bathe him. Mare found this all more than a bit unnecessary, but they were here by his master's orders, so he couldn't refuse their "help."

"Oh, Fen's almost here. Not sure how long it'll take us, Mare, but be ready."

"Mm. Got it."

Aura ended the call and went back to her master.

•

The flower field on Nazarick's sixth layer had blooms of all colors. Theoretical invaders would have to survive pure hell to get this far and would likely assume this area must have monsters in disguise or fatal traps lurking within. They would be wrong, of course.

It merely looked ominous. In fact, nothing here was for invaders at all.

The world of *Yggdrasil* did have plant monsters that could disguise themselves as flowers, and plenty of bug monsters besides. They just hadn't been placed here. There was generally a domain guardian stationed anywhere noteworthy—but again, not here.

Arguably, it was under Aura's and Mare's direct purview, but it was *just* pretty flowers.

There had been *plans* to add traps.

No one capable of reaching the sixth floor would ever believe these were simply regular flowers. They'd be too suspicious to go near or try and get the drop on lurking

threats by setting the field on fire. The idea had been to counter that with flowers that released a virulent poison or paralytic when burned. But the three female guild members had violently objected to this, and they'd gone back to the drawing board. The result—a field of completely normal flowers.

That was the flower field Ainz knew. A far cry from what he found today.

Giant blossoms sat in the center of the field, each large enough for a human to fit inside. Twelve in all. Obviously unsafe—or outright threatening.

Ainz searched his memory.

This world had many monsters Ainz was unfamiliar with, but he'd seen a monster like this in *Yggdrasil*.

"Are those an alraune?"

"Yes! They are!"

There had been none within Nazarick, and no one had summoned any since their arrival here. This was an exterior species—creatures brought here from the Tove Woodlands.

There was a conspicuous shovel stuck in the ground near the field's center.

A god item, the Earth Recoverer.

As a god-tier weapon, it had obscene amounts of durability, but its actual attack power was horrifyingly low because the bulk of its data had been dedicated to its support power.

Nearby was a creature resembling a giant Angora rabbit—a spearneedle. It was sitting in the middle of the field, munching away at a gigantic carrot. What an idyllic sight. Downright bucolic. But that was likely not the creature's purpose here.

He'd have to ask Aura to be sure, but he felt confident it was on watch duty.

The spearneedle's level was in the upper 60s. It could easily wipe out the alraune if they tried anything.

"The carrot it's nibbling on was grown in our fields. Pinison and the other plant monsters combined their abilities, giving it tons of nutrients, and were able to alter ordinary carrots to that size."

"So it's been engineered to be that size and didn't grow that big naturally? Is it safe to eat? Then again, considering this spearneedle's level, I'm sure no ordinary poison would do much."

"It's not poisonous at all! We checked with the head chef, and it meets his standards for consumption. The downside is that eating it doesn't provide any buffs like the food we had in Nazarick to begin with. It's just bigger and sweeter."

"But from a logistics standpoint, that sounds like a success. Can these be grown in ordinary farms in our territory?"

"Nope. Even with the help of the plant monsters, we're still not capable of growing them in large numbers. Even with Earth Recoverer's power, a single carrot absorbs a ton of nutrients from the soil. Not enough to cause desertification, but if you don't use magic to restore the earth, you'd have to leave the field fallow for a year."

As they looked over the field, one of the blossoms—the largest—began to unfurl.

"The alraune lord. In charge of the fourteen alraune here," Aura whispered. Clearly indicating the unfurling flower.

"Fourteen?" Ainz asked, counting again. "Not twelve?"

"The other two are newborns and are hidden beneath the flowers. Should I pull them up for you?"

"...No, that won't be necessary."

If they were born within Nazarick, did they count as Nazarick denizens or not? What were their abilities? Many questions sprang to mind, but before he could throw any of them at Aura, the alraune finished blooming.

Within was a female form, exactly what he'd expected—her appearance the spitting image of the alraune he'd fought in *Yggdrasil*. This one was apparently a lord, but size aside, there was no other visible difference.

Her hair and eyes matched the petals around her, while her body was the same green as her stem. She wore no clothes, but her body was formed from thin, coiled tendrils, so the overall impression was rather unsettling.

The eyes turned up at the outside, which did not make her look friendly—if anything, she seemed openly irate.

Ainz felt a wave of nostalgia. There was a certain girl in the Sacred Kingdom who had a similar intimidating glare.

He'd never been great at remembering faces, but her eyes had really stuck with him.

This monster's face twisted ominously.

"Good morning, Lady Aura. We bathe in glorious light once again, and I speak for all that is green when I offer my gratitude."

She spoke with a voice like a bell, and there was no trace of hostility in it. Her tone sounded quite reverent, in fact. Apparently, that sinister smile was supposed to be a welcoming one. Ainz still wasn't fully convinced those twisted lips were anything but wicked.

The remaining blooms stirred but did not unfurl. Their eyes peeked from among the petals, stealing glances at the visitors.

Unsure what they intended by this behavior, Ainz couldn't exactly call it rude. It was possible that in alraune culture, this was a sign of the highest respect.

"Is this...?" The lord glanced at Ainz.

"You stand before the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, the one who conquered your forest and the regions around it, the king of kings who reigns over all races in the Nation of Darkness. The absolute authority, His Majesty, the King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown!"

As Aura started boasting, the lord's smile grew all the more malicious. The other alraune fluttered their petals, hiding their faces from view. Caution? Fear? Or merely genuflection?

Ainz gleaned nothing from their expressions, but he felt it was most likely the second.

"A-a pleasure to make your acquaintance, ruler of this land, king of the Nation of Darkness, and, above all, master to Lady Aura and Lord Mare, Your Majesty, the King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown." She spread her arms outward, presumably in a gesture of respect. "My name is Murasaki, and I am at your disposal."

Her name literally meant purple. Maybe because that was the color of her hair? Ainz had no idea.

What an uncreative, lazy way to name something. Of course, he obviously couldn't say that aloud. There were few things more insulting than scoffing at a name bequeathed by one's parents. Or at least, that's where he assumed it came from.

"Mm, I shall remember it. That said, I have left this floor in the charge of Aura and Mare. It is unlikely I shall ever offer direct orders here. You may continue to act as they have instructed."

He had no clue how the twins were handling these alraune, so he kept things unspecific. It was a real headache if the CEO said anything that contradicted the departmental manager's instructions. He'd experienced that firsthand.

He had no idea what function these creatures fulfilled or how they were being treated, so there was nothing he *could* safely say.

"As you wish, Your Majesty."

Ainz was impressed. Despite her forest upbringing, Murasaki had impeccable manners. Where and when had she acquired this knowledge? Had the twins coached her, or...?

Perhaps she's simply saying something more alraune-like, in the general ballpark. For all I know, she might have said, Ainz, your bud is so big!

It was a relief that they could understand each other, but he couldn't shake the apprehension that this could create problems without anyone ever noticing until it was too late. Not that he would object even if she had called him a big bud.

Ainz glanced around the flower field.

The alraune obscured the view a bit, which was a shame, but otherwise it was exactly as he remembered it.

Ainz smiled faintly—naturally, his actual face of bone didn't move an inch—then swished his robes as majestically as he could before turning on his heel to rejoin the giant wolf and itzamna and Lumière.

Aura was immediately at his side.

"You're done here?" she asked. "Don't want to give the other alraune an audience?"

"I don't see the need. I've accomplished what I came to do. Take me to the elves next."

"Very well!" Aura said. They hopped on Fenrir and rode off across the sixth floor.

Soon, they neared their destination. Looking up through the branches, he could see the somewhat oddly shaped tree that Aura and Mare called home.

A few moments later, they left the woods behind, emerging onto a grassy knoll. At the center of this clearing was a stout tree, wider than it was tall, its close-knit branches casting a large shadow across the ground.

There was a gaping hollow in the tree's trunk, and before it stood Mare, with three elves in attendance. They had come out to greet Ainz upon his arrival.

He wasn't sure when Aura had sent word to Mare, but if it had been right after his arrival on the floor, they must have been waiting awhile.

He'd made no specific appointment, and there was no need to feel guilty about this, logically speaking.

At the same time...

If he was a branch manager and got word that the company's president had arrived at the nearest station, he would have immediately gone to stand out front. Failing to be there to greet a superior was out of the question. He knew that yet had failed to be more specific with his schedule, meaning this *was* on him.

This eventuality had not crossed his mind until he had arrived, so a part of him wanted to let it pass without comment. But was that appropriate? Regardless of how long he'd actually kept them standing here, saying something thoughtless, like *Oh, you shouldn't have waited up*, would only be demeaning and emphasize their position in the hierarchy.

Mare was dressed in his usual gear, and the elves wore drab fatigues. Some humans might've found that alluring in its own way. Ainz thought the choice of clothing was a bit... off... but if the twins wanted it this way, he wasn't going to argue.

More importantly...

If they were dressed as maids, Lumière wouldn't be the only one objecting.

The regular maids seemed to take great pride in personally serving Ainz. If he brought in outsiders as potential new additions to the staff, perhaps they wouldn't be overtly mean. At the same time, Sebas had mentioned they might engage in some passive-aggressive pettiness. Purposely neglecting to teach the new hires how to complete a certain task, for instance.

If these elves waited on only Aura and Mare as maids, then it might ruffle fewer feathers, but that wasn't guaranteed. Just seeing them dressed in the same uniform might be provocative. The maids considered those clothes their battle gear.

With that thought, he realized Fenrir had reached the waiting party.

"I appreciate your coming out to greet me," Ainz said, making the first move while still mounted. "I am thoroughly pleased with the depth of your loyalty."

He had considered waiting until after Mare greeted him, but thanking him first was important to impart the impression that he was *nice*.

"Th-thank you," Mare said, smiling and bowing. The elves followed suit, lowering their heads.

Good.

Ainz thought this interaction had gotten off on the right foot and pumped a fist inside his mind.

When the elves raised their heads, he looked them over.

Their faces—and bodies—were very stiff. When they sensed his gaze on them, they gulped.

Anyone could tell they were anxious. The question was whether that sprang from fear

or something else. In other words, was it fear that a single false move would end their lives, or was it more like the tension that typically came with meeting someone famous?

Just in case, Ainz doubled-checked to ensure he had no auras active. He felt no hostility or animosity toward these elves, so that couldn't be the source of their fear.

This could be tricky. I thought I was getting better at it, too...

When beings as powerful as Ainz experienced strong emotions, everyone nearby could sense it, often striking fear into their hearts. This could betray what he was thinking, so when training with Cocytus, he'd received some pointers on controlling it.

Personally, Ainz was not great at sensing hostility from others. Cocytus had been extremely reluctant, but at Ainz's insistence, the guardian had directed those emotions at his master. There was a sort of... pressure, but Ainz couldn't really discern from that whether someone wanted to kill him or not.

Perhaps the undead simply weren't sensitive to these things. As a general rule, they negated psychic effects entirely. He felt it was reasonable to argue that sensing enmity was a form of psychic feedback, after all.

But Shalltear seemed to have no trouble detecting it, and Cocytus had said that improving your skills as a warrior would help it become second nature. Perhaps he would get better over time. A worthy goal if nothing else. And Ainz couldn't rule out the possibility that he was just inherently oblivious.

Whoops, my mind's wandering.

He refocused just as Mare spoke up.

"Er, um, so, ahem. L-Lord Ainz, you said you w-wished to speak to these elves. May I ask what about?"

Mare was being extra timid today and had clearly spoken to Aura ahead of time. He could cut to the chase.

Ainz looked from Mare to the elves, consciously turning his head. Their eyes darted to the ground, fleeing his gaze. They were visibly shaking.

That was definitely not just *tense*.

This must stem from emotional fear. I have child dark elves like Aura and Mare in my employ, and they still don't trust me? They already know living creatures have sworn fealty and live here in peace. Honestly, why haven't they figured out that I'm not like the bog-standard undead by now...? I suppose I can't help the way I look. Perhaps their minds understand but their hearts won't listen.

In this world, *all* undead loathed the living. They were the mortal enemy of all who lived. Coming face-to-face with a being like that would put most people on edge. Terrify them, even.

Perhaps if he'd placed them under Shalltear and they had more experience with the undead residents of Nazarick, they'd have gotten more used to the general concept and handled this better, but there weren't many undead on the sixth floor. There had been no natural opportunity.

Seeing something with your own eyes is better than hearing about it from a hundred others.

This had been true in *Yggdrasil* as well.

Game-play techniques, acquired skills—simply demonstrating them was far more useful than issuing verbal instructions. Ainz would always follow up by practicing a hundred—if not thousands of—times, committing ideas to heart and making them his own.

“Yes, that is true, Mare. I have one... yes, a simple topic to discuss with them.”

The elves' breathing grew shallow. Rapid.

He longed to tell them there was no need for fear, but cheerily going, *Aw, don't be so scared* ♪, was out of the question. He couldn't drop the act. He had to be Ainz Ooal Gown, ruler of Nazarick, at all times. He'd have to find some other way to settle them down.

“But do not worry. I am not here to harm you in any way.”

He came very close to asking them to relax but then figured he'd never buy that line from anyone he feared. He was better off leaving it unsaid. If the boss urged someone

to speak freely, could anyone *actually* forget who they were speaking to?

Sigh. What a hassle.

He knew it was a bad idea, but using Dominate to control their mental states would make this easier. Certainly easier than trying to make them feel safe with words alone.

But if he did use a spell like that, once it was over, they'd remember what he'd said and what they'd done. And most people in this world viewed mind-control spells as intrinsically barbaric.

He wasn't sure if elves were among them, but he doubted they considered it a good thing. In fact, if someone did the same to anyone in Nazarick, Ainz would immediately begin looking for an opening to deliver the culprit a fatal blow.

Naturally, if they had a need for information, he would not hesitate to resort to those measures. He had no qualms about using Control Amnesia right after, either.

But there was no need to go that far here. They had done nothing wrong, and he had no reason to believe they were hiding information. Most of all...

This isn't like the Zen... bel (?) situation. Using spells to get information where a conversation would suffice is like scolding Aura and Mare for failing to get the intel I need. I wouldn't blame them for interpreting that as my doubting their skills.

The twins—no, everyone belonging to the Great Tomb of Nazarick—believed Ainz could do no wrong. In all honesty, it was an alarming proposition, but he had to act in accordance with their unswerving faith.

And that meant he should do his absolute best to avoid coming across as doubting their ability to fulfill their duties. No telling how they'd react, and he would never think anything of the sort in the first place.

Besides, if he wanted to use mind-control spells, they could have done that ages ago.

He'd decided not to when these elves were first captured because he wished to seem friendly and welcoming—to maintain the fiction that he'd saved them from their suffering. That had been an investment in the future, and throwing that away for a magical shortcut seemed rash.

"Mm, well, speaking here won't do. Let's move."

He didn't think he could convince them with words alone, so he'd have to try something else. Location was a good start.

"Then come on upstairs!"

"Y-yes, please do!"

"Ah..."

Ainz glanced up at the tree above.

Would this work as a setting for their conversation?

In a sense, this was their home turf. That might make it easier to talk to them. But who would prepare the drinks? Aura or Mare? No, he had Lumière with him; she could handle it.

Not a bad idea. Will this conversation be a relaxed one or fraught with tension? Will they be volunteering information in a friendly manner or relinquishing it under duress? Hmm, I don't have time. I swear, I used to get my presentation notes in order first, predicting how they'd respond, what questions they'd ask. That's exactly what I did with the dwarves and the Sacred Kingdom. Am I getting sloppy?

He'd been offered an invitation. He had to respond as soon as possible. But moments like these always sent his thoughts spiraling away.

...You know, I don't think I've ever seen the regular maids offer drinks of their own accord. Or, no... maybe one time... I think?

It wasn't that they couldn't. Ainz had ordered it once, and they'd offered up a broad selection of refreshments, soda included. They must be kept on hand somewhere within Ainz's room. The regular maids were constantly striving to be the best attendants they could be. He couldn't imagine they'd ever be discourteous or let anything slip their minds.

So perhaps they believed that since their ruler could not drink anything, no one else should, either. The same way it was tough for anyone else to order booze if the boss wasn't drinking.

He felt the correct response would be to prepare a drink for Ainz—whether he could drink or not—and then offer drinks to the guests.

I feel bad for everyone who's visited me.

When he got back, he'd have to consult Pestonia on the matter. Then he realized this was unrelated to the issue at hand and hastily course-corrected.

Wait, wait, what the hell am I thinking?! I need to focus on where we'll drink. If I waste any more time, they'll think I don't want to come in! That would be awful. But...!

At a loss, he glanced around.

“Oh!” Aura suddenly said, and Ainz barely stopped his shoulders from twisting. Perhaps the shock had been so great, his emotions had been forcibly calmed. “Were you thinking of speaking somewhere else? Not here but out on the sixth floor?”

“M-mm. Indeed. It’s a nice day, so I thought we might talk outside.”

“We can make that happen. We’ve got a table and an umbrella ready! Lady BubblingTeapot once used them to chat with the other Supreme Beings! She made it so we can use them! There are unused houses back at the village, and I didn’t show you this before, but this floor actually has a gazebo, too!”

“Yes, I’ve been there with the others.”

Ainz found himself recalling the idle chatter he used to have with his guildmates.

I feel like I get lost in these memories less than I used to.

Maybe he no longer saw the shadows of his friends in the NPCs as often. Was he forgetting his old companions, or had he begun to properly see the NPCs as individuals? He preferred the latter explanation, but the thought that the former might be true was saddening.

Everything Satoru Suzuki had—all those dazzling, happy memories—had been shared with them.

No! It's not just memories! Ainz Ooal Gown lives here and now!

Emotions he could not put a name to scorched his heart, and he let out a long breath. His gaze turned to Aura and Mare.

When... when they left this place, how did that feel? No, at the time, the NPCs were nothing more. If not, then... Argh.

He shook his head.

His thoughts were growing increasingly fragmented. He had to focus on the task at hand.

Ainz glanced at the faces around him, but nobody seemed to suspect anything amiss.

They must have thought he was considering Aura's proposition. Best he put a pin in his musings for now.

"Let me see... This floor isn't bad, but... why don't we go elsewhere? Show them other parts of our domain."

If he really wanted this to be a friendly meeting, holding it in familiar territory was effective. But he was inclined to leave this place.

In which case—where could they go? Two ideas sprang to mind.

The first was E-Rantel. And the second—the ninth floor of Nazarick.

If he showed off how the city was filled with many races, living in harmony, he felt sure it would leave a good impression. But there was no guarantee nothing would go wrong. Direct assaults or violence could be easily dealt with and explained away. But what if someone made a terrible impression? Acting like they were suffering because of the King of Darkness? That would leave him worse off than he was now.

He could use mind control on a crowd and feed them all lies—but that might make the elves suspicious. It didn't seem like an effective strategy.

And Ainz was still widely feared in E-Rantel. There were those who'd learned to admire him, but not many. Less than 30 percent, all told. Showing people acting scared of him would be inadvisable. And if the elves assumed the races there were little more than slaves, the whole thing would blow up in his face.

In which case... the ninth floor. But where on it?

Should he take them to his office and have Lumière practice serving drinks?

He considered that.

Drinks prepared in the boss's office? Or drinks at a café? Which would be more relaxing?

"The answer is clear. Where else could we go? The ninth floor it is. There's a cafeteria there. We can eat—have you eaten?"

"N-no. N-not yet."

"Excellent. Then the timing works out well."

He'd had that in mind from the start.

Most people let their guards down when their stomachs were full.

But it had taken more time to get here than he'd expected. He'd been afraid he'd arrived too late, but luck had been on his side. No—they'd been warned of his arrival the moment he reached the floor. Uncertain when he'd appear, no one had considered eating first.

"Good, then we'll chat over lunch," Ainz said. He turned to the elves. "What say you?"

They quickly looked at one another, silently wrestling with which of them would have to speak. The one in the middle wound up answering, less because she spoke for all of them and more because she'd been beset from both sides.

"Y-yes, Your Majesty. If Lady Aura and Lord Mare approve, we'd be happy to join you."

Ainz agreed. They could hardly accept without involving the twins. He turned to them.

"If you've no objections, shall we take them to the cafeteria? I'd love for you to join us as well."

"We're in! Right, Mare?"

"Er, um. Uh, I mean, yes, Aura's right! I-I'm in."

"Glad to hear it. Then..." Ainz glanced at the elves. "Let me open a Gate."

2

He first used a spell to move them to the sixth floor's teleportation gate. Then he sent a Message to Aureole, who managed those, ordering her to connect one to the ninth floor. Naturally, the gate from the eight to the ninth floor was operating properly—or else there was a high chance Ariadne would kick in.

Technically, there was no need to be this complicated.

There was a limit to how many could be transported by the Ring of Ainz Ooal Gown, so they couldn't all go at once, but he could have simply popped back to pick up any stragglers. He was jumping through these hoops out of an abundance of caution to avoid revealing everything to the elves. Ainz mostly didn't want anyone seeing what the ring could do.

Beyond the ninth-floor gate, Cocytus's minions stood guard. When Ainz appeared, they bowed their heads.

"Well done," he intoned, acting as a ruler should.

Aura and Lumière came out next and then the elves behind them, in a row. But the instant they saw the row of monsters bowing to him, they froze on the spot.

Cocytus's minions weren't trying to intimidate them. But if a mere mortal was out for a stroll in the woods and ran into a tiger—they would be scared stiff. That was basically what had happened here.

Someone gave an elf a gentle push from behind.

They'd stopped right by the gate's exit. Mare was last in line, and they were preventing him from getting out. That was why he'd nudged them along—being careful not to push too hard—but they were already at their limit, and this proved too much for her.

"Eep..." she squealed. Her body swayed, and she sat down heavily. The elves on either side looked horrified and tried to help her up, but there was no strength in her legs,

and they weren't getting anywhere.

"Don't be alarmed. You are within Nazarick, and no one here will harm you."

"Y-yes, sire..."

She didn't doubt his word, but it also wasn't enough to calm her down.

The elves on either side of her were nodding a bit too fast, their hair thrashing around. The seated elf looked ready to burst into tears.

This was a disaster and would have repercussions. Ainz was sure of it. He had to get them stabilized immediately.

"Let's take a rest before we head to the cafeteria—Gate. Aura, carry her."

"Yes, sir!"

"N-no, I couldn't ask Lady Aura to—"

"It's fine; I don't mind. Come on."

Aura ignored the elf's protests and easily scooped her up. She placed the elf on her shoulders. Since she was wearing fatigues, there was no skirt to worry about.

Through the black half-orb—the Gate—was his office.

He spotted three maids with their heads down. Cleaning implements rested at their feet.

"Good work," Ainz said. "We'll be taking a quick break and leaving again. You can continue cleaning."

The maids nodded and bowed again—just as the last of the party made it through the Gate.

The elves' jaws were wide open, gaping at the room around them. Rather silly-looking. It was nothing like the twins' home and clearly new to them. They looked more relaxed already. The regular maids were much easier to deal with than the monsters under Cocytus's command. They were not something to fear.

"Aura, she can use that chair."

Ainz pointed at Albedo's seat, and Aura nodded, setting the elf down on it. Albedo's desk was as spotless as its owner, while Ainz's desk was mostly just empty.

"Th-thank you," the elf said.

Doing his best to sound nice, Ainz said, "I understand your surprise. But like I said, you have nothing to fear. Nothing in Nazarick will harm you—any of you. Relax and enjoy yourselves."

But that was easier said than done.

He turned away from them and moved to one of the maids.

"We're heading to the cafeteria next. Can you clear the halls on the way of anything but maids? And the cafeteria—" He considered clearing that room but thought better of it. "No, strike that. Let the cafeteria be used like it always is. Perhaps it would be better if you maids were there."

"Certainly, sir. I'll go right away."

"Sorry to pull you from your duties, but please do."

"Not at all, Lord Ainz."

He'd chosen her only because she was closest, but she clearly didn't realize that. She shot her colleagues a smile—a triumphant one. They didn't even try to hide their frustration, groaning aloud.

One eye on her colleagues, the maid left the room to carry out her orders.

Ainz could feel the other maids' eyes on him—it was rare he was this sensitive. They were clearly hoping for special instructions of their own. Ainz duty already counted as a special assignment, so Lumièlle was taking things in stride.

He'd really stepped in it this time. Naturally, the maids didn't mean to pour the pressure on—he was feeling that all on his own. But Ainz found himself tearing his attention away from them, turning back to the elf on the chair. He had to check to make sure she was breathing normally again.

"Feeling better? Then let's be on our way."

The last thing he wanted to do was rush her or make this compulsory, but he didn't want to linger here, either.

Certain the elf could walk again, Ainz led the way out the door. It took everything he had to pretend to not notice the maids' disappointment.

On the way to the cafeteria, he could hear the elves oohing and aahing, occasionally saying, "Wow" or "So beautiful!"

He resisted the urge to start boasting and kept facing forward.

At length, they reached their destination. There were no minions along the way, but it had taken a while. The elves had been so busy gawking, they hadn't exactly been fleet of foot, and Ainz himself had slowed down anywhere he particularly wanted to show off. Their progress had been otherwise unhindered.

The cafeteria on Nazarick's ninth floor was supposed to resemble those found at most companies or schools, though there had been no such thing at Ainz's own school or company, so he could not personally verify how accurate that was in a general sense. It was undoubtedly a far cry from your typical restaurant interior.

He had not stepped foot here since his initial tour of Nazarick upon his arrival in this world, but at a glance, nothing seemed to have changed. From within, he heard the chatter of girls and the clatter of silverware on dishes.

Likely all people who worked on the ninth and tenth floors, primarily regular maids, were currently eating inside. Maybe a few domain guardians as well. It was a little late for lunch, but the interior was abuzz with activity. Perhaps they ate in shifts.

The sight of maids cheerily enjoying their meals would help the elves to surmise what this facility was for. This was unfamiliar territory, so they might feel a bit out of place, but with everyone going about their lives, it would be easy enough for them to settle down. That was why he'd chosen not to empty out the cafeteria.

But the moment Ainz stepped in, that peaceful lunch vibe vanished.

Not a sound remained.

The happy chattering, the sounds of food being eaten—all that evaporated. The tension in the air felt like no cafeteria on earth.

Every head in the room turned their way. Eyes peeled, no one even dared to move.

Nothing could be more alienating.

It was like a grotesque player with negative karma wandering into Alfheim.

“Pay us no heed,” he said. “Continue your meals.”

Almost all the diners scattered around the expansive interior were regular maids. At his word, they all resumed their meals. But there was no sign of them resuming their conversations. Everyone ate in silence.

Ainz had not meant to disrupt their lunch hour and felt rather sad about this. But then he put himself in their shoes and realized something.

A boss who never visited the lunchroom suddenly making an appearance—anyone would react like this. Satoru Suzuki certainly would have. Perhaps if this was a smaller company, and the CEO was closer with the low-rung workers, this outcome could have been avoided.

But not here.

Lord Ainz was revered and universally greeted with bowed heads. Attempting a sudden culture shift to the friendly neighborhood Mr. Ainz was simply not in the cards. It might be possible if his true nature was discovered and everyone knew he was a fool—but turning himself into a laughingstock (however unlikely) was hardly a goal to strive for.

“Come on in,” he said, turning back.

As he did, he surreptitiously took stock of the elves’ reactions.

There wasn’t much that needed studying. A single glance made it clear they were shriveling up. Of course they were. They hadn’t missed how Ainz’s entrance had shattered the peaceful mood here. Or the GIA (Grotesque in Alfheim) factor.

He had no clue how to fix this.

He just hoped time would heal things. Possibly a tad optimistic, but for the moment, he decided to stride purposefully into the cafeteria.

Not wanting to stress out the maids any further, he found a table removed from the crowds and gestured at the seats across from his.

“Take a seat.”

The elves exchanged nervous glances. Like they were deciding who would draw the short straw and sit opposite Ainz. That was almost certainly what was happening.

“...Yes, my understanding of manners may differ from that of the elves. At this table, we are all equals and need not concern ourselves with stiff propriety. No one will mind, no matter how different our ideas of etiquette might be.”

A generous interpretation of their behavior that also offered them an excuse to act less wary. If they were too hesitant, that itself was a problem. Ainz also didn’t want to find out what would happen if Aura and Mare got frustrated by their obvious reluctance.

“Go on, sit before me,” Ainz said, pointing at the elf in the back. She had yet to stand in the middle of the group, so it was only fair she took her turn in the hot seat.

Honestly, he didn’t enjoy framing it that way, but he also understood why they’d be desperate to avoid it, so he did his best to handle the matter professionally.

Things moved fast from there.

The elf he’d pointed at sat down, and the others took spots on either side. Aura and Mare flanked Ainz himself.

Lumièlle stood behind Ainz. He had thoughts on that but kept them to himself.

“Well then. I’m afraid this is my first time using the cafeteria. Would you mind explaining how things work here?” He directed this question at Lumièlle. Her colleagues were making use of it, so he figured she would know. “First... let’s get some drinks. Is there a menu?”

“At this time of day, we usually help ourselves to drinks. And the buffet. Drinks can be found over there. That table has simple sides, and we can take as much as we can eat.”

He followed her pointing finger toward a table that held a number of pitchers, presumably with a variety of beverages inside. Past that was a row of chafing dishes.

“Finally, we can select one dish from the lunch menu here.”

“Aha.”

“The head chef is in the kitchen, Lord Ainz. A word from you, and he’ll prepare anything you wish.”

“I’m sure. But that won’t be necessary. If there’s a set lunch menu, we’ll order from that.”

He took the menu from her.

It was written in Japanese. The elves wouldn’t be able to read it. And—

“...Have you even heard of *katsudon*? ”

They shook their heads.

“...Aura, Mare, what do they normally eat? ”

“Normal food! ”

“Y-yes. M-more or less, er, just like our food. The same food.”

Then had the twins never eaten *katsudon*, either? No, they were likely getting food from the delivery service and could cook for themselves, too.

“Have you not had *katsudon*? ”

“No, we’ve eaten that. I think they just didn’t know the name.”

“Oh, that explains it.”

The menu didn’t exactly have holographic photographs attached to it, so they couldn’t see what the dishes looked like.

“What do...? ” But he realized if he asked for a recommendation, the answer would be

Everything's good, and he decided not to bother. "Hmm... Oh, can you eat meat?"

The elves all nodded, so he picked an option from the menu.

"Let's just all have the Salisbury steak set."

"You can choose between demi-glace, Japanese-style, or mustard cream sauce, accompanied by either rice or bread. Which would you prefer?"

"...Let's say bread and the demi-glace."

He had an idea what that and the Japanese sauce would taste like, but mustard cream was a complete mystery. A shame that this body could never find out.

"That works!"

"Um, yes. I'm, uh, fine with that, too!"

The twins confirmed immediately, and the elves just nodded. No one disagreed.

"Then make it so."

He let out a little breath, assuming that settled things—but Lumièlle showed no signs of heading to the kitchen. Why not? Would staff come to take their order?

"Lord Ainz, what about drinks?"

"Oh, right. Let's have everyone fetch whatever they'd like. Does that work?"

"Yes. I'll fetch your beverage, Lord Ainz. What would you like?"

"It doesn't ma— Actually, I'll have a hot coffee."

"Coming right up."

Aura led the company off toward the drinks counter.

Meanwhile, Lumièlle went to the kitchen and said something that apparently provoked a commotion.

Something burst out of the kitchen door.

Naked from the waist up, a massive cleaver strapped to his hip, and a large wok on his back. The kanji for fresh meat tattooed on his corpulent chest, below a chunky gold chain.

His face resembled an orc's but actually belonged to a related species, a wilder breed known as an orcus.

A chef's hat sat upon his head, and a white apron wrapped around his waist.

This was the cafeteria domain guardian and head chef—Shihoutsu Tokitsu.

Moving nimbly, the orcus dashed over to Ainz and took a knee. Ainz wondered if this was dirtying his apron.

“Lord Ainz! Welcome to my humble domain.”

“It’s been a while, Shihoutsu Tokitsu. A pleasure to see you unchanged.”

“Thank you!”

He'd said *unchanged*, but he had not met the chef since the huge meeting with all the NPCs upon his initial arrival here. It had been far too long, and he likely wouldn't have noticed any changes even if there had been any.

“Or have you lost weight?”

“If you believe that to be the case, Lord Ainz, then it must be true.”

That definitely wasn't how he'd intended it, but he resisted the urge to argue.

“I received your order from the good lady, but it lacked an item for yourself. I understand completely!”

Shihoutsu Tokitsu flashed an extremely dude-bro grin—it was sort of hard to tell under that hairy snout, but Ainz was pretty sure about this, which convinced him the chef understood absolutely nothing. Had anyone ever gotten something like this on the first try? Sadly, probably not.

"Lord Ainz, I will prepare you a *feast* befitting the absolute ruler of Nazarick, the greatest of Supreme Beings!"

See, Ainz thought, but Shihoutsu Tokitsu was already on his feet and hollering at the kitchen.

"I wade across death's own line! Cuisine worthy of Lord Ainz! A banquet that will outlast the week itself!"

"Ohhhh," the watching maids crooned in amazement.

"Nope, wait a minute."

"Of course!"

Shihoutsu Tokitsu was back on bended knee in an instant.

Ainz could almost see the fires of passion burning in his eyes, eager to impress—which made this news all the harder to break. He had long believed if the NPCs wished to do a thing, he should play along, but this was more than a bit much.

"...Perhaps you are suffering from a misapprehension, so let me be clear. I am undead and cannot eat at all."

"Indeed, sir! The feast will be a delight for the nostrils! An olfactory cornucopia! Coming right up!"

He jumped to his feet again.

"No, wait."

"Of course!"

"Calm yourself. When I say I cannot eat, that means I do not wish to waste food."

"Lord Ainz, that is inconceivable. No food prepared for you could possibly be a waste. Right?"

Shihoutsu Tokitsu spun around, calling out to everyone in the cafeteria. A hearty round of applause was the reply. It wasn't only the maids—Aura and Mare were

clapping, too. The elves hastily joined in.

Ainz privately wished they hadn't.

"I'll get right—"

"No, stop."

"Of course!"

The chef was back on his knees.

"I'll just come right out and say it. I am not here to eat. I am here to enjoy a conversation. I appreciate your eagerness to serve me, but I do not want you to. I merely wish to have a relaxed discussion. Does that make sense?"

Ainz fully understood why Shihoutsu Tokitsu was so excessively enthusiastic. He had always believed his ruler would never enter his domain, yet here he was. Naturally, he wished to provide the finest hospitality possible. But that was not what Ainz wanted.

"Sir, in that case, I will ensure you have the place to yourselves!"

"No, don't."

"Of course!"

"Do nothing dramatic. Again, I am just here to enjoy a conversation. There is absolutely no need to do anything like *that*."

Ainz glanced at the others—especially the elves—and everyone was looking very serious.

The maids were already halfway out of their seats, ready to leave at any moment. Aura and Mare looked just as they always did, while the elves seemed largely alarmed by how out of hand this was getting. But the whole reason he'd picked this location was to avoid giving them that impression.

"I am not trying to be modest. I came here specifically to do that. I want to see everyone acting as you always do. Pay me no heed."

“Your wish is my command, Lord Ainz. But you are a Supreme Being, and I cannot simply treat you as I would any other!”

This might be a bit mean, but the situation left him with no choice. Ainz cleared his throat and lowered his voice.

“Shihoutsu Tokitsu.”

“Yes, Lord Ainz!”

“I said I wish to see this facility operating as it always does. You need do nothing out of the ordinary to demonstrate the dedication with which you perform your daily duties. Or is there a reason why you should behave differently? Something you wish to hide?”

Shihoutsu Tokitsu gulped, and a resolute look crossed his face. (Probably?)

“Lord Ainz, I must protest. I, Shihoutsu Tokitsu, was placed in charge of this domain by one of the Supreme Beings, by Lord Amanomahitotsu himself! I have never and would never do anything to disgrace him!”

“I imagine not.”

The chef looked surprised.

“Even in this brief interaction, I have sensed your dedication to your craft, your devotion to those you call the Supreme Beings. I spoke out of turn, and I retract that statement. You have my apologies.”

Ainz bowed his head.

“Ohhh! Lord Ainz! Please do not act like this! For a Supreme Being to bow his head to one so beneath him! I beg you, raise your magnificent visage at once!”

Ainz slowly did, fixing his eyes on the boar-like chef.

“Shihoutsu Tokitsu, I thank you for accepting my apology. I wish for you to know and understand one truth—I have come to appreciate the sight of everyone here acting as they always do, while enjoying a relaxed discussion of my own. Treat me as you would any other visitor.”

The chef wrestled with that idea for a long minute but eventually came to peace with it.

“As you wish, sir,” he said, nodding.

“Glad to hear it. Someday, I am sure I will find occasion to invite company to Nazarick—visitors of high rank and status. On that occasion, I will assuredly ask you to demonstrate your skills.”

“Yes, my lord! But please do not bow your head to one of my ilk again.”

“My words disparaged you, and my contrition was genuine. But it was not just that—Amanoma had faith in you and placed you in charge of this domain. That apology was meant for him as well.”

Shihoutsu Tokitsu smiled awkwardly at that. He couldn’t argue the point further. An instant later, he was all business again (as far as Ainz could tell).

“In that case, Lord Ainz, I will begin work on the dishes you requested.”

Ainz watched the chef’s retreating back a moment and then addressed the room at large, raising his voice a tad.

“I apologize for the commotion, everyone. Pay us no heed and resume your meals.”

As the chef left, the others came back from the drinks counter. The maids at the other tables resumed their meals, and the atmosphere in general felt marginally less tense. Perhaps Shihoutsu Tokitsu’s dramatic entrance had broken the ice.

The twins and the elves each had their chosen drinks in hand, and Lumière set Ainz’s coffee before him.

The fragrance of the coffee reached him. There was an intriguing hint of something berrylike mingling with the smell.

Yggdrasil had not done tie-in deals with any famous chains, but the game’s data spread was downright ludicrous. Food was a prime example. Any ordinary game would simply have generic “coffee beans” and be done with it, but *Yggdrasil* featured multiple varieties, each granting distinct benefits depending on the grade used.

The coffee beans housed within Nazarick were naturally high-grade, and this coffee was likely exquisite.

I bet expensive coffee just smells like this. I wonder if it tastes of berries, too?

Once again, Ainz regretted not being able to taste anything.

Making sure everyone was seated, he spoke.

“Let us talk as we drink,” he said.

Two of the elves had gone with melon soda, while the third had iced green tea. Taking him at his word, each took a sip—and the melon soda elves blinked furiously, hands clapped over their mouths. Like they were afraid the contents would escape—Ainz took that as a good sign.

“Bubbly! Good!”

“Sweet!”

Those words spilled out, and their glasses were soon empty. At which point Ainz gently suggested, “Would you like to get a refill?”

“Y-yes, I certainly would!”

They both nodded and got up, hurrying back to the drinks table with light footsteps.

“I’m pleased they enjoyed it.”

“Um, yes...” the remaining elf said. She seemed curious about their drinks. She chugged the rest of her tea and got up to join them. Aura and Mare had both picked cola, but they were used to drinking it and didn’t show much of a reaction.

Little of this had gone as planned, but the elves finally seemed to be relaxed. They were no longer acting suspicious of his every move based purely on him being undead.

Sweet things are very effective. Mocchi Mochi always said all women love sweets, and no woman can resist them. It seems those words were true. And here I always assumed they were an excuse for her gluttony.

The other two female members of Ainz Ooal Gown had tilted their heads—not that slimes had heads—at this bold claim but never argued the point. And it had worked wonders on these elves. Based on that evidence, Mocchi Mochi may have spoken the truth. Ainz still had his doubts.

Time we get started. I've run through any number of simulations, but can I get them to voluntarily talk about the elf country?

He recalled what he'd heard when he first met them.

The home of the elves lay in the woodlands to the south. It had no name. Albedo suggested this was because they had no outside trade and no other countries close by. With no need to differentiate their territory from others, they had never needed a name.

It was technically a kingdom and had long been ruled by the same man who was apparently quite strong. Strong how? What classes? They had no idea. The elves had given Aura and Mare baffled looks... as if to ask, how did *they* not know?

The elf country was currently at war with the Theocracy, which had captured and sold their people. They didn't know why the war had started or even when.

This might be because the elf country had no formal educational system. They didn't seem interested in learning more. From what he'd heard of the elves' lives, they had much more important knowledge and techniques to acquire—mostly related to fending off monsters. As a result, they had learned nothing of their homeland's history and felt no particular need to do so.

He'd asked if they'd seen any dark elves at home, and they had not. Aura and Mare were the first time they'd ever seen any. Dark elves must be a minority in the elf country. But they'd never heard of any ill treatment. Given their general lack of knowledge, they might simply be ignorant of it.

And—that was it.

That was all Ainz currently knew.

To avoid raising their suspicions, he'd been forced to leave it at that. But now he was armed with a pretext to dig deeper. The time was ripe.

Gotta make up my mind. Do I say our countries will be breaking diplomatic ground? Or simply say I want to visit the dark elf village so the twins can make some friends?

If he went with the former, the sheer scale of his proposal might cause them to tense up again. The latter would probably make more sense to people of this world, and that might loosen their lips. And ultimately, the latter was Ainz's true motive. It always felt better to be honest. Ainz lied rather a lot, but that didn't mean he enjoyed it. It simply benefited him to do so.

And since it was possible they might learn the truth later, honesty could be the best policy.

That would be easier. But voicing that reason where Aura and Mare can hear... well, I can't imagine how they'd react.

He was afraid they'd get all fired up and feel obligated to make friends. Ainz was a firm believer in making friends through shared interests. Forging friendships to follow orders didn't really qualify.

Ainz remembered his fellow guild members, his *Yggdrasil* friends. Bonds formed through chance encounters and natural meetings.

He wasn't certain if children actually *needed* friends. Ainz—Satoru Suzuki—had never had any, and he never really found himself inconvenienced by it.

So why had he started thinking about the idea? Because Yamaiko had once spoken in favor of cultivating friendships. Mind you, Ulbert had spat back, *Dream talk from a denizen of an entirely different world.*

Ainz didn't know which of them was right. But having friends could hardly be considered a bad thing.

Then let's not say friend out loud and simply say I'd like them to get to know the other dark elves? Leave it up to them if they make friends or not. If they can, then great!

But discrepancies in strength and roles might stand in the way of true friendship.

In *Yggdrasil*, everyone had been equals.

Several of his guildmates' faces floated across his mind, and a shadow fell over him. He soon shook it off, casting aside the memories and the emotions that came with them.

If they had met in real life, where they were far from equal, they likely wouldn't have had anything to do with each other. With that in mind, perhaps the first thing to do was ensure that the twins started out as equal to the dark elves as possible. They could not visit as emissaries from the Nation of Darkness to meet villagers who were a minority in their own country.

That means hiding their true identities however I can... Hmm. Do the fathers of the world all think like this? Did Touch Me? Should I have asked him more about it?

As Ainz dithered about how to broach the subject, the elves returned with new drinks.

All colas.

Oh dear. I still haven't collected my thoughts. I really can't expect to wing these things. But oh well. The twins are with us, so let's start by acting like I'm just asking out of curiosity. If I can't guide the discussion where I want, I can always say, You see..., and bring up my personal motives. Perhaps suggest that we just want to start small, establishing friendly relations with the dark elves.

When they were seated, he spoke quietly.

"I suppose we should begin."

They had all been sipping away with a focus that bordered on diligence, but their hands—or throats—stopped cold.

"We are currently building a country known as the Nation of Darkness. We believe people of all races can live here in harmony. We have humans, dwarves, goblins, orcs, and lizardmen coexisting with us, becoming citizens of our nation. Whether or not elves agree to join us, it is high time we opened diplomatic ties and established trade relations. I'm thinking about paying your country a visit. Can I ask your help with that?"

This was not pure pretext; diplomacy and trade weren't bad things. There was just one

fatal problem.

Ainz himself could never be the envoy.

He simply lacked the ability to meet with foreign diplomats and negotiate terms. Things had gone well with the dwarves, but he could not imagine that success repeating itself. Odds were high the exact opposite would happen.

So if they were to establish relations, he would send someone intelligent in his place. Albedo would be best, but she was extremely busy handling the occupation of the kingdom they had just conquered, and he didn't want to put anything else on her plate for a while.

If he ordered it, she would insist she could handle it, and it was possible she could. But that didn't mean she wasn't pushing herself. For that reason, Ainz felt compelled to look after his subordinates' well-being and mental health, being careful not to overload any of them.

So if the envoys this time could avoid any big-deal propositions and simply focus on making personal connections with the dark elves, then that would suit Ainz just fine.

"Er, um, Lord Ainz Ooal Gown, h-how would we help?"

A very guarded voice. Ainz shrugged.

"I just have a few questions. And please—call me Ainz."

"If it's anything we know," one elf said, her mind made up, "we would be happy to explain. B-but, um... that form of address... I-I'm not sure it would be..."

Aura, Mare, and the maids eavesdropping from a distance all looked disgruntled.

If the elves called him Ainz, they'd undoubtedly provoke cries of "Too familiar!" "Who do you think you are?!" but if they didn't, they knew full well they'd think, *How dare you refuse Lord Ainz's orders!* Everyone here was struggling to decide how the elves should respond.

He had no intention of scolding the eavesdropping maids. They weren't listening out of spite or mere curiosity—he realized that much. They were possessed of a cryptic intensity, competing to be the first to step in if any opportunity to be useful presented

itself.

“...Ah, a shame. But tell me, what is the elf country like? How do you protect yourselves from monsters that deep in the forest?”

They looked taken aback by the question.

“We dwell within the forest, but we live up in the trees. It’s too dangerous to linger at ground level.”

“The druids’ magic transforms the trees into homes.”

“And trees designed for that are also grown with magic. We call them the elf trees.”

To hear them tell it, elven druids had spells that could alter the shapes of the trees at will. They could open hollows within the trunks or form simple suspension bridges across the space between the trees themselves. It was common practice to link dozens of these elf trees together, rising above the forest ground.

These clusters were elven villages.

Transforming these elf trees to make things was the heart of elven culture; it wasn’t just houses and furniture—they made weapons and armor from them, too. They could even harden the wood like iron, making arrows for their hunts.

As far as Ainz knew, no such magic had existed in *Yggdrasil*, and when he asked them to demonstrate, they seemed rather surprised. They’d believed the tree Aura and Mare lived in was made the same way. It looked nothing like the elf trees, but they’d assumed it must be a variant of some sort, a special breed only the twins could manipulate.

And their magic worked only on elf trees—it did nothing to any other kind of tree.

Given the nature of their homes, their main predators were snakes, spiders, and other monsters that had a knack for climbing. They did have guards posted at all hours, but their natural enemies tended to be rather stealthy and claimed their share of victims. On the other hand, less talented climbers were easily repelled and not considered major threats.

The elf capital—the total elf population was not considerable, so this was the only city worthy of the name—was apparently the only settlement located outside the forest, on the plains by a lake shaped like a crescent moon. *Apparently* because the three elves lived in a village that was quite far from the capital, and they knew of it only from stories.

Why was the capital outside the forest? Well, supposedly there were massive aquatic monsters living in the lake, and fear of being consumed by those creatures kept other threats at bay.

This all made sense to Ainz.

Druid magic could easily create water, so life in the treetops would be comfortable enough. The branches atop the elf trees would provide adequate defense against flying monsters and help keep the elves hidden.

Growing up in that environment, it made sense that most elves learned ranger or druid skills. Without those, they would struggle to eke out much of a living.

There's still a lot we don't know about skill acquisition and how the people here gain classes. But with few farmers, the elves likely have more combat-ready citizens than human countries do.

He asked more about their life spans and population.

Their own mortality seemed to be of little interest to them; they had never wondered how long they might live. But the eldest elves in their village were believed to be well over three hundred. None of the three here was sure exactly how old they were. They had no custom of marking their birthdays.

But perhaps because they were guaranteed long lives, there weren't that many elves. They certainly didn't pop out kids as often as humans. But from what they said, Ainz believed they actually had a fairly *high* birth rate.

Yggdrasil elves were said to live a thousand years. They grew rapidly over the first ten years and only started looking old in the last ten, I think? My memory there is fuzzy; I could be wrong. But I swear they had maybe one child every decade and weren't considered fully grown until two hundred. If they were fertile until four hundred, that

would be... twenty children each? This information might come in handy. I'll have to discuss this further with someone more informed.

"Were we to return you to your village, where would we go?"

They looked at one another.

Ah. I might be pushing my luck. That must be considered critical info.

After a long silence, one of them tentatively asked, "Er, um... are we being sent home?"

"Mm?" *That was an odd turn of phrase*, Ainz thought. Then he realized his own error.
"Oh, right. Your village was attacked by the humans."

These three weren't exactly warriors; the village they'd lived in had been raided by the Theocracy, and they'd been taken captive. Being sent back to that village now would only lead to suffering and could hardly be considered safe.

"Well, then not that village. Somewhere you can live in peace. Do you have anywhere in mind? Relatives living in other villages? Or perhaps the capital itself?"

"The... capital..."

"Sorry, we only know the area around our old home."

"We have no idea what would be safe."

They didn't know much about the outside world. And this was hardly unique to them. Citizens in the Kingdom and Empire had been much the same.

People in this world usually died where they were born. Unless given a proper education, at best they might know the nearest city, but anything farther out might as well be a different country entirely.

As he thought about that, the elves asked, "Um, so we will have to leave this place?"

"That was the plan. If we're opening ties with the elf country, keeping you here might damage our reputation. Does that make sense? Until now, we've kept you here due to a lack of options, but that excuse no longer applies if we establish formal relations. But just dropping you into the middle of a war zone would be heartless. That's why I was

asking about safe areas..."

Ainz did not intend to head the diplomatic mission permanently, but returning these three safely might earn some political points in the future.

Sensing they had something to say, he asked, "What?"

"Is there no way for us to stay here?"

"..... Hmm."

His eyes dropped to the drinks in front of them. Had those—? No, that couldn't be the reason.

"...Why?" he asked. "If you don't wish to explain, I won't press the point, but I'm curious."

"Um..."

The leader of the trio glanced at Aura and Mare.

".....Aura, Mare, we're running low on refreshments. Care to get us some more?"

"Huh?"

"Sure thing! Coming right up, Lord Ainz. C'mon, Mare."

Splendid.

Ainz was extremely impressed with Aura's ability to take a hint.

Had he been in her shoes, it likely would have taken him far longer to realize he was being asked to step away for a moment. Or would his experiences in the office have clued him in?

Aura might actually be better at picking up on these social cues than Albedo and Demiurge. He could just see Demiurge grinning faintly and going, *Is that what this is, Lord Ainz?*

They both tend to grossly misread what I intend. I sometimes wonder if they do it on

purpose. Are they doing it on purpose?

"Er, h-huh?" Mare stammered, totally lost. Aura was on her feet and pulling his arm, dragging him away.

Once they were safely removed, he asked, "Now can you answer?"

"Y-yes."

One eye measuring the distance to the twins, the elves spoke softly. Dark elves had better hearing than humans, and if they were masters of the ranger class like Aura, their ears were even better. These elves lowered their voices, fully aware of that, but it was still highly likely Aura could hear every word.

"Once we got used to life here, it felt hard to go back to our old lives. Lady Aura and Lord Mare's home is... wonderful."

"Oh?"

He'd intended to keep his voice low to match theirs, but the surprise got the better of him.

At first, he mistook it for a joke—but they were all nodding intently. They were in full agreement and meant every word.

First, the food was far better, they explained. The elves had grown up on fruit, meat, and vegetables, mostly fried or boiled. No one had really put more effort into it.

Now that they were used to Nazarick cuisine, they were not at all certain they could go back to such simple fare. Their favorite food was now pizza.

Ah. Food as an instrument of diplomacy. You can eat like this every day might be a surprisingly effective tactic. Like with the dwarves!

That wasn't all they had to say.

It was much safer here. The villages made with magic were high up and relatively safe, but there was still not a year that passed without someone being killed by monsters. In Nazarick, they could sleep soundly at night without anyone needing to keep watch.

Ainz had thoughts on that, but none of this sounded like anything they couldn't have admitted with Aura and Mare here. There must be more to it. As soon as that thought crossed his mind, one elf said, "And serving the two of them is pure bliss."

"Oh."

Ainz nodded. It all added up.

The twins were fellow elves, children, and cute. Perhaps some would hesitate to serve a child, but Aura's and Mare's charm had presumably won out.

If someone asked Ainz which of the floor guardians he'd most like to serve, he'd have picked the twins, too. Well, if someone *actually* asked him that question, he'd diplomatically say, *All my guardians are magnificent. I couldn't possibly choose.* But deep down, it had to be Aura and Mare. Maybe Cocytus in third. He didn't really want to serve the others.

But this still didn't seem like anything they couldn't have said with them present. He thought there must be more to it, but the elves seemed to have run out of reasons.

I don't really get it. Why not just say this with them here? Did they think they'd be scolded for proposing this? No matter.

"Very well. Then you may continue working in Nazarick."

Refusing their wishes seemed unnecessary.

All three elves looked delighted. It didn't appear as if their flattery was a performance.

"If we're formally employing you, we'll have to discuss wages and benefits in detail. I'll have someone handle that later."

It didn't seem like they understood what that meant, but he deemed this essential.

Once Nazarick established friendly ties with the elf country's dark elves, the treatment of these three could make all the difference. He had freed them from slavery and could argue their labor up until this point was fair recompense for looking after them all this time. But that only went so far. Working without compensation could hardly be considered fair labor practice. He didn't want to give any potential visiting dark elves a poor impression of Nazarick's employment standards.

And these three were an ideal opportunity to establish a precedent for giving Nazarick employees excellent compensation and world-class benefits.

Ainz glanced at the maids around them.

After the elves lowered their voices, their neighbors could no longer overhear the conversation. The maids were pretending to rest their heads on their hands but were actually cupping their ears, trying to catch anything being said.

Extremely transparent.

It spoke to their dedication, and Ainz couldn't bring himself to chide them for it. But he did wish they'd hide it a little better.

We'll have to get these elves under contract quickly. I wonder if we can extend their benefits package to the regular maids while we're at it?

Maybe, but if he forced the matter and ignored the maids' desire to work harder, it might just earn their ire. Also, if they viewed the elves as the root cause of their increased time off, they might turn their displeasure on them. He doubted they'd form an angry mob or anything, but if he was serious about including the maids on those same standards, he'd have to be careful about his approach.

"...The status of your employment and residence aside, I would appreciate your assistance with the elf country. If possible, I'd like you to serve as guides. Naturally, Aura and Mare will be accompanying us. But we know little about elf etiquette, so I thought it might help to have you as intermediaries."

They looked at one another and shook their heads.

"Sorry, we don't think we'd be much use as guides. And... we've been to the next village over, but that doesn't mean we learned any etiquette."

"Oh..."

"Sorry!"

"No need to bow your heads."

Venturing into uncharted territory without a guide was far more difficult, but it was

unclear if these elves would actually be of any use. If they'd wind up improvising anyway, then there was no need to force them to come along. And there was a high chance they'd wind up slowing them down.

Ainz turned and beckoned to Lumièlle. When she leaned in, he said, "A little more," and lifted his cup. Naturally, it was as full as it had ever been. Just to be very clear, he glanced toward the twins.

He thought this might be a bit cryptic, but she understood right away and said, "Pardon me." She left the table.

"So—to elves like you, what *are* dark elves?"

"Wonderful people."

An instant response, all speaking on top of one another. Ainz frowned.

If they were held in high regard, that was pleasing, but he felt this answer was motivated by something else.

And he soon realized what.

Aura and Mare.

"No, I'm asking how the elven race regards the dark elf race."

"They're wonderful people."

"That's not—"

He wasn't getting anywhere. With everything the twins had done for them, they could hardly answer, *They're an inferior species*, or anything along those lines. It would be alarming if they did.

"Like I said earlier, I'm planning on establishing diplomatic ties with the elf country. And those two will likely be in charge of that effort. That's why I need to know how a typical elf would respond to the sight of a dark elf. If dark elves are normally looked down upon in elven society, making those two our envoys might not be the wisest decision. For that reason, I'd like to know the unvarnished truth."

They looked at one another.

"Honestly, there were no dark elves in our village, so we never met any until we came here. We had no real opinions on them. At best, I'd once heard a group of dark elves had come wandering into the northern reaches of the country."

"The stories were all secondhand, so I mostly thought, *Oh, they really do have brown skin.*"

"I never heard anyone in the village say anything bad about the dark elves, but... I can only speak for our village."

This did not seem like they were only saying what he wanted to hear or distorting the truth. It seemed like young—if that was the right expression—elves did not have any prejudices against dark elves.

They might be a minority, but odds were high dark elves were not a persecuted one. Perhaps this was because the elves had a clear exterior enemy—the Theocracy—and had no time to waste on internal conflict. Or perhaps life in the forest was simply that harsh.

"...And undead?"

"Corruptors of the forest."

"Foul beings."

"But we've almost never seen any."

"Mm, I figured."

No hesitation there.

He was Aura and Mare's boss but got no respect. Of course, he kept that thought to himself. He *had* asked for the whole truth and nothing but the truth... He just hadn't expected it to be *this* unvarnished. These girls might be the type who take it at face value when the boss says *speak freely* and wind up transferred to a dead-end post.

But this made it extra clear that Ainz absolutely could not serve as the envoy. Perhaps that worked in his favor. He could argue that the situation prevented him from taking

the lead. Certainly better than admitting he simply wasn't up to the task.

Or should they take their time with it, following formal procedures? Send a diplomat, slowly establish normal relations, et cetera?

But we don't have any diplomats. Not having anyone we can trust on our human staff is a weakness. Although there's always a chance I'm simply unaware of them. Perhaps I could speak to Albedo, suggest sending adventurers? No, we're not yet at the point where we could have them speak for the Nation. That's my assumption, so it could be wrong, but...

Maybe Albedo would say the adventurers would suffice.

But do we have that kind of time?

The elf country was fighting the Theocracy, and the incursion seemed quite serious. Even before these elves had been captured, things looked rather dire. The elf country might be on the verge of complete collapse.

The collapse of the elf country was not necessarily bad for Ainz. Extending a helping hand was more effective under those circumstances. But that didn't mean he should wait for it to happen.

He couldn't afford to wait and see. Waiting meant that someone who *might* become Aura's or Mare's friend could perish in the meanwhile. Especially given that dark elves were a minority—their lives were in short supply.

I could send the two of them ahead—Wait, no, I can't do that. Just the two of them in unknown territory is too risky. I know they're level-100 NPCs, not helpless children, but I'd like them to focus on making friends and not worry themselves about the diplomatic angle. In which case, I should probably accompany them.

At the moment, he had no intention of intervening in the elf/Theocracy war or of saving the elf country. He didn't want to be the sole reason why the Nation of Darkness would suddenly be thrust into open conflict with the Theocracy.

He would like to know Albedo's and Demiurge's thoughts on the matter, but if he tried to pick their brains, they might discover that he had absolutely nothing going on in his. Worse, if the conversation went wrong, they might end up giving priority to his own dim-witted opinions, leaving Nazarick worse off for it.

Perhaps I should go to the elf country and warn the dark elves to evacuate their homes. In which case... I don't really need to bring anyone but the twins.

If he took anyone, it would not be an army but guards with high stealth capabilities, like the Hanzos.

Just as he had on his trip to the dwarven realms.

"I see..." he said, looking the elves over. They served the role the lizardmen had.

"Wh-what?"

"Oh, nothing. Talking to myself."

What if he did take one of them with him? Naturally, leaving the other two here. Having hostages would ensure no one would thoughtlessly act against him.

Not a bad plan.

Even if these girls realized that's what they were, they could insist that wasn't the intent.

Ainz glanced at the twins—a signal they could come back. Aura, Mare, and Lumière rejoined them at the table.

"Oh, what gifts would be good to bring your people? Gold and silver? Jewels?"

"We use no metals in the village, so I don't know if that..."

"Our village would have been happiest with food. Or medical herbs that are hard to obtain. Minor injuries can be healed with magic, but poison and illness require a highly skilled druid. Medicines are precious."

"Clothes are also made from the elf trees using magic."

"Those are your homes, your arrows, *and* your clothes... elven druid spells can do almost anything. Mare, yours aren't that versatile, are they?"

"Mm? Oh, n-no. I don't know that magic."

These strange druid spells must be a product of elven evolution. Ainz wanted to acquire those techniques if possible, but it was likely no one in Nazarick could learn them. In which case, it was best to bring the residents of this world under his control and have them all bow to Nazarick. That could be decisive if they found themselves facing another guild.

No...

We have to assume that's already happened. That other guilds have already arrived here. I'll have to speak to Albedo about this and rework our national strategy.

If Ainz had thought of it, then surely other players would have as well. Only a fool assumed they were unique.

Perhaps opening a Gate in the elven village and ferrying in food would be a good way to demonstrate that the Nation of Darkness had friendly intent. He remembered that being effective with the dwarves.

Recalling what had worked then might help him plan this expedition.

At the time, I just wanted to turn tail and run...

“First, we’ll locate this moon-shaped lake, gather information in the elf capital, and use that to reach the dark elf village.”

“We’re going there?” Aura said. She seemed like she had further thoughts on the matter but didn’t want to be more specific in front of these elves.

Ainz, meanwhile, couldn’t admit his goal was really to have them make friends. He didn’t want that to become an *order*. He pretended not to notice her unspoken question.

“That’s the plan. And I’ll need your help.”

The twins nodded eagerly.

What next? Who do I have to convince? This won’t be as easy as the dwarves.

He wasn’t sure he could overcome the next obstacle. But he would have to figure something out. This would form the basis for implementing a paid-vacation system in

Nazarick.

With perfect timing—perhaps they'd been waiting for a lull in the conversation—the food arrived.

"Please dig in," Ainz said, and the elves' eyes gleamed. They were clearly savoring every bite.

3

How did one prepare to tackle an obstacle?

There were any number of means, often tailored to the specific obstacle in question, but in this case, Ainz opted for numbers and territorial advantage.

He had Aura and Mare stand on either side of the throne in the reception room the guardians had made for him. For the first time in a while, he was holding the real Staff of Ainz Ooal Gown.

The goal was to present himself as the absolute ruler of Nazarick, the guild master.

But despite these preparations, he might still fail to defeat his adversary. She was the last boss. Worse than the Devourer of the Nine Worlds.

An urge to swallow spit he didn't have struck him deeply.

He'd rehearsed this countless times in his head. Imagining how she would react and concocting flawless answers. Yet—Ainz was but a man. His thoughts could not even reach the realms she walked in.

In other words—

I just have to get lucky!

He was pinning his hopes on his ad-libbing skills and simply hoping that his future self would make this work.

Lumièlle was on standby at the door, and she indicated the greatest obstacle had finally arrived.

"Show her in."

"Certainly, Lord Ainz."

She needed no introduction.

It was none other than the captain of the floor guardians herself—Albedo.

When she saw Ainz, her smile vanished, and her demeanor grew grave.

"I apologize for keeping you waiting," she intoned, bowing low.

"Raise your head," he said. "Do not concern yourself with that, Albedo. I was informed your arrival would be delayed, so you are simply on time."

When he'd sent Albedo a Message, she'd been busy in the Ice Prison and not dressed for an audience with him. She'd requested time to make herself presentable.

Ainz saw no reason to refuse this and had set the meeting for a full thirty minutes after the time she'd requested, ordering her to meet him here. Albedo had appeared ten minutes before the appointed hour. Was it her personality, or was it the iron rule of business dealings?

Albedo raised her head and took a knee before the throne.

He got right to the point.

"Albedo, I am taking a paid vacation."

He could make any number of excuses for this. But when he'd done that in the past, it had only led the conversation astray. In which case, it was best to state his goal plainly. And Demiurge wasn't here. Less chance of things getting wildly out of hand.

Albedo looked up at him, her brows briefly twitching. Her eyes glanced left and right, observing Aura's and Mare's reactions.

Ainz braced himself for her response.

"Nazarick included, everything in the Nation of Darkness belongs to you, Lord Ainz," Albedo said, deadly serious.

Hng?

He didn't have any idea what she was implying.

No clue whatsoever.

Why on earth would she say that?

What leap in logic, what thought process, what conclusions had led her to these words?

More importantly, how should he respond to them?

Two answers sprang to mind.

First: *The hell you say?* Second: *That's right!*

Naturally, he intended to make both of these sound more regal.

Ainz fired up his hypothetical synapses, trying to burn out the circuits. Time was of the essence. Albedo had put the ball in his court, and he had to return it soon.

“...You may have misunderstood me, Albedo. That is not my point.”

An honest response. Had pretending to understand ever worked in his favor?

Oh yes, once.

As a result, he was revered as the absolute ruler of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown.

At the cost of Satoru Suzuki's heart.

A light bulb went off.

“I—I beg your pardon, Lord Ainz.”

She bowed her head.

“I am not angry. There is no need to bow.”

Only complete scumbags would enjoy forcing innocent people to lower their heads.

"The phrase I used seems to have misled you."

Nazarick had neither a payroll system nor a formal process for taking time off. It gave employees no rights at all. So the phrase *paid vacation* must have sounded like some sort of metaphor. The blame here lay on Ainz's failure to implement systems benefiting his workers. Naturally, part of Ainz insisted he had allowed this situation to continue only because the NPCs themselves had stood in his way, desiring nothing but constant labor.

Based on Satoru Suzuki's own experiences, no matter how bad the working conditions were, they could be tolerated as long as the people you worked with were pleasant. Meanwhile, even under ideal conditions, if you couldn't stand your coworkers, you wouldn't last long.

In that sense, Nazarick denizens were all fabulous, and perhaps that was what kept things running smoothly.

"My mistake. Forgive me."

Ainz bowed his head.

"L-Lord Ainz! Please raise your head!" Albedo protested. He did.

"Now that we have both bowed our heads, I hope all is forgiven."

"There was nothing to—"

"If I cannot bow my head to you, then we are done for. That would no longer be me."

Albedo gasped, eyes going wide, then bowed low once more.

He caught movement on either side of him as well. Perhaps they were surprised by Albedo's reaction.

Before he could ask what this was for, Albedo looked up.

"By *paid vacation*, you mean you plan to take those two somewhere?"

That was more like it.

Leaping from those words to travel plans was downright terrifying. If Ainz had been in Albedo's position, he would have asked, *If the twins are with you, will you be relaxing on the sixth floor?*

"I plan to take them to the elf country supposedly located south of here."

"The elf country..." Albedo thought about this a moment, then said, "I see."

He wasn't sure what she thought she saw.

Perhaps she had been considering a diplomatic mission herself. He would have to be sure.

"...Let's not leap to conclusions. I am not intending to conduct any diplomacy. Just taking a look around."

"Understood."

That was easy. He'd expected her to have more to say.

That was actually alarming in its own way. It felt like there was a perception gap occurring, and that could have fatal consequences.

"...So I shall be taking a paid vacation and using it to tour the elf country with the twins. If anything urgent comes up, I will be available via Message and can come right back. Nothing else is going on here. I have no further plans. I mean that. You have my word."

"Understood. Will you be leaving right away?"

"Uh, yes, in fact." He hadn't actually gotten that far, but given the Theocracy's invasion, sooner was better. "That is the plan, but Aura and Mare will need to prepare."

"It should not take them long. Lord Ainz. If you wish to leave now, it is their duty to be ready on the spot."

This didn't sound like a good thing to him, but the twins were both nodding.

"Hmm."

If they said they were ready, perhaps he shouldn't argue the point. Still...

"One thing I'd like to verify. Not just with Albedo but with you two as well, Aura and Mare. Answer me this. The Great Tomb of Nazarick has founded the Nation of Darkness. The Empire has become a vassal state, the subhumans in the wilderness have come under our rule, and just recently we annihilated the Re-Estize Kingdom. Our domains have expanded, as has the size of our bureaucracy. And this leaves me concerned. Have we trained the personnel adequately to compensate for that growth?"

Would a few people taking a vacation cause a work stoppage?

Aura and Mare were in leadership roles. They were for all intents and purposes critical staff. Rank-and-file workers might easily fill in for one another, but the top positions were not so easily subbed out. And yet—if them taking time off was all it took to grind things to a halt, they were in real trouble as an organization.

That would require he put the kibosh on this plan, or at least make some alterations.

"That is my concern here. If we are lacking, then we must take drastic measures to correct it."

"I do not believe there will be an issue. If anything does come up, Demiurge and myself are here. If Pandora's Actor is available to assist us, no problem is insurmountable."

"I see. That's excellent news, Albedo. You addressed my concerns before I raised them up. That is why you are Nazarick's brightest mind and captain of the guardians. Work befitting that title. Most magnificent. I am suitably impressed."

It was every bit of praise he could muster.

Unlike Ainz, she was properly tending their operations. How could he not shower her in praise?"

"I thank you," she said, bowing low. But when she stood up, her cheeks looked rather stiff.

Another question had suddenly occurred to him, so he asked, "This time I will be bringing Aura and Mare, but would our operations suffer if you or Demiurge took a vacation?"

That made her hesitate.

"I have faith that in our absence, the others would step up to fill the gaps, working at the level you have come to expect, Lord Ainz."

"Hmm. Albedo—faith is not enough. What I ask is whether we know for certain it can be done. I realize this is difficult, perhaps painful, for you to voice doubts about the capabilities of the floor guardians, about your own colleagues. But I asked that you determine if they are truly up to the task after taking emotion out of the equation, leaving only the truth behind. If they are not capable, then when time allows for it, we must train them to compensate for their shortcomings and take whatever time is necessary to ensure the stability of our operations. Albedo—I'm sure these concerns have long since crossed your mind—"

"Er, um, Lord Ainz... I hate to interrupt. Um, sorry."

"What is it, Mare?"

"Well, um. S-sorry again. I really don't know if I can do amazing things like Albedo does."

There was a brief silence; then Albedo's voice echoed through the room.

"Is that *all*?"

What?

Ainz saw nothing in Mare's statement that would draw Albedo's wrath. To his mind, this had simply been a confirmation of fact.

"Er, uh... yes?"

"Mare!"

Albedo's voice cracked like a whip, and his shoulders quivered. Her face twisted, her fury palpable.

Before Ainz could stop her, she spat, "You are a *floor guardian*, yet you cannot do the work a Supreme Being requires?!"

"Albedo! It is nothing to shout about. What is wrong with admitting to what one cannot do? Claiming one *can* do what they cannot—that is a far graver problem."

"If I may be so bold!"

Her voice was still raised, despite his warning. But it was no longer directed at Mare, so Ainz allowed it.

"It is not the accurate assessment of his current capabilities I am objecting to. My concern is that he offered no suggestions on how he could acquire the skills he is lacking! If a Supreme Being wants a job done, no floor guardian is allowed to shrug, say they can't, and consider the matter settled."

Urgh. She had a point.

He couldn't find anything wrong with her argument. From that perspective, Mare's statement *was* a failure.

"Lord Ainz, I believe Albedo's position is correct. Mare should retract his statement."

Aura's voice was awfully cold. With his own sister turned against him, Mare let out a series of whimpers.

"As a floor guardian—"

"Enough!"

His roar stopped Albedo from further reprimands. Naturally, this was a performance, and he was not actually angry with her. His emotions required no artificial suppression.

As he yelled, he switched on an aura. This was just a visual effect, used to forcibly draw attention, not to inflict any debuffs. Naturally Albedo, Aura, Mare, and even Lumière were all carrying psychic nullification items; he was well aware it would have no negative impact on them.

He wasn't sure what Albedo had planned to say next. Perhaps she had meant to gently guide Mare to the right answer. But if there was any chance of developing a lasting rift between them, Ainz had to step in.

“...Mare, what Albedo said does make sense. If you believe you can’t do something, offering a solution is always a good idea.”

“I-I’m sorry.”

“That said, Albedo, if a subordinate thinks they’re not up to a task but are assigned to it anyway, is that not a problem with management?”

“...It could very well be.”

“I believe there were failings on both sides here. Albedo, I *do* appreciate your dedication. But everyone makes mistakes. To ensure that mistakes are not repeated—or worse, covered up—a first offense should be gently admonished.”

Fact of the matter was, Albedo possessed an excess of both loyalty and ability, and that combination made her very strict with everyone else. Ainz generally rejected these proposals, so nothing too dire had come of it. But if he relinquished all authority to her, there was a very real possibility it would culminate in a purge.

No, I’m probably worrying about nothing. Still...

“Yes, Lord Ainz. I may have lost my temper there. Forgive me, Mare.”

“Er, uh, oh, no, I think what you said was right, Albedo. I was in the wrong. I apologize.”

Both bowed—Mare went down a full ninety degrees—and the matter appeared settled.

“...So where was I? Oh, right. I’ll be taking you two on a paid vacation to the elf country, so while we’re away, make sure your work is covered. Let’s say... finish up and transfer your work over the next three days. If possible, rather than pass it to another floor guardian, have your own subordinates handle things. If that proves too demanding...”

They had only just felled the Re-Estize Kingdom, so Albedo had far too much on her plate.

“...Then consult with Pandora’s Actor. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir!” they both said.

"Who will be your retinue?" Albedo asked. "The Hanzos?"

Not a bad idea. The Hanzos had proven astonishingly useful. Honestly, if they had the money and data to spare, he'd gladly summon more.

They'd used up all the Hanzo data, but the library still had data on other ninja monsters. They could make use of that, but—

But I don't want to use too much of what we have stored in the Treasury, and I'll have to hold off until my gold reserves recover. Or should strengthening Nazarick be our top priority? I'll think about it on the way to the elf country. Ugh, I need more money! Enough that I don't have to watch the bottom line. Is there anyone out there sitting on a vast store of gold? Someone who can't complain if we just swipe it from them...?

"..Lord Ainz?"

"Mm? Oh, my apologies. I got lost in thought there. My retinue..."

He was about to say the Hanzos would be fine but then stopped himself. Good businessmen knew when to take a hint, but he had never really been anything more than average. The dice had simply rolled in his favor here, and his instincts told him not to accept that suggestion.

There'd been a hint of something off in Albedo's tone of voice, in the corner of her eye.

"...I wasn't planning on taking the Hanzos. Did you need them for something?"

"Oh, no. If you're not taking them, far be it from me to object to your decisions..." She hedged her words for a moment, trying to gauge his response. "They say the Hanzos have your favor, Lord Ainz. There are all manner of denizens who wish to serve you, and I thought this might be an excellent opportunity to grant others a turn."

When she saw him thinking this over, she hastily summed it up.

"Just bear in mind that there are others eager for a shot at impressing you."

He nodded sagely, but inside, he was clutching his head.

Ainz—or Satoru Suzuki—was but a humble man. It had never even occurred to him that this might be a whole thing.

He *did* favor the Hanzos. But it would never do for other subordinates to start resenting that.

Favoritism was a given in any company. It was only normal to promote people you liked, even if their abilities were not quite all there. But if this started souring coworker relationships, then it had to be addressed.

He would have to fix this. Ainz had just been thinking that the staff harmony was the only thing that made Nazarick's working conditions tolerable.

At the very least, he could not afford to bring the Hanzos this time.

"I'll decide who to bring later— No, send word around now. Whoever I end up choosing, make it clear that they must be ready in case I do."

He grinned, but that mirth didn't go beyond the surface.

"Brilliant suggestion, Lord Ainz," Albedo said, bowing her head. "I'll immediately contact everyone within the Great Tomb of Nazarick."

"Mm, make it so."

Ainz got to his feet and left the room, accompanied by Lumière alone. Letting out a sigh like a businessman at the end of a long, hard day.

•

When the door closed, Albedo straightened up. The twins had, too, and their eyes met.

"Um, Albedo, can I ask you something?"

"What?"

Aura got to her feet. "Lord Ainz said we were going to the elf country for a paid vacation... but what's he actually after? It's not just to relax and have fun, right?"

"I hardly think so."

"Oh? Th-then what?"

Ainz Ooal Gown was the absolute ruler of Nazarick, a brilliant leader whose every action contained multitudes.

They had to assume he was up to at least three things at all times.

Being king was far from a frivolous position. You didn't just cast it aside like one might throw off a winter coat. He might call it a vacation, but even if they told other countries as much—to them, he was still there as the king of the Nation of Darkness. His every gesture would convey the will of his country. Even the dumbest man would know that.

So this vacation to the elf country must mean something else, must disguise another purpose.

"So what is Lord Ainz's real goal?"

"Like he said, I suspect the organizational reforms are a part of it, but the information he'll be gathering will be far more critical," Albedo said. "Demiurge would be able to expand on this more than I can, but... we can assume that the Theocracy is waging an extensive campaign against the elf country right now."

"Th-the Theocracy?"

Everyone in Nazarick had been briefed on them by now. They could omit the basics in casual conversation.

"Yes. They view us as a potential enemy, and with us preoccupied with the conquered kingdom, they'll be in a rush to wrap up their ongoing war with the elves."

"Because they don't want to be in two wars at once?"

"Exactly. The Nation of Darkness and the Theocracy are not yet overtly hostile to each other, but they won't want their forces split between their northern and southern borders. Odds are very high that they'll commit to a large-scale engagement to decisively end their conflict with the elves. Reconciliation is likely off the table, but—well, there's always a possibility."

Albedo didn't care if the Theocracy wiped out the elves or not. If they enslaved the elves, the Nation could use that as a casus belli and claim they were attacking to liberate them. It was yet another argument they could use in their case against the Theocracy. If anything, that would be ideal. But it seemed their master had other

thoughts on the matter. And he was likely going to gather more information to inform his next move.

Perhaps Demiurge would be able to say for sure.

Albedo had the advantage on domestic issues but ceded expertise on military issues to him. She was ashamed to have missed something she should have picked up on, but more than that, she wondered why Demiurge had not acted himself.

Is he acting without telling us? If he secretly gathered information on the elves and didn't send it our way, he might be plotting something. I doubt that, but...

Demiurge was often away from Nazarick, busying himself with one project or another, and had much more autonomy than the other guardians. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say the other guardians were disinclined to fully exercise the autonomy they had. The information Demiurge gleaned and actions he took were reported to his master after the fact, in writing—in considerable detail, which made going through them something of a chore. Thus, Albedo was kept abreast of his operations. In theory, she was well aware of everything he'd been up to, and this had not included anything elf-adjacent.

Given Demiurge's personality, he was unlikely to keep secrets. It was much more likely he simply hadn't gotten around to the elves yet.

But given her own actions, Albedo couldn't rule it out entirely.

Perhaps she could go see Demiurge the moment she left—or summon him to her. This was not a topic to broach in his domain. But if they spoke with her minions around, Demiurge might figure out what *she* was after.

But if he brings his demons with him— No, would he do something so drastic? Does he suspect me? I haven't made my move yet, so—

“A-are we going to fight the Theocracy?”

“Mm? Oh, possibly. I couldn't begin to predict that far ahead. Perhaps Lord Ainz is uncertain himself, which is why he's insisting on calling it a vacation.”

Mare's question pulled Albedo from her reverie. She'd been deep in thought, but neither seemed to think that odd. For the moment, she put Demiurge out of her mind.

Her master might think he was acting not as the ruler of Nazarick but as an undead on holiday. Perhaps hoping that if something went wrong, Nazarick would not suffer for it.

“Maybe there are elements in play even Lord Ainz himself cannot decipher. And for that reason, he’s decided to detach himself from Nazarick for the time being.”

“No way!”

“Whaaat? L-Lord Ainz doesn’t know something?”

They looked extremely surprised and more than a little dubious.

Their master’s ingenuity predicted all things and controlled their every outcome. They’d seen innocuous-seeming gestures pay huge dividends any number of times. As far as they could tell, he was acting with an eye on the future a thousand years from now.

Even suggesting that he might err— Well, it was only natural they’d think Albedo must be wrong.

“So you can’t figure out what he’s up to, either?” Aura said, folding her arms behind her head.

Albedo winced at that. “Even I cannot plumb Lord Ainz’s deepest thoughts. That much has long been clear to me. Honestly, I have no idea what motivated him to use the phrase *paid vacation*. But bear in mind that going to the elf country may well lead to conflict with the Theocracy.”

Both twins nodded gravely.

“Er, um, should we not bring our own underlings?”

“Other than anyone Lord Ainz personally picks, you mean?”

Albedo considered this. Part of her agreed bringing anyone not personally selected would be acting out of turn. But there was also a chance he’d be delighted they’d acted of their own volition.

“If Lord Ainz desires a small, select unit... No, wait.” Albedo thought harder. “Each of

you select two security details, one for a small team and one for a larger expedition. I'll speak to Demiurge about Lord Ainz's likely purpose and follow up with you afterward."

Lord Ainz seemed very concerned about loss of organizational efficiency within Nazarick. Is that related to his reasoning here?

When she'd attempted to reassure him, he'd responded with sarcastic-sounding praise. Albedo had likely not understood his concern and failed to secure his trust.

He was very worried...

They had added a mind as brilliant as Albedo and Demiurge, but was that not enough? Or—?

When the twins nodded, Albedo concluded, "Aura, Mare, who Lord Ainz chooses may give us a hint as to his purpose here. I suspect this will be your toughest assignment yet. Be prepared for anything, never let your guards down, and keep your wits about you."

The twins responded with enthusiasm.

Given their combat abilities, she felt certain they could keep their master safe—but caution never hurt.

She would have to speak to Demiurge and be ready to bring the combined might of Nazarick to bear if the situation called for it.

Even if that delays our search for the kingdom's survivors, it's better to be prepared.

Prioritizing the tasks ahead in her mind, she and the other two guardians left the room.



CHAPTER 2

SIGHTSEEING, NAZARICK-STYLE

1

The elf country lay in the Eivasha Woodlands. This forest had no particularly perilous reaches; there were certain sections filled with many dangerous monsters, or small subhuman settlements, and the terrain itself made it easy to get lost. Yet, there were no buildings worth calling *fortresses* or landforms too steep for humans to pass. If progress was halted, there was only one cause.

Someone had stopped them.

Schuen, subleader of the Firestorm Scripture, was hiding behind the scattered forest trees, peering at the view ahead.

There sat an elf child. She looked to be all of eight, but elves were generally smaller than humans, which made them seem younger.

There was a little chair placed on a mound of dirt, and she was perched on that, holding a bow that dwarfed her tiny frame. A quiver sat behind the chair, the shafts of several arrows visible within.

The quiver was not that large, and he could count the arrows within on the fingers of both hands. But reports indicated no matter how many arrows she unleashed, the quiver never ran empty. Clearly a magic item.

There was no one else around.

This girl was all by herself.

A lone child.

And that was *terrifying*.

A single hero could turn the tide of war. They were as valuable as ten thousand men. This girl had already robbed nearly a thousand Theocracy soldiers of their lives.

The result was that forty thousand troops were pinned down by a single little girl.

Standard strategy dictated that if you couldn't break through the enemy's forces, you should go around. There was no pressing need to use this path, and while the forest itself was a constant impediment, there were few places that could not be circumvented.

Sadly, they were not up against *forces* but a single foe. When the enemy acted as a group, it was easy to detect their movements. But this girl was not only a deadly shot, she was nimble as anything they had ever seen, and if they lost sight of her, it would be extremely difficult to locate her again. A one-girl army, undetectable in the darkness of the vast forest—that meant endless guerrilla attacks and the collapse of morale among the frontline troops.

They could split the troops, dedicating some to keeping her busy while the main force pushed ahead. Not the worst idea, if you ignored the utter stupidity of splitting your forces deep in enemy territory.

Arguably, they had a golden opportunity before them, since the enemy camp—if a chair qualified as a camp—was in plain sight. The army's leaders had decided it was worth some small sacrifices to try and eliminate her while they knew where she was.

Fight heroes with heroes. This was hardly a problem that could be solved by quantity alone.

But the Theocracy forces here did not have any heroes in tow. Instead, they had the Firestorm Scripture.

They didn't have a hero in their ranks, either—they had once, but he'd transferred to the Black Scripture. That group generally snapped up any Theocracy citizens who'd stepped into the domain of the heroes.

Schuen, sadly, had not reached that level.

And yet, the Firestorm Scripture had been sent here, in the hopes that their members working together could fell the hero.

This was true enough.

Schuen's team made hero-slaying possible.

But there was a big difference between someone who'd just arrived in that realm and

someone about to burst out the other side. They had a shot at besting the former and none against the latter. That was why Schuen was making careful observations.

In his time, he'd seen everything from the rank and file, to good soldiers, elite warriors, heroes, and those who lay beyond. He had the experience to back his knowledge. He had to take the measure of this elf girl and minimize the casualties to his unit. They may not be in the Black Scripture's league, but the members of the Firestorm Scripture were still the best of the best—as was everyone in any of the six scriptures. Their lives were too valuable to waste.

And depending on the outcome of this analysis, they had the option of sacrificing more rank and file to pin her down while they waited for the Black Scripture to arrive.

Schuen let out a long, quiet breath.

He was behind a tree, using both Invisibility and Silence. (Ordinarily, arcane casters didn't have access to Silence, but their research had made it possible.) Even with both spells concealing him, each breath he took further frayed his nerves.

He wanted to wipe the cold sweat from his brow, but when any movement could mean death, he didn't dare. Schuen was an accomplished arcane caster, but his non-magical stealth abilities were barely above those of an average human, and no effort could be spared.

The elf girl was likely some sort of archer or ranger class. If the latter, her senses would be extremely honed, and she might detect him despite the spells. She might not work out *exactly* where he was, but an area attack—they'd confirmed she had one—would easily flush him out.

Even if she was a hero, it was unlikely that she could slay Schuen in a single strike. Regardless, he was not confident he could get away from her injured.

He was less scared of dying than he was of failing to bring home the information he'd gleaned. That would make his death meaningless.

Still, what a creepy kid.

Her expression had not changed since he started watching her. Like a mask of gloom.

But Schuen knew all too well this was no doll. She still lived.

How long had he been watching?

His target moved at last.

Schuen's heart leaped in his chest. His initial fear was that she was aiming at him.

Her gaze darted elsewhere, but that was little comfort. A truly skilled warrior could easily use their gaze to disguise their true intention. Schuen knew of martial arts that did just that.

Then, hearing enhanced by the second-tier spell Elephant Ear, he caught the sounds of multiple footsteps approaching from the rear. The girl must have heard them first.

These were Theocracy soldiers—his comrades in arms.

Schuen felt a pang of guilt. He knew full well why they'd been sent in.

He did not offer them a warning. That was not his role here.

He had one job—to not miss a single detail.

You could determine your target's skills—their true strength level—only when you saw them fight. Sacrifices were necessary. Command had been true to their word and sent these soldiers in service of a greater cause.

His countrymen would give their lives here. Careful his movement did not give him away, he turned, the second-tier spell Hawk Eye tracking the movement of her arrow.

She'd released a single shaft, and he watched it snake through the trees—before it split in midair, becoming dozens.

The missiles rained down upon the earth.

She had not taken careful aim. Even if the sound alone had been enough to locate her targets with any precision, this was a dense forest. The trees blocked the way, and she could not shoot anyone directly. If this was a spell like Fireball, it would simply burn through all obstructions. Her approach had a similar effect—a skill to thread the arrow through the trees and an art to multiply the projectiles once through.

Schuen's enhanced hearing picked up the sounds of soldiers screaming. It did not

sound as if any had escaped injury.

Screams? They still live?

They were beyond his sight, but judging from the sounds, the soldiers were confused and scared. None of them knew where the arrows had come from, and they were scattering in all directions, none willing to put up a fight.

This wasn't a failure. It was the best possible choice of action. The more directions they fled, the more of them were likely to escape the killing zone.

The girl loosed another arrow.

Once more, it wove a path around all the trees, racing toward its targets, and splitting in the air above them.

He heard the arrows raining down and the soldiers' screams cutting out. There were no more footsteps in the dirt.

Their deaths had given him a critical piece of intel.

Ordinary soldiers had taken two hits to kill. Certainly, skills—or martial arts—that scattered an attack's power typically lowered the accuracy of each strike. But a hero would have been able to slay rank-and-file soldiers with a single hit nonetheless. Which meant—

She's no hero. This kid ain't reached those heights yet.

Schuen was sure of it.

Years of training against his rival—now the Black Scripture's Third Seat, the Quad-Elementalist—had given him insight.

This target was weaker than Schuen himself. But that did not mean he would win easily, nor could he afford to relax.

Archers and casters had different approaches to battle. Even if one had the advantage in overall skill, circumstances could conspire against that. And there was always a chance she knew she was being watched and was intentionally disguising her true capabilities.

But he'd been observing enough to be confident.

She hadn't spotted him.

His course was clear. She was a stone in the Theocracy's path and must be kicked aside.

He activated Silent Magic: Wall of Protection from Arrows.

That hardly counted as adequate preparation. But if he used any more spells at this distance, she would likely sense it and turn to flee.

Time to strike.

"Silent Maximize Magic: Magic Arrow."

Stepping out from behind the tree, he used an ability—the daily exploit from the Arcane Devotee class, which was considered required learning for any caster in the Firestorm Scripture. This exploit allowed the use of magic buffs not yet acquired—in this case, he naturally used Triplet Maximize Magic.

A total of twelve magic arrows shot forward.

These arrows were guaranteed to hit and could not be dodged. But realistically speaking, they didn't do much damage. Even maximized, without major discrepancies in combat ability, this alone would not be enough to kill her.

That is, if it was *only* him attacking.

All his subordinates were using See Invisibility to track Schuen's movements.

The girl's mask slipped.

Was it because she couldn't withstand the pain of his magical attack? Or had she spotted the hundred magic arrows hurtling in from behind him?

The Firestorm Scripture's work ranged from assassination to counterterrorism. They were required to be adaptable and always moved in teams no less than four, composed of a variety of classes. They were like the adventurer parties seen in the Kingdom or Empire. The Adventurers Guild itself had been introduced into every country by Theocracy agents, so it was practically a sister organization. The party this time was

formed entirely of one class and exclusively of those who had acquired specific spells from it.

All of them were arcane casters who could use Invisibility.

Hit.

Hit.

Hit.

Hit.

It looked like she'd sprouted wings of light.

She toppled over, facedown, and did not move again. Even then, only Schuen dared approach.

There were illusion spells that could make you look dead. This girl was an archer and was unlikely to know any, but you could never be too careful.

He put a foot under her and flipped over the body.

The girl's skin was covered in dark bruises from the magic-arrow strikes; no part of her young body had been left unharmed. Schuen took a close look at her face. The swelling of her lids left her eyes half-open. There was no light left in them.

She was definitely dead.

"Hmph, that's what you get, runt."

They had not chosen Magic Arrow for retaliatory purposes. With ranger-type foes, their nimble evasions could result in area-of-effect spells doing no real damage. Spells with psychic effects could instantly kill tough opponents—but if the target resisted, there would be no effect at all. With their numbers, they'd had the option of going for dealing guaranteed damage and had taken it.

But in hindsight, it was the perfect spell. Payback for all the countrymen her arrows had slain.

Schuen frowned at the young elf's death mask.

Unable to shake the impression that she looked... relieved.

Was it all in his head? He couldn't say for sure. But if that was the case, it rankled. This one girl had slaughtered a thousand Theocracy soldiers. He would've preferred her death be one of agony, suffering, and regret for the sins she had wrought.

He made to spit on her corpse but thought better of it at the last second. He had to strip her of her gear. There were no other foes in sight, so he planned to do that right here, but spitting on it first would just be gross. He could spit on her once he'd finished looting the body.

First, the bow.

A weapon carried by one strong enough to pin the entire Theocracy army down single-handed. It was likely a masterpiece.

"Another failure."

A man's voice, nonchalant.

Schuen froze, hand halfway toward the bow. Clearly the situation called for urgent action, but he was caught off-guard and unable to react in time. His eyes alone darted sideways—and found an elf.

No one had been there. He knew that for a fact. This girl had been alone. He'd even used See Invisibility on his approach.

"Were you aware, human? The fastest means to true power is to put your life on the line, fighting superior foes. I thought this one might have been a rare success, so I tore her from her mother's arms and placed her here..." The man's tone grew grim. He glared scornfully down at the girl's corpse. "Incompetent fool. The time I spent on you, yet you're worse than the other failures. Without the royal aspect, they're little better than refuse."

Schuen knew who this elf was.

His eyes were different colors, and that made it all too clear.

The Theocracy's ultimate goal.

The loathsome criminal.

The elf king.

A being beyond the pale, one no hero could defeat—let alone Schuen.

He stood no chance.

Silent Magic: Invisibility.

Quickly casting, he tried to move.

But the elf king's gaze followed. His eyes never left Schuen. He had not moved far from where he'd turned invisible, yet the elf king's gaze was still on him.

The moment Schuen realized that, he turned his back and fled. Even with Invisibility and Silence active, there was no hiding the grass his footsteps bent. Even so, he ran.

The elf's eyes had wavered slightly. He had not caught Schuen's location with spells like See Invisibility. His senses were just too sharp—far sharper than any human could hope to match—for Schuen's concealment magic to matter. He had to get away, as far as he could. If it wasn't an ability blowing his cover, then distance was his friend and the only thing that would prevent his detection.

If only Fly were an option. A bitter regret, but it was not in the cards.

He was an Adept of Sulshana.

That class's special ability could be used only once a day, but it allowed you to keep spells with finite activation times in play indefinitely—as long as your mana held out. The more spells kept active, the faster your mana drained, and he simply didn't have enough to use Fly here.

And using Fly while otherwise defenseless, in range of the elf king—that was pure madness. Schuen didn't have it in him. He at least had to gain distance, take cover behind some trees. Then maybe he could consider it.

“Ha.”

He heard the elf king's derisive laugh.

“There is literally no point in killing you, but—I *did* come all this way. Might as well have *something* to show for it.”

Since Schuen was an arcane caster, physical exertion wasn't his strong suit. But his overall skill level was verging on the domain of the heroes—his legs could cover quite a bit of ground in a short sprint. As the gap between them yawned, his Elephant Ear enhanced hearing caught the king's next words.

“Go on, Behemoth. Kill!”

The earth shook. He didn't need to look back—he knew something massive had just spawned.

“Scatter!” Schuen roared, canceling Silence so his voice would reach his squad.

Never in his life had he yelled this loud. He could only pray it would at least make the elf king wince.

He had to get his team moving. No matter who went down, no matter who they had to cut loose. The only way to honor the lives lost here was to take home as much intel as they could.

Schuen was too close to the elf king. His fate was sealed. For that reason—he turned around. Dying before his men did wasn't such a bad way to go.

He had seen earth elementals before. Smaller than humans but thick, burly arms—they made for quite a quirky spectacle. But the thing behind him was no such feeble little charmer.

Its bulk was made of rocks and boulders, piled on, towering as tall as the surrounding trees. This was undoubtedly the king of earth elementals.

Long, thick arms and short, stocky legs. On a smaller scale, the proportions might be comical, but this thing radiated power far beyond anything he'd ever sensed from a monster. Behind it, the elf king crossed his arms, grinning as he watched Schuen struggle.

A galling sight indeed.

The arrogance of one seeking to claim the life of another, without risking their own.

But Schuen's rage was lost on him. The earth elemental—Behemoth—closed the distance, legs unmoving, as if sliding on ice. One unnaturally massive arm raised high.

"Come at me, you cur! Wall of Stone!"

At his cry, a rocky wall appeared between him and the elf king.

An instant later, a single hit pulverized it. The shattered stones melted into the air.

The strength and durability of some wall spells were based on the caster's own power. Despite that—well, no, this result just proved the elf king's elemental was far stronger.

Behemoth raised its left fist.

Out of the corner of one eye, Schuen saw the elf king smirk and knew what that meant—the man was convinced this next blow would kill him.

He wasn't wrong.

The swing would reach before he could get another spell off. He would perish.

And yet—

I bought some time.

For a few seconds, he'd slowed this thing down. That was enough.

Yes—

More than enough.

He had avoided the worst outcome—none of them making it home alive. That outcome would be not just his loss but the Theocracy's.

“Ha-ha!”

Schuen laughed into the descending fist. Behemoth's blow struck home, and he became one with the soil.

•

The elf king—Decem Hougan—passed through the castle gates with a sigh of disgust.

The source of his displeasure was the length of time the trip home had taken.

He'd ridden on the back of Behemoth, a creature that knew no fatigue—so that was likely the fastest transport available. But knowing his time was being wasted took an intolerable toll on his mind.

Recovering the gear he'd given that failure was not itself a waste. He could be proud of that act. He'd inherited that gear from his father, and no one alive could make anything of its like ever again. It would not do to let it fall into the hands of humans—they would never appreciate its true value.

The real problem—only he was up to the task.

This applied not only to recovering weapons. The lack of reliable help meant that all manner of tasks were confounding him. The elves around him were far too weak.

Not one of them was worth a damn.

The elven race was magnificent. Decem's father had proved that beyond all doubt. They were a race capable of being stronger than any other living thing. If Decem had been a special breed—a high elf or an elf lord, perhaps—then he would simply have assumed all others were beneath him and been done with the matter. But this was not the case. Decem and his father were ordinary elves. That meant that any elf could become tremendously strong. So why did the others remain so weak?

How could he prove elves were the ultimate species?

He need simply produce results that were plain to see.

Place the world in the hands of elves, those who inherited his blood.

To that end, he needed suitable—powerful—mothers.

Unfortunately, there was no way to tell which mothers were suitable until the children they bore grew. To hasten their growth, he had thrust them all into the bellows of war, and few, if any, had returned.

All this time he'd spent and with nothing to show for it. His head hurt.

These thoughts had left a scowl on his brow—yet a woman came his way.

"Your Majesty."

"What?"

His rage turned her way. Then his eyes widened, surprised.

Strong emotions—especially hostility—from one of his power were a burden upon those weak in body and mind. Even a glance their way was stunning. True, he had merely been angry, not actively desiring her death. But even that would hit a weak elf hard. Yet, she had withstood the impact, merely turning pale.

She was extremely weak—one of many failed mothers.

So how had she withstood his disfavor? Was he simply that exhausted?

He could have brushed on by, but her feat was worth some small reward.

Decem paused. He was a merciful king.

"What happened to her?"

Her? Who? After a hard day's work, she should be praising his labors, not offering incomprehensible questions. His interest in her withered.

"Rugi, I mean."

Rugi.

He had no memory of that name.

True, Decem never remembered anyone's names. Few people were valuable enough to remember.

In his opinion, it was a waste of memory to learn useless names of those who possessed no value. He could not go so far as to say memory was a limited resource, but there was no point in learning anything noncritical. He had no idea why so many stuffed their minds full of useless rubbish.

The woman's eyes were on the bow he held.

"She died, didn't she?"

That connected the dots. She meant the failure. He'd given her this glorious bow, and the fool had died anyway. The thought that she had carried half his blood made him feel deeply embarrassed. No—perhaps it was because she had only half his blood that mere humans had been able to kill her.

"Yes, she'd dead."

"I—I see."

Her voice quivered.

She must be ashamed to have been related to that failure. But it was also true that the failure had been far stronger than this woman. An even greater source of shame.

But it was a king's duty to dole out opportunities.

How kind of him to show mercy to these fools. Decem impressed himself anew.

"Come to my room. I'll grant you another chance."

He walked away without waiting for an answer. His priority was to return this equipment to the treasury.

When that was done, he washed away the grime of the battlefield and lay down in his bedroom.

As he waited, a man knocked at the door. "Excuse me, Your Majesty."

He glanced over the man's shoulder, but the woman was not there.

"...What?"

"Report for you, my king. You called Myugi in tonight, but she took her own life."

"She what?"

"She threw herself off the parapets."

"And for such a minor fall to kill her—no, that would be enough for you lot."

Decem considered this. He could not imagine why she would want to die. He had just called her to his chambers. She should have been delighted. Perhaps someone had been envious and killed her for it.

"Are you sure it was suicide?"

"Quite sure, Your Majesty. There were witnesses."

Decem considered blaming these witnesses, but if it *was* suicide, what could be the cause? In time, he realized there was only one possible explanation.

"I see; it all grows clear to me. She took her life by way of apology—for the sin of bearing that defective child, I assume?"

"...Only she can know her feelings. But that may be the case, Your Majesty."

The man's expression never changed.

"In that case, give the body a proper funeral. She made amends with her life. It is my royal duty to accept."

"Your generosity honors us all."

The man bowed low. Decem took this deference in stride. It was only proper to dispense the king's mercy to those without value.

Feeling horribly merciful, he decided to grant the servant before him—whose name he did not know—a boon.

“Do you have a daughter?”

“.....Yes..... I do.”

“Fortune favors you, then. If she is of age, send her to me. If she is not, your wife will do.”

The man quivered, clearly honored. Once the tremor died away, he spoke, forcing his voice out.

“As you wish, Your Majesty..”

The man left, and Decem forgot the dead woman completely. The fate of the useless was of no concern to him.

2

In the sky above a vast forest to the south of the Nation of Darkness and southwest of the Theocracy, Ainz was gazing down upon the land, buffeted by the winds.

“Woodlands? This a grand forest. A sea of trees!”

It was the middle of the night, and the green carpet rolled out beneath him was dyed the deepest black. Each time the wind blew, the leaves heaved like the surface of the ocean, making the phrase he'd used feel quite apt. This place was the size of the Tove Woodlands and Azerlisia Mountains combined. Quite possibly larger than the Re-Estize Kingdom's entire holdings.

Let's give it a more appropriate name in the Nation, at least.

The vast forest stretched as far as the eye could see, without anything to break up the monotony. Beneath those leaves, all manner of species had developed cultures of their own and territories around them. Yet, from the sky, he could see none of that, which meant—

The canopy itself provides cover. There are flying monsters to worry about, so their

civilizations naturally avoid dwelling in sight of the sky.

He had found two landmarks of note.

The first was the crescent-moon lake, where the elf capital supposedly stood. It was quite sizable and easily spotted on his ascent.

The other was the dirt path stretching from the Theocracy.

They had cut their way through the forest, blazing a trail for their invading armies.

The forest itself was so vast, the road was but a thread weaving through it, but it had to be more than a hundred yards wide. Otherwise, he'd never have spotted it from this height at all. It seemed a rather slow way to invade, but providing some measure of safety within this forest was no small task. And given the time and labor involved, the Theocracy's dedication to ending the elf country was all too evident.

I don't get it. Why are those the only distinctive features? Has the Theocracy's invasion stalled?

The simplest way to wipe out the elves would be to fell the trees around them and then set them on fire. They weren't particularly dry, but neither was the forest especially humid. If you were careful of your surroundings, you could easily take out a village.

Are they avoiding burns so they can enslave more elves? That would imply they're confident of victory. Has the balance of power swung that far in their favor?

From here, he could not see any evidence of forest fires. He was a considerable distance away, so it was hard to definitively declare there had not been any burns. If Aura had been with him, she might have had a different opinion.

And the Theocracy's frontline camp must be where those lights are.

Human eyes could not penetrate the darkness of the night. If a camp was of any real size, the lights would be visible even from this distance. He had easily spotted what must be their front line. But for reasons—most prominently, his altitude—it was hard to estimate just how far they were from the elf capital. Moreover, if they were clearing the forest as they advanced, he could not begin to imagine how long it would take them to reach their destination.

Still, Ainz had seen what there was to see. He activated Greater Teleportation.

There was no cover in the sky, and anyone flying was easily spotted. Plenty of people could see perfectly well, even at night. It was not worth lingering.

Naturally, if anyone started ascending from several thousand yards below, he would have plenty of time to get away. But he could see no benefit to announcing his presence in the area. For that reason, he'd kept Perfect Unknowable active the whole time.

Analysis of the intel they'd gathered suggested this world's creatures were mostly quite weak.

But they knew little about this area, and there was no guarantee it did not hide someone of Ainz's strength. He had to account for those maybes and take precautions to avoid revealing too much information. The more they knew about his skills, the more countermeasures they could prepare, placing him one step closer to defeat.

...Next up, the elf capital.

Midnight.

In the woods, sparse moonlight filtered through the boughs above—a world of near-total darkness. But that was no impediment to Ainz.

He'd used Fly to descend through the trees and was now hovering just above the brush, approaching his destination.

He'd figured out roughly how far off the Theocracy armies were. Now he just had to gather intel in the elf capital.

In time, the view opened up before him.

Elf homes were made from thick, stout trees—aka elf trees—and the capital was a cluster of these, a forest of its own. The layout was more or less like any elf village, but where those had few residents, the capital had many—and that made all the difference. The residences were packed together, making the place feel claustrophobic. It reminded Ainz of the gray world he'd once lived in; he instantly found it repulsive.

Beyond the elf trees of the capital, no other trees grew—only a plain of short grass.

This was no natural occurrence but a deliberate effort to shore up their defenses. It provided a clear line of sight on anything approaching, making a stealthy encroachment unlikely.

Or it could be an elf tree survival strategy.

He wasn't really doubting the story about the elves using magic to create the elf trees, but perhaps the trees were just using the elves to propagate their species.

Maybe the elf trees were actually a kind of monster—it seemed worth investigating to see if they were sentient.

He wasn't sure how to do that. Perhaps he should leave it to Mare.

As he pondered the question, his eyes studied what was in front of him. If there was a grassy field providing no cover as far as the eye could see, it stood to reason there were lookouts posted. It would be difficult to enter without the use of magic.

That said, a ranger of Aura's level had techniques that would make it possible. High-level rangers didn't need cover to conceal themselves, and if the level gap was great enough, they could go undiscovered even if they made eye contact. Aura had said advanced ranger stealth techniques were tantamount to convincing your foes you were a pebble.

Ainz was not entirely convinced. He'd had Aura demonstrate on the way here and had managed to spot her—as long as she wasn't using magic items to boost her abilities. This was because Aura was a hybrid ranger/tamer, and while both classes were high-level, her skills paled in comparison to a pure ranger. On top of which, Ainz himself was high-level, and his core stats were accordingly high. Unfortunately, this left him unable to confirm the veracity of Aura's claims.

But regardless of the truth, with Ainz's own abilities, he could not safely approach the elf capital. For that reason, he had Perfect Unknowable active and was using an illusion to disguise himself as an elf.

By the standards of this world, Perfect Unknowable was nigh impossible to penetrate, but he was using the illusion anyway just in case—an extra precaution, like he'd taken during his earlier flight. Not once had he ever believed he knew every skill or ability

the world contained. His knowledge dated from his time in *Yggdrasil*, and even that could hardly be considered complete.

Ainz himself kept an invisibility-piercing ability active at all times and had to assume opponents would do the same.

For that reason, he wore a magic item—the Ghillie Guise Cloak. Anything to lower his risk of detection, but also a way to hide his true identity if he was spotted.

Let's do this.

From the border between the plain and the forest—any closer, and there were no trees to hide him—Ainz peered up at the capital.

He could see elves on the bridges circling the outer elf trees.

Those were essentially the castle walls, and the bridges were the ramparts.

Ainz was unsure if they lacked the ability to penetrate Perfect Unknowable or simply weren't paying that much attention, but they showed no signs of spotting him. With all the measures he had in place, it would be embarrassing if they'd made him right away.

Keeping a tree between himself and the elf sentries, Ainz took out a scroll.

Just as he was about to activate it, he hesitated.

Once again, he got ready—and he hesitated.

He'd made up his mind already. But he could not shake the feeling that it was such a waste. Was there not a better way? That thought persisted, and it stopped him from using the scroll.

If he was in combat or lives were on the line, he wouldn't think twice. But with neither being the case—well, the lack of urgency naturally invited indecision.

He dithered for a while, and eventually, he successfully emptied his mind, activating the spell at the cost of the scroll. Thought led only to doubt.

The spell used was God Eye.

A ninth-level spell, it generated an invisible incorporeal magic eyeball. He had not used this since the lizardmen incident.

The main differences between it and remote viewing through a magical item were increased range and the fact that it could simply pass through ordinary walls.

It was an excellent spell for reconnaissance, but not a flawless one. It was merely invisible and could easily be spotted with tier-two detection spells. And while incorporeal, if it did take damage, the feedback would harm the caster. Since it was classified as intelligence magic, anti-intelligence measures could reveal the caster's location, and if he tripped an attack wall, there was a chance spells would come flying his way. But the greatest flaw was that the eyeball itself had no HP and borrowed neither level nor defense from Ainz himself.

Yet, it was still far safer than infiltrating in person and was situationally very handy to have around.

It moved steadily forward—at a speed Ainz found infuriatingly slow—and reached the city walls after some time.

The elf sentries worked in teams of three, armed with bows, but they did not see the God Eye sailing toward them.

Seems like they don't have any way of seeing the invisible. But I can't be sure other elves don't have a class allowing it.

The first seemed a safe assumption—they wouldn't just *ignore* an eyeball. But he couldn't relax. This was his first excursion into an area he knew nothing about, after all.

Ainz's God Eye floated under the bridges and into the capital itself. Once inside, he quickly turned back, moving outside the capital boundaries again and hovering by the three sentries.

They were talking among themselves and didn't appear to notice anything out of the ordinary.

Whew.

Ainz let out a sigh of relief.

The Great Tomb of Nazarick—and many other guild homes—often used traps that stopped or disrupted some spell effects once you entered them. Canceling Invisibility, lowering holy-attribute spell effects, et cetera. He'd been double-checking to see if the elf capital had anything like that active.

He'd have to check again after entering any key capital structures, but it seemed like he'd be safe to roam around the bulk of the city.

With Perfect Unknowable active, he didn't want to take too much time. Given how much mana he'd need later, he didn't have much to spare.

Ainz's God Eye moved farther in. His goal was an elf living in a tree with goods for sale.

In ordinary villages, shops like that would be clustered together, and that sort of practical design would likely apply even here. Given the need for storage, it would make sense for them to be in extra-large trees.

After searching a while longer, his hopes grew dim.

I can't find shit!

There were thousands of trees here, and to human sensibilities, it was *just* a forest. Possibly because it was late in the night, there were no visible signs anywhere and no nameplates on the trees themselves. Just row after row of indistinguishable lumber. He could not even be sure the tree in front of him was not one he'd checked already.

In human towns, there would be main roads and avenues and shops lining them. Possibly stores arranged around a square. But that logic did not appear to apply here.

There were no larger roads or squares at all—at least none that he could see. Experience was of no use in this search, and he had to wing it on hunches alone.

Not a great town for tourists. It would be very difficult to find what he needed here—no, it seemed downright impossible.

But there was no need to complete the task today. He was in no hurry; he could afford

to take his time and play it safe.

Nonetheless, Ainz kept looking awhile longer. He *had* used a God Eye scroll and wanted to look as long as it lasted.

But the result of that extended search was a deep sigh.

If the residents here are already in bed, no matter how many times I search, I'll get nowhere.

Searching blindly was useless. He'd have to try again in daylight, despite the risks. Then at least the flow of foot traffic would clue him in. Otherwise, there was no telling how long this would take.

Ainz sent the God Eye into a random domicile. Since the elves' lives revolved around the bridges, the elf tree entrances—what humans could call homes—were on the second and third floors. When sneaking in, the first floor was best. Like a thief pilfering the wardrobes. Too much activity on the second floor.

He slipped through the wall—and then had the God Eye ascend to the third floor, where he found some elves.

This appeared to be a family home. A father, a mother, and two boys, all asleep.

I'd heard as much, but... they really are primitive.

This was a “bedroom,” but all four were stretched out on what appeared to be a pile of leaves. Given that human villagers used dried grass in lieu of mattresses, this might not qualify as a substantial difference.

From what the elves in Nazarick had told him, this was typical elf bedding. Gathering this quantity of leaves was hard work, but once gathered, they could be used for quite a long time. He'd asked if there were bugs, but they'd said they had spells to stop that.

The children—both boys—were sleeping peacefully.

Sleep... what is that like?

Ainz's body had been like this awhile now. Sleep, food, and sex were things of the past, and it took some doing for him to feel any pain. That was an asset, making all his feats possible... but there were times when he missed what he'd lost. Seeing them sound asleep like this stirred those memories and brought a pang of envy. Though this was nothing compared to the pangs felt when seated before a delicious-looking meal.

Gazing at the happy family, he canceled God Eye.

Oooof.

With a shrug, he cast Greater Teleportation, and the view changed. Before him was a veil of twisted vines.

These blended into the surroundings, looking like part of the forest but, on closer inspection, were actually a cunning disguise hiding the little cottage beyond.

This had been created with a magic item—the Green Secret House. For the next few days, it would be their base of operations.

Fenrir had been seated outside the cottage, and he got up, sniffing the air and growling, looking—no, glaring—at Ainz.

Not *quite* at him.

Like Aura earlier, Fenrir couldn't actually perceive anyone under Perfect Unknowable's protection. Yet, despite the spell, he had realized someone was here, and that was commendable indeed.

Ainz let the spell drop.

Recognizing him, Fenrir quickly bowed his head.

He might not be capable of speech, but he was far more intelligent than a simple animal. This gesture was not mere instinct—it was a conscious decision to apologize to Ainz. But Ainz thought Fenrir had nothing to be sorry for.

From the wolf's perspective, an unknown creature had approached. It was only natural to be cautious and protect his master. It would be more of a concern had he reacted otherwise.

Fenrir was the only guard Ainz had brought along (in lieu of the Hanzos). Ainz himself had suggested bringing multiple other high-level minions but ultimately changed his mind. Unsure how his plan to help the twins make friends would turn out, he decided it was best to prevent information from leaking.

And that wasn't the only concern.

Since Shalltear's brainwashing, he'd avoided sending guardians out alone.

But what did he have to show for it? No signs of their enemy, no matter how much time passed. The only bait taken was when Ainz—well, Pandora's Actor—had fought the platinum full-plate man, Rik Aganeia. Nothing since. Still no clue who had brainwashed Shalltear.

Thus.

If he'd baited Rik in when there were no Hanzos around, then perhaps his enemies had some way of detecting their presence.

Maybe the use of a World Item.

Maybe one of those abilities unique to this world—Talents.

It might be dangerous, but he'd decided to experiment with leaving the Hanzos behind.

He had explained the latter reason to Albedo, fully aware that there were any number of arguments against the idea. She'd nodded with her usual smile, but he wasn't sure she fully bought it. Maybe he'd find out when he got back. Not a prospect he relished.

"Good work," Ainz said and reached a palm toward the door of the Green Secret House. It was well hidden and virtually imperceptible unless you knew exactly where to look.

He pushed lightly against it, but the door didn't budge.

Sadly, this magic item had no key. It was possible to force it open with unique magic items like the Epigonoi, but normally, once locked, you'd need someone inside to open it.

Ainz used the knocker. The Green Secret House allowed you to make the door

semitranslucent—one-way—so that anyone inside could look out. It didn't take long before he heard the lock click.

The door swung open.

"Welcome back!"

"Wel... come..... back..."

Aura's voice was bright and cheery, but Mare barely got the words out. His eyes were clearly not focused.

They'd changed into their sleeping clothes, and Mare even had on a nightcap. Given the hour, this was entirely appropriate.

"Sorry to keep you up this late."

Ainz stepped inside.

The interior was bathed in warm light and much more spacious than the exterior had implied.

Inside the door was a living room with a kitchen beyond. There were four other doors leading to bunk rooms.

"You said you'd be out late, so I thought it would take far longer."

"So did I... but no use standing around. Let's sit."

He considered telling them to go ahead and sleep, but even if he'd learned next to nothing, it was worth sharing information—and sooner rather than later. Ainz really didn't have much faith in his own memory.

He felt a little guilty about making them stay up for a mundane reason like that, but he dutifully led them into the living room to fill them in.

He sat down on the chair and found Aura ready to listen. Mare's head hit the back of his chair, his mouth half-open; he looked ready to fall asleep right there. Ainz had only just seen two children sound asleep, and his guilt grew.

Since I don't need sleep, maybe I'm not being adequately considerate of those who do? That's not good.

"Should we put Mare to bed? Aura, you can bring him up to speed tomorrow."

"Hoo, boy," Aura said, smacking his head. "Wake up! You're before Lord Ainz! Don't be rude."

"Yawn... Oh. Welcome baaack..."

Mare bowed, but they'd already had that conversation. Ainz didn't point that out.

Aura shook her head. "He's such a child," she muttered.

"No need to force yourself to stay awake. I don't want it causing problems tomorrow..."

He trailed off, remembering some late nights in *Yggdrasil*.

He didn't think he'd ever let it affect his work performance. But was that really true? And staying up too late for something fun was a far cry from when someone else made you.

Ainz—Satoru Suzuki—had certainly grumbled when his boss had kept him working late.

And the twins were *children*. Of course, Mare was a level-100 NPC with an astonishingly high-functioning body, so perhaps there was no use comparing him to the ordinary human Ainz had once been, grown-up or not.

Mare was so sleepy, he could barely keep his eyes open, and it looked like he was glaring at them.

Then his head lolled to one side. He blinked furiously and quickly straightened himself up.

This wouldn't work.

"Okay, let's do that. Mare, we don't want to affect your performance tomorrow, so you go to bed. Forcing yourself to stay up just makes it hard to think straight. There's little advantage in that. Like I said, Aura can fill you in tomorrow."

Aura's face was a sight; she was torn between the impulse to obey and feeling like her brother was disgracing them in front of their master. She soon made up her mind and bowed her head.

"...As you wish. I'll take Mare to bed. Can you stand?"

"Huhhh...?"

She didn't even get a real answer. This wasn't happening.

"Mm, let me carry him."

Aura's lips parted, but Ainz got to his feet anyway, picking up Mare.

"Mm," Mare mumbled.

He was in sleeping clothes, with minimal gear on, and felt super light. Maybe that was just how much children weighed.

This might have been hard if he'd been in full gear. I'm sure I could have managed it, but... that thing is heavy. Possibly the heaviest weapon any of the guardians carry.

With both hands full—he could have cradled the boy in one if he wanted—he was led by Aura, who opened the door for him. He gently laid Mare down on the bed inside.

Mare must have fallen asleep on the way. His eyes were closed, and he was breathing peacefully.

Careful not to make a sound, Ainz tiptoed out. Aura was even quieter—she *was* a ranger.

Back in the living room, they sat down. Aura bowed her head lower.

"I apologize on his behalf for retiring while you're still working, Lord Ainz. Your anger is to be expected, as is your concern about his abilities as a guardian, but on night duty, we use sleep-blocking equipment to avoid any risk of this unseemly behavior. Today, though... Well, to equip the anti-sleep gear, he has to remove a combat item, which does keep him from exercising his full potential. Lord Ainz, our top priority here is your protection, so I made the call to avoid using that sleep preventer."

This all came out quite quickly. Aura rarely spoke like this, so she must be pretty rattled.

"No, it's no concern. Like I said, we're here on vacation. There's nothing wrong with falling asleep early. But you're properly awake? You sure you don't need to sleep?"

"I would never disgrace myself like that in front of you, Lord Ainz."

"So stiff! I'm not angry, I swear. Honestly, I'm tickled to see a side of Mare I never ordinarily would. When you're with me, you're both inevitably on your best behavior, so I often wonder how you act when I'm not around. Is Cocytus any different?"

"...Not really, no."

Aura was back to her usual self.

"Ah. Well, perhaps I'll use Perfect Unknowable and take a peek at what he's like on his own."

Ainz smiled—not that anything actually moved, but his tone of voice likely conveyed it. Aura grinned back, full of mischief.

"Aura, you're sure you aren't sleepy?"

"I always stay up this late, so I'm good to go."

Aura explained that she often played with the nocturnal beasts, so it was common for her to be up late. This "play" was important for any beast tamer; if she didn't spend time with each beast in her care, they'd get stressed and not be in top condition. She wasn't taking time out of her sleep cycle or anything—whenever she stayed up, she also slept till noon. More or less, it was just like working a late shift.

When either of them was outside Nazarick, they used the item she'd mentioned and avoided sleep entirely.

Hmm, is that a good idea? I'm glad they take their duty seriously, but races that need sleep should probably get it. And sleep is important for growing children. I'll have to discuss it with Albedo. For now...!

Ainz took a breath, then began with the location of the Theocracy's invading army. He

wasn't able to accurately say how far that was from the capital or how many soldiers they had with them. The goal here wasn't to pick a fight, so all they needed to know was that the invasion was ongoing.

More importantly—he filled Aura in on the results of his capital scouting.

He hid nothing, explaining it all. No point lying or making excuses. Explaining failures as is. Aura wasn't like some others he could name—she would simply nod and maybe provide a better idea.

"Hmm," Aura said, nodding. "In that case, I think you're right, Lord Ainz. Better to try again during the day."

"That was my thought, yes. What will you be up to?"

"Let me see... Are you sure you don't want me infiltrating?"

"Hmm. I think it's extremely unlikely you'd be spotted, but we know so little. If there's any chance they'd learn who you are, we should avoid it at this stage."

"Then I'll have to talk with Mare tomorrow about his plans, but I'd like to support your efforts somehow. How about I search the capital's surroundings and look for any tracks the elves might've left?"

Ainz nodded. This made sense.

If they were hauling things in and out of the city, there would be evidence of that. And the more tracks they found, the more likely that they would stumble upon a *path*.

Discovering that would lead them to villagers or settlements—places where elves often had to go.

He had to assume elves were using something with a similar effect to Forestwalk, but Aura's suggestion was a good one. He saw no reason to reject the idea.

"An excellent suggestion. I'm sure inspecting the area... would take you a day at most. Mare can help you locate tracks. Find what you can."

"Will do!"

"Then, tomorrow—well, the day's already changed—I'll try gathering information again at midday."

"I might attract attention during daylight hours, so I'll make my move after dark."

"Hmm, sounds like a plan. For now, let us retire. Good night, Aura."

"Good night, Lord Ainz!"

Each went to their respective rooms. Ainz lay down on his bed, but he was undead—and did not need sleep. So he took out a book from his item box.

A business manual he often read. It was called *How to Be a Good Leader*. If he was honest, he didn't think reading books like this was doing much good, but it was better than nothing.

He began flicking through the pages.

•

A late-night incursion on the first day, a midday infiltration on the second. Two precious scrolls wasted, which certainly hit Ainz where it hurt, but at noon on the third day, he lucked into some critical information. In other words, he found several trees that seemed like shops and was starting to get his bearings.

It might seem like a small step, but for Ainz, it was a huge development. His joy was so great that his mental restraints kicked in. Not wanting to waste this intel, he spent a good deal of time double-checking the route to the shop.

At that point, he beat a temporary retreat. The spell itself had plenty of time left on it, so he was tempted to send the God Eye up the unnaturally tall, thick central tree—the palace—and take a peek inside but ultimately stopped himself.

In human society, kings need not be strong, but there were two reasons for that. First, you could not survive by following the strong, only those who could make the right judgment calls. This was a survival strategy for a feeble species who would otherwise be little more than food for everything else. Second, their dwellings were secure. That was the difference between this forest and the Empire, the kingdom, and the Sacred Kingdom.

But for a race carving out a living in competition with other species, it was natural for the king to be the strongest among them.

The elf king was clearly a force to be reckoned with. Best to avoid unnecessary risks here.

Ainz had learned a lot about this world but had yet to find anyone but monsters anywhere close to his strength. Had he not met that mysterious warrior Rik, he might not have spared much thought for the elf king. But the fight with Rik had made Ainz extra cautious.

He discarded the eyeball spell and cast Greater Teleportation.

Back at their base, he found the twins waiting for him—this time Mare was wide awake—and they exchanged information.

He learned the twins had found a number of paths—the elves mostly moved within the trees, so the second day had been a waste. Discovering where these led would depend on how far they led.

Ainz expressed concern that if they moved in daylight, they'd be spotted by the elves on these paths.

Aura seemed quite confident that if they rode Fenrir through the woods alongside the path, they would not be discovered easily. Her confidence convinced Ainz he had nothing to worry about. But he did not immediately grant permission to investigate. Rather, he suggested holding off for now. They might have far better information later that day.

Night had fallen on the third day...

Once again under cover of Perfect Unknowable, Ainz approached the elf capital. Naturally, from a different direction than any previous approach, with magic assists. There was always a small chance a skilled elf ranger had discovered signs of his previous visits.

Fly should have stopped him from leaving any tracks on the ground, but Ainz himself had little expertise with stealth or tracking. For all he knew, he could have bent

branches or scattered leaves in odd directions, leaving trace signs behind.

Honestly, sometimes I wonder if being extra-extra cautious all the time is actually worth it, but if the surrounding villages all go on red alert because some mystery intruder is hanging around, that'll make everything far more difficult. And if the Theocracy takes those elves prisoner—well, I'd rather they not find out about my little scouting mission.

Even if they did discover signs of a mysterious watcher, few would assume they were from the Nation of Darkness. However, the Theocracy finding out a third party was hanging around was bad news. He was scared to see what they'd do. Unexpected actions could mess up all kinds of plans.

I could pop back and consult Albedo and Demiurge, but that could put a damper on my "have Aura and Mare make friends" scheme.

Which left him with only one option—be as careful as he could.

Ainz took out a scroll and this time activated it right away. He was certain it would lead to results, and therefore, he did not hesitate.

His God Eye flew into the target elf tree, and Ainz muttered, "All right!" under his breath.

The elf he was after was sound asleep on a bed of leaves. A grown male.

As a rule, elves had slim builds and were shorter than the average human. Maybe 80 to 90 percent as tall. They had little body hair and no beards. And since their biological prime lasted for centuries, it was difficult to determine their ages—everyone looked young.

So he couldn't be sure this elf had the information Ainz was after. Yet, he'd targeted him anyway, for good reason—

No one slept here but this man.

Cleaning up after snatching a whole family was a lot more work.

He had a second goal in mind, but that—he'd have to find out later.

Ainz knew where the man's home was, so he used Greater Teleportation to bring

himself there.

The elf did not wake at his entry. Ainz had made no noises and was undetectable—even someone high-level would likely not have noticed. This was expected.

Ainz used a tier-four spell, Charm Species.

This took hold easily—the fact that the elf was asleep helped more than the level gap.

“Wake up,” he said.

Perfect Unknowable had dissipated the moment Ainz used a hostile spell—in more accurate game terms, when the spell required a resistance calculation. As he spoke, he grabbed the elf’s shoulder—gently, not causing pain—and shook it. He did not want to linger in enemy territory.

“—Mrah?”

Not the most intelligent noise, but he *had* been asleep.

“Don’t resist,” Ainz said. He took the man’s hand and cast Greater Teleportation.

This spell allowed you to travel with someone else, but only if they consented—if they resisted, they’d be left behind. However, a charmed state was treated as “consent” and posed no hindrance. The same went for the higher-level controlled state, but while harder to resist, Ainz had reasons to avoid resorting to that.

For now, his kidnapping was a success. He had the makings of a criminal mastermind.

Cool, just as planned.

Having everything go right was always a pleasure. A broad smile spread across his bony visage.

“Whoa! Wh-what the—what’s going on?!”

The elf appeared to be shocked by the sudden change in the ground below him and the view before his eyes. He leaped to his feet, now wide awake. Did not seem like he was inclined to believe this was all just a dream. Perhaps elven culture was not big on that notion.

Ainz glanced around, but unlike the past few days, there was no sign of Fenrir. He must be hiding out of the elf's view.

"Nothing to yell about."

"N-nah, it kinda is..."

"I simply used a teleportation spell. Keep your voice down. No one here will harm you."

"T-teleportation?!"

The elf blinked and then fell silent. The charm kept his responses mild.

"Come on in."

Ainz ushered the elf through the half-open door of the Green Secret House.

He knew Aura and Mare must be watching through the gaps in the doors to their respective rooms.

He'd wondered if having two dark elves at the table might help loosen this man's lips, but as there was a chance revealing their faces could cause issues down the road, he'd thought better of it.

The three elf women they'd rescued had not shown any hostility to dark elves. But the situation might have changed in recent times, or perhaps the elf capital had always taken a more negative view of their kind.

Even if that *was* the case, Ainz could have simply said, *These two are not your enemy*, and resolved the matter.

"What is this place? Is this the world of the godtree?"

Ainz had no idea what a godtree might be but assumed it must be from elven myths or legends. Or—

Could it be related to Yggdrasil players? I'll have to ask... but I don't want to take much time. Maybe some other day.

Ainz had the man sit down on the living room couch. He took out a piece of notebook

paper on which he had written several questions to ask this elf. Time was of the essence. If he messed this up, he'd have to kill the man. But that would mean a mysterious disappearance in the elf capital, which had a low but distinct chance of causing future headaches.

"Since we're good friends, I'd love for you to tell me a thing or two. Keep it nice and simple." Ainz did not wait for a reply. "Is there any possibility—magical or otherwise—that leaking information would lead to your death?"

"Huh? Of course not."

The elf looked at him like he was crazy, but it was always possible he simply didn't know.

And in that case, three questions is all I get.

They'd planned for that, which was why there were only three questions on his note. He was going in order.

"Do you know where the dark elf village is?"

"...Not exactly, but I know the approximate area."

It was farther southwest from the capital. He was given more detailed instructions, but the directions mentioning *the three big trees* didn't really mean much to Ainz.

He'd have to hope Aura got more out of it.

"Next..."

The last question on his note was one Aura and Mare had been shocked he'd originally not planned to ask. They had a point, and it was pretty important.

"Tell me what you know about the Theocracy."

"The Theocracy... Oh, you mean those horrible humans! We ain't done nothing to them, but they invaded us anyway!"

He launched into a lengthy tirade, accusing them of tyranny, unprovoked aggression, and the enslavement of hundreds of elves. Ainz was forced to step in and stop him.

It seemed like he was but an ordinary citizen and didn't know just how close the Theocracy was to the capital. He wasn't even sure if the elves were winning or losing. But the guards on patrol seemed extra tense these days, which the ordinary elves took as a bad sign.

That was the last of his three questions, but this elf did not seem to be any worse for wear. Those prisoners had been the exception. In which case, he had plenty more to ask—but did not want to take too much time.

“How are relations with the dark elves? Any enmity to speak of?”

“None... that I know of?” The pause was because he'd started answering before Ainz had quite finished. “I sure don't, and nobody I know has anything against dark elves or thinks less of 'em. They're basically distant relatives, ya know? But that's our perspective on it, and I can't speak for them. Never met one, so honestly no clue what they make of us.”

“Do you know anything about the Nation of Darkness?”

“What's that?”

No lag there. That was the answer Ainz had expected. And at the least, that meant it would not work against his plan to help the twins make friends.

“That's all I need to know. Thank you.”

“No prob. What are friends for?”

That made Ainz smirk. He'd used the word himself, but hearing it from someone else just made the lie all the more transparent. Ainz's only friends were his fellow guild members.

“That's enough,” he said. The signal—Mare's face peeked out from the crack in the door behind the elf. To keep him from noticing, Ainz kept talking. “I would have liked to know more about elf culture, but I'm afraid we don't have time—”

The man's eyes blurred, and he fell over on the couch, sound asleep.

This sudden slumber was the result of Mare's Sandman's Sand.

Aura came out with her brother, so Ainz asked, "Aura, will that man's directions get us to the dark elf village?"

"I believe so, yes. Once we get closer, I may have to investigate further."

That was more than enough. Ainz used Control Amnesia.

This was a major reason why he'd snatched—chosen—a man who lived alone.

Elf ages were hard to determine, and a grown-looking male might not turn out to be an elf who knew much about the world. He could well have been a very young man who'd never even left the capital.

Meanwhile, someone with kids would likely be old enough, but that raised the question of what to do with them—and their family.

If they wound up deciding they had to eliminate them—well, now an entire family was missing, and with no signs of any struggle. The uproar would almost certainly come back to haunt him. No one would believe they'd up and decided to flee into the night for no apparent reason.

And he lacked the mana to use Control Amnesia on that many.

For that reason, Ainz had gone with a bachelor instead.

He wiped the man's memories in one fell swoop. Meticulous memory manipulation, making every detail add up—that was a tall order indeed. But all at once, without much thought—that was pretty simple.

And since he didn't have to go that far back, the total volume was quite small. That's why he'd been racing against the clock. If he hadn't planned on using this spell, he could have asked questions until the charm ran out, then cast Charm Species again and continued questioning the man.

But since he'd kept the question count low and taken little time, all he had to do was wipe all memories after he'd gone to bed. He might have gone back a bit too far—Ainz had accidentally wiped the part where he lay down to sleep.

That kind of error was common when rushing cleanup, but if he'd gone any slower, Ainz might have run out of mana. Given how much he still had left, maybe it wouldn't

have been an issue... but that was hindsight talking.

Nothing he could do about it now. The elf might be a bit confused, but hopefully he'd invent a plausible explanation on his own.

Ainz had used a lot of mana, but since he'd prepared carefully and made no mistakes, the remainder was enough to complete the plan.

"I'll be right back. Aura, Mare, help like we planned?"

"Yes, Lord Ainz! We're on it!"

"Um, r-right. I'll do my part!"

Ainz led the way, while the twins picked the man up, swinging by his limbs. Either one of them was strong enough to carry the man on their own, but there was a risk they'd bump into something and have that register as damage, canceling the spell and waking him up. Then Ainz would have to cast Control Amnesia again and run out of mana.

Of course—

I have another plan for that eventuality, so it wouldn't pose a real problem.

Ainz stepped out of the Green Secret House and activated Perfect Unknowable. Then he opened a Gate.

It led straight to the elf's bedroom.

He stepped through first, inspecting the bedroom interior, ears perked up.

Whew, that's a relief.

No one had been surprised by the Gate's appearance and gone running. Just to be sure, he stayed still a moment, listening closely.

Seems like we're good.

A ranger of Aura's level could probably be too quiet for Ainz to hear, but even she didn't stay in perfect stealth mode around the clock. If a veteran ranger had noticed something off about the man's house, guessed there might be more to it, and staked

the place out, that would be such bad luck, Ainz would have no choice but to suspect someone was out to get him. Best to assume nothing like that had happened.

He released Perfect Unknowable and poked his head through the Gate, signaling to the twins that they were free to carry the man through.

They executed the plan in silence.

Aura and Mare carefully laid the man down on the leaf bed. Letting him take damage here (and waking up) would be a very stupid mistake.

Sandman's Sand was stronger than regular old Sleep. A good shake could wake you from the latter, but Sandman's Sand would leave you under until you took actual damage.

If they left him like this, he would not wake up until someone found him and hurt him. He might even sleep until he died. That would undo all the efforts Ainz had taken to avoid causing a commotion.

With the elf on the bed, the next step was to wake him up. Ainz looked around, searching the closet he'd spied on his earlier exploration.

He found a wooden carving depicting a strange sort of creature—probably—like a mole or frog with a portly belly. He hadn't seen anything like this in the woods around them. Perhaps it was a fictional being from elf myths or legends. Ainz picked it up.

Definitely wood. Still... heavier than it looks. If the blow proves fatal... well, that's just his luck.

Even if this became a crime scene, no one could tie the murder to Ainz.

The twins saw him heft the statue and carried the man over beneath the shelf.

Aura and Mare nodded once and disappeared through the Gate. Ainz himself stood just outside of it.

He tossed the strange statue toward the ceiling.

This was Ainz's best shot at avoiding any suspicious deaths.

Before the statue landed, he jumped through the Gate and closed it behind him.

"Good. Now for the final check. Wait right here."

"Okay! Got it! Almost done! Good luck, Lord Ainz!"

"Er, um, I'm sure you'll be just fine, Lord Ainz! But, um, I know you're running low on mana, so be careful!"

With that, Ainz cast Perfect Unknowable again, then used Greater Teleportation. This took him back to the elf's abode.

"Shit fire! That hurts like hell! Why'd it fall? Why was I even sleeping over here? Booze? I don't remember drinking... Goddamn, that stings!"

The elf was awake and glaring balefully at the statue. His eyes were tearing up, but Ainz couldn't help but grin.

Excellent! The perfect crime.

The man was clearly not acting—he genuinely didn't suspect a thing. Well, he was confused by the statue that had fallen on him but naturally didn't think anyone had broken into his house and thrown it at him.

"...Wait."

Ainz had been about to teleport away but quickly stopped.

Did he notice something amiss? He can't know it was us, but does he know someone was here? This is a shop; could there be a security device or... a magic item? One even I couldn't detect?

"Maybe Tsungoggua was trying to tell me something!"

Tsungoggua? There were no monsters in Yggdrasil by that name.

"Tsungoggua, Tsungoggua! Please send me a sign!"

The elf was on his knees, head bowed to the wooden statue. Clearly the pose of a faithful man in supplication.

...Some sort of indigenous religion? This man sure talks to himself a lot. Does he think someone's listening? A prayer to some god named Tsungoggua?

This man had gone from useful tool to something far more sinister. Ainz wondered if it might be better if he snatched him up and finished him off but decided against it. There was a strong possibility he was just *religious*. Best to be cautious, though. He'd have preferred to leave something to watch over him, but even Ainz had no good options there. None of his spells would help. At best, he could use magic to peek in on him from time to time.

Ainz clicked the tongue he didn't have, then used Greater Teleportation to return to the Green Secret House exterior.

Canceling Perfect Unknowable, Ainz gave the twins a thumbs-up and got big grins back. Honestly, that last bit had been concerning, but without a good way to deal with it, it seemed pointless to worry them.

"All right, everybody! I thank you for all your assistance. Today's business has come to a close," Ainz said, being very theatrical. The twins looked momentarily taken aback but soon smiled again. "The hour is late, so let us head to bed, lest we find ourselves weary in the morning."

"Yes, Lord Ainz!" they chorused.

"The date may already have changed, but when should we rise? You may wake when you please, but no sleeping all day. If you can be up by nine, I'll fetch breakfast for us from Nazarick"

"Okay!" they said, and Aura elbowed Mare in the ribs.

He had meant none of this to sound spiteful, so he just said, "Then—good work, one and all."

"Good work, Lord Ainz!" they said.

"And good night!"

3

They set out for the dark elf village.

Fenrir was running across the land, following the elf man's directions. If they'd been able to spot any landmarks from above, they could have skipped right to the end, but even Aura had come up empty.

Speeding through the forest meant damp air—as in the air itself was practically green—constantly buffeting Ainz's face. That distinctly pungent smell of the forest made his nostrils quiver. Perhaps it was only his imagination, but the air here felt very different from the Tove Woodlands. If it were not all in his mind, then this world was more varied than he'd imagined; even similar terrain contained an infinite myriad.

This thought left him with an urge to explore the world at large.

An ordinary human in this forest would find their path blocked by hanging vines and overgrown thickets. Unable to travel in a straight line, they could easily get themselves all turned around.

The man had said the dark elf village was a good week out from the capital.

Elves might be adapted to life in the forest, but even they could likely manage only nine or ten miles a day. That meant their destination was at least sixty miles out. They'd covered that distance in just over an hour. If they hadn't felt a need to keep an eye on their surroundings, they could have made it in less.

That just proved how good Fenrir was. His Forestwalk skill was particularly handy. The trees and brush seemed to move aside to let them pass, allowing them to charge straight ahead. Even Fenrir could not have gotten them this far in so short a time without that skill.

Now—

"It should be around here..." Aura said, frowning.

She was seated in front of Ainz.

Since elven villages were made of trees, it was sort of hard to spot them in a forest.

That was probably why their culture had adopted that lifestyle. The capital's approach—felling the trees around the city—was an exception to the rule.

But they had no means of hiding the villages from a skilled ranger like Aura. It seemed unlikely they'd missed anything along the way, so they must not be there yet.

"If the path we've taken was the right one, then there's no cause for concern. We don't want to get *too* close just yet," Ainz said, tapping the mask he wore. "Best we locate the village first, then hide ourselves somewhere the dark elves won't find us and gather information."

He was a little scared they'd come to the wrong place entirely. But that was not very likely.

This forest was a sea of trees, with no landmarks anywhere—Ainz alone could never have gone anywhere without getting lost. The path the elf had described was all, *There's a boulder at twenty-five-hundred paces, turn toward the three trees in a row, and go another three thousand steps.* It didn't really make sense to Ainz.

But it did to Aura.

She'd certainly been confused at times and had to stop and look around, but once her mind was made up, she'd led the way with confidence.

Are all rangers this good, or is it just Aura?

He hadn't been nearly as impressed by it on their way to the dwarf country, but this time they clearly would never have gotten *anywhere* without a ranger.

Yggdrasil had had its share of jungle zones, but in hindsight, they were still less punishing than this. He had never imagined a real jungle could be this formidable.

It was also true he found it *exciting*.

The jungle depths... who knows what we might find. Wasn't that the motto of the World Searchers?

Exploration was itself a thrill. That was the essence of the true adventurer Ainz sought to create.

Leave everything behind and set out to see the world...

Ainz shook off that thought. He could never do that. He was the absolute ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown. Exploration was a luxury not meant for him.

But every now and then might not be out of the question—not abandoning Nazarick entirely or anything, of course. Just vacations.

Argh, my mind's running in circles. Can I honestly say I'm not just here to shirk my duties and escape my burdens? I'm treading water, making no progress at all. Are undead incapable of personal growth? Or am I just particularly bad at it? Thoughts like this lead to nothing but sighs. No use brooding. Focus... This trip is about Aura and Mare. Next time, maybe I'll take Cocytus and Demiurge somewhere... It's been far too long.

He remembered when they'd obtained that land-sailing ship together on the Katze Plain.

Right! No more negativity. Think positive! If I'm taking more trips like this, it'll be hard without a ranger, but it might be fun to overcome things with sheer wit and inspiration!

This time they had Aura, so things were going swimmingly. But that also left Ainz with little to do himself. That was rather dull.

Naturally, he wasn't about to stick his nose in and insist he could do things; that would just make Aura defer to him. If he screwed up, she would likely gently guide him back on course, but...

I don't want that at all. I'm already frightened enough that I'm getting in the way of properly running my own nation.

Ainz would have loved to try an adventure without Aura's steady hand and have a grand old time with everyone debating about the best course of action. But perhaps he only felt that way because he knew he could explore with the best of them.

Even if he got lost in unknown territory and couldn't find his way out, he could always teleport away.

Even if an unknown creature attacked from the brush, he could handle it—and, worst-case scenario, escape to Nazarick.

Sending adventurers into uncharted territory is a fine idea. Ainzach agreed with me. But I can't assume they can do what I can. Watching Aura work here just shows the importance of training them properly.

Ainz did not want them dying on their adventures.

They're training in the Tove Woodlands...

But that was wholly under Nazarick's control and was a far cry from this place. Perhaps they could train there and hold the final exam here. He'd have to discuss it with Mare later.

“Er, um, Lord Ainz?”

“Mm? Oh, sorry, Aura. I got lost in thought there. What is it?”

“Uh, just... what do we do now?”

Ainz looked up at the sky. The branches grew so thick that he could not see a scrap of blue. But the light itself had taken on a reddish hue that made the hour all too clear.

“Hmm. Like last time, we should secure a location outside the territory of intelligent life-forms like the dark elves—somewhere hard to find. And then we'll base our operations there.”

“Understood! Can I have a little time?”

Ainz nodded, and Aura hopped down from Fenrir's back. But before she could run off, Ainz stopped her.

“Wait, Aura. Take Fenrir with you. We'll wait here, but no cause for concern. I'll summon another monster to replace him. Does that sound okay, Mare?”

“Y-yes, Lord Ainz.”

Mare's voice came from behind. They'd been riding the wolf with the twins on either side of Ainz.

With Fenrir's intelligence, he could easily detect anyone approaching—an ability Ainz and Mare found quite helpful, as they were not skilled in that department. But having

him stay behind would force Aura to move alone.

If she had a way of summoning monsters like Ainz, that would be one thing, but she had no such skill, and Ainz didn't want to risk sending her into unknown territory without a guard. She could use a magic item instead, but that summoning took an action, and given the time limit, it wasn't the best choice.

Maybe I'm being a worrywart, but bringing Fenrir would also let her finish the job faster.

Aura swallowed her arguments and said, "Will do!" instead. Ainz and Mare dismounted, and she rode away on the wolf. They were soon hidden by the dense brush.

"Now then, Mare. Let's keep ourselves out of sight here. If anyone discovers us, Aura's efforts will be in vain."

"R-right. Um, then... should we use the Green Secret House?"

"Good idea, but there's another step I should take first."

On his own, Perfect Unknowable was always his best option, but there was no way to cast that spell on others. Mare couldn't use it, so they'd need another approach. Like Ainz had mentioned earlier, they would summon a monster.

Mare pulled out a small figure from his item box.

A magic item—Magical Beast Statue: Cerberus.

This had been made by the same creator as the Animal Statue: Warhorse he'd used in the past. It was carefully carved, capturing a snapshot of the creature's rippling muscles and making it look ready to come to life. A true work of art.

When Ainz used it, the statue grew, expanding into the shape of a great beast.

As expected, a Cerberus appeared.

Biting with those three doglike, lionlike heads, raking with those razor-sharp claws, injecting poison from its snakelike tail, able to add fire damage to all its attacks, immune to all varieties of flame and poison—this high-level beast boasted solid combat stats.

Anyone who wanted to summon the Cerberus with a spell would need to be able to cast Summon Tenth-Tier Monster. That should be some indication of its raw power.

But to a player of Ainz's skill, it was hardly a major threat. Few things were.

Summoned monsters were not designed to solo kill other players—they were all about exploiting weaknesses, trapping opponents, increasing general DPS, or perhaps tanking incoming damage.

Certainly, it would fare better in a straight-up fight if he used skills to buff it right. The undead Ainz summoned certainly came with a few bells and whistles. But this strength would simply never be a match for a player in the same level bracket as Ainz; a player would risk losing only if it was an incredibly unfavorable matchup or if their build was fundamentally flawed.

The reason Ainz had gone with the Cerberus over, say, an eyeball corpse was because he'd assumed beast-type monsters came with solid detection skills.

And in a dense forest, a good nose and ears were much more useful than eyes.

This Cerberus wasn't as high-level as Fenrir, but it had *three* heads. That meant it was three times as good at sniffing things out. Probably.

"Yikes," Mare said, having never seen this beast before. Ainz was almost certain it wasn't because Mare thought it looked strong.

If the two of them were to fight, the Cerberus could never win. Mare could likely defeat it with one hand tied behind his back.

"Cerberus, if you smell anyone else approaching, let us know."

The three heads each growled. It seemed motivated and confident. Very *you got it, boss!* Pleased with this, Ainz shot Mare a boastful look—but the boy likely didn't pick up on that at all.

"Oh, how far out can you distinguish scents? A few hundred yards?"

The Cerberuses—or the heads of the one—all froze.

"What?"

This time he was getting *huh? uh-oh*, and *yoiks*, followed by a nervous *a few hundred yards?*

At least, that was how Ainz read it. There was a possibility he was wrong.

“I mean, you have three heads. You can smell farther than Fenrir, right?”

The Cerberus let out a whine and displayed its belly.

If it had been a puppy, that could have been cute, and even Ainz might have been tempted to give it a rub. But this was a three-headed monster. It was the opposite of cute. The bulk alone did it no favors, and the hideous faces defied the concept.

When Ainz didn’t move, Mare decided to be nice and rub the beast’s belly.

“...Mm? What’s this?” Ainz asked.

Careful not to knock Mare over, the Cerberus got back to its feet, letting out a grim growl. *I’ll try. I can do it! No, I can’t.* The heads did not seem aligned on this.

Ainz settled on the most negative of the three.

“...If you can’t, that’s fine. I don’t want to force you to attempt the impossible and have it end in failure. Can you at least monitor scents around us and let us know if anyone unfamiliar approaches?”

He may have suggested the range himself, but he’d been aware that a few hundred yards was clearly unreasonable.

Ah-ha-ha, yeah, that we can do, boss. Can do. You got it!

Ainz nodded. “Then let’s go with that.”

The heads growled and sniffed the air.

Incidentally, Ainz did not need to voice these orders aloud. Even under the influence of spells like Silence, summoned monsters were his to command. Anyone who wanted to disrupt the link between summoner and familiar would have to use an extremely niche class build called anti-summoner. Ainz had spoken aloud only because he knew Mare would be left out if he and the Cerberus just stood there staring at each other.

while communicating telepathically.

"Next, let's do what you suggested, Mare. Set up the Green Secret House so we can shelter within. Best if no one has a chance of spotting us."

"Okay!"

Mare looked pleased his suggestion was approved.

It had been a good one.

Neither of them had the means to cover his tracks. If they carelessly wandered around, they might well leave signs that any wilderness expert could easily use to hunt them down.

The less they moved, the better. Their best option was probably Camouflage, a spell druids and rangers used to keep themselves quiet, but sadly, no one present had access to that. Mare was a druid, but his specific build was pretty extreme, focused mainly on mass-extermination spells. Without using items, he had no access to the bulk of the standard druid spellbook, barring a few buffs.

In which case, hiding inside the Green Secret House was the most viable option. By staying put, they left no tracks.

Just one problem.

It really wasn't a good look.

Aura was out working her butt off, and he was kicking back in a cottage.

Naturally, Ainz was familiar with the phrase *idle hands are the devil's tools*. There was a time when someone had used that line as an excuse for foisting work off on him, which had compelled him to look it up. And he remembered Squishy Moe saying there was no greater hindrance than a fool with a work ethic.

So doing nothing was the right choice.

If he was simply here as the King of Darkness, entrusting a task to one of the floor guardians who served him, that would be well and fine. But what had he claimed this expedition was supposed to be?

A paid vacation.

And if the man who'd proposed that was kicking back and making children go out and work in his place, how could he help but feel guilty?

He pushed his brain into overdrive but couldn't think of any way to help Aura with her work. Nor could he think of anything to do from his current position. At best, he could claim to be keeping Mare entertained.

Looking after a child is a feeble excuse... or worse, a bald attempt to wriggle off the hook. But what else is there? Nothing I do would back Aura's task. Is there anything I could do that would impress—or at least prove I know how to be the grown-up in the room?

He felt sure there must be some role he could play here.

But racking his brain produced no good solutions.

Dejected, he turned to Mare.

"I guess we'll sit in the Green Secret House and wait for Aura to get back."

"Okay!"

Mare's cheerful grin felt like some small salvation.

•

There exists a magical beast known as the ankylooursus.

From a distance, it looked like a bear, but failure to immediately recognize the difference would likely prove fatal.

They averaged a good two or three yards tall. Two forelegs on each side (a total of four) with two hind legs. Two of the four forelimbs were primarily used for combat, with two-foot-long jagged claws as hard as burnished steel. At the back was a long, thick tail that ended in a tip that widened out like a hammerhead.

And the bulk of its body was covered in thick plate armor—an advanced type of scale. The raw power this frame could command was prodigious. Between the muscles and the sharp claws, it could easily slice through any human's armor.

But that was the only thing to fear.

It had no skills of note, could use no powerful spells. The only magic the ankyloursus knew was Fragrance, and that was not a combat spell. Within this forest, it was a top predator—but not *the* top.

But there were exceptions.

This particular ankyloursus was more than four yards tall. Its raw power alone could spell doom for monsters with tricky skills or powerful magic.

To the untrained eye, it might appear to be a different species entirely—this was an ankyloursus worth calling a *lord*.

Lifting its face from the creature it'd been feeding on, the ankyloursus let out a low growl, one that would strike fear into the hearts of anyone who heard it. Intestines slid free from the corner of its jaw.

Its breath tinged with blood, it sniffed the air. There was fresh blood on its face, but it could smell past that, detecting two odors it had never smelled before. The two scents mingled. Perhaps mates.

Its belly was full.

It could let them pass.

But irritation propelled it to a slow lumber.

This was its territory. Intruding, walking around like they owned the place? Unacceptable.

It rose up on its hind legs and raked the bark of a nearby tree with its claws, then rubbed itself against the trunk. Clear evidence that this was its domain.

It began moving toward the odors, casting Fragrance along the way. This would disguise the scent of blood as well as the odor of its own body. That was how a creature the size of the ankyloursus got close to its prey. Capturing anything in this forest otherwise would be nigh impossible.

There were no signs they'd noticed it. If they had, they would be acting differently. Stopping to listen closely, for instance. Or maybe making a beeline out of here. These creatures did neither. Or did they think they could win?

The ankyloursus stayed as quiet as it could until the scent was near. The trees were still too dense to get a clear view.

But scent alone was enough. It always hunted like this. If it could see them, they could see it. It never hurried until it reached that range, moving stealthily, tracking the odor carefully, then a lunge—that last burst of speed was the linchpin of its hunt.

It was close enough. The scent stayed still.

And so it broke into a run—just like any other hunt. Despite its bulk, it slipped through the trees like the wind.

This was no handy skill like Forestwalk. When it had staked a claim to this territory, it had simply toppled enough trees that it could easily charge around. Naturally, no smaller tree could ever impede it, but if its prey was nimble, that might let it get away.

Its strength was certainly overwhelming, but it did not succeed on every hunt. Thus, it prepared.

The source of the odors stood before him.

One dark and small, one dark and large. The small one rode on top of the large one.

Not mates. Likely different creatures entirely.

That was not unusual. Creatures like this could be found from time to time. They helped each other. A wise way to protect themselves from predators. The one on top might have unusual skills, while the one below was fleet of foot.

But to the ankyloursus, they were merely another meal.

It smirked.

At this range, they would not escape. The little one was barely a mouthful, but the lower one was sizable enough. The ankyloursus was full now, so it would bury them to eat later.

But... something was odd.

It was charging forward, legs pounding the ground. Even the dullest creature would spot it and take action at this point.

Why did these dark creatures show no fear? Why did they not run? Most things it had met did both. Others of its kind were the only rare exception.

Were they frozen in fear?

It considered that as it charged.

The meat of the petrified was not the best. It preferred to leave them half-alive and let them bleed out—it was best when the meat went limp. Feasting on the organs while the prey still lived was always good. Flesh after it abandoned hope was truly delectable.

“Graghhhhhh!”

It rose up, howling at its prey.

This was no mere threat—it was *trying* to scare them.

Run. Perhaps you will live. It will make your flesh taste better.

A whisper crossed its mind, but there was no running at this distance. It knew the hunt was a success.

“Huh, never seen one of these before. What a cute bear!”

The little one was chirping.

Oh, right, it remembered. It had seen creatures like this little one high up in the trees. The average ankylooursus could climb trees, but this one was far too large. If it wanted to eat food in trees, it knocked entire trees down, slamming them into the ground and eating what fell from them. It had been full at the time, and they were far away, so it hadn't bothered.

But this one was on the ground and ready for eating.

The dark thing beneath was just looking up at it.

Its claws came down.

The lower beast was its target. This would prevent them from running.

There was a clang—and its forelimb grew hot. Then the heat turned to pain.

It crumpled, falling back.

The ankyloursus looked at the source of the pain.

Its forearm was still there. The limb was not gone, but it hurt far too much to move.

“Grrrrr...”

Looking again, the smaller prey had some snakelike wriggly thing dangling from its arm. Had it attacked with that? Maybe it was poisonous. The ankyloursus had been bitten by a giant poisonous snake as an infant, and this felt similar.

“Yeah, yeah, calm down—don’t thrash around.”

The little one waved a hand, and a nearby tree snapped. The snakelike thing had struck the tree. The impact split the bark and detonated the wood inside.

It could do that, too. But seeing it done so casually sent a shiver down its spine.

Was this thing *actually* small?

It was beginning to look much bigger.

“Good, good, don’t be scared. See, I’m not scary.”

Chirping away, the little one split away from the big one. It landed on the ground, forelimbs spread wide as it approached. Such a tiny thing. It towered over it.

The ankyloursus was a predator, and this was prey—or so it thought. So... why did this small creature keep approaching, totally unafraid?

It was almost like—like *it* was the prey.

With that thought, its gaze broke away to glance at the bigger creature.

That one simply watched from the side.

This only confused the ankyloursus even more. It had never met a creature that acted like this.

The ankyloursus was spooked, so it did the only thing that still made sense: It turned tail and fled.

When it was young—shortly after leaving its mother and the den—it had often run from foes it could not handle. It saw no shame in fleeing what it could not understand.

But then something wrapped around its hind limb—

“Hokayyy...”

—and the world spun.

With a tug and a sudden sensation of floating in the air, the ankyloursus found itself on its back.

How had it been flipped over?

It sat up and saw the long snake thing coiled around one hind leg. The little creature stood at the other end.

The ankyloursus had no idea what was going on, but... the little one must be responsible despite its feeble size.

“Don’t you run away,” the little one growled, baring its teeth.

The chirping sound it made was clearly a threat to eat the ankyloursus. This little one could attack prey without provoking hair-raising fear. Maybe it was the kind of predator who ambushed creatures. Were all the things in those trees this strong?

“Hmm, maybe I shouldn’t. I can’t keep Lord Ainz waiting. Might be easier to kill and skin this thing than capture it... but that would be such a waste! It could help with my experiments. Hmm. And Lord Ainz did say killing should be a last resort...”

The little one was staring at it. Was it not very fast? Was that why it was using the stretchy snake thing?

It tried to peel the snake thing off its limb. And failed. It was too tight and wouldn't come off. So it tried its claw.

Those could cut everything.

Grrr?

Confusion. It wouldn't snap. The first time anything had withstood its claws.

"Okay, okay, stop fighting."

Its body *slid*. The little one was winding in the binding snake. That left a furrow in the ground beneath it.

There was no room left for doubt. This tiny thing was incredibly powerful.

"Well, fine. I don't really like doing this, but I'll try it once, and if it doesn't work, I can always kill it then."

The snake thing came off the ankyloursus's limb. Before it could even consider running, there was a *snap* and a shooting pain.

"Grahhh!"

Pain after pain, its arms, legs, face, belly, tail—that one didn't really hurt—and, when it rolled up, its back. When it flinched, a pain shot across its snout.

It tried to fight against the pain and run, but incredible force pinned it down. It looked and found the big one with a single paw pinning it in place. That one paw pressed with enough force that the ankyloursus felt like it was being pushed into the soil.

How was this even possible? How could there be *two* things this much more powerful?

The pain continued without end.

Each time the snake cracked, more pain came. It was like sheets of rain—only the thunder never stopped.

Only when it no longer had any fight left in it—only then did the sound stop. Every part of it hurt. A hot flush. It felt like its body had swelled to two or three times its usual size.

“You finally settled down.”

Was it destined to be eaten? That was what it had done to all its prey.

“Right, you finally realize who’s stronger? Then let’s get going.”

The little one was baring its teeth again, but could such a small mouth eat all of the ankyloursus? Or would it be shared with the bigger one?

The ankyloursus had given up on life. It would likely taste quite good.

•

Inside the Green Secret House, Ainz and Mare were working together.

First, they used magic to make a table out of what looked like obsidian. On this, they laid out a spread of food. There was also hot soup, but to keep it warm, they intended to serve that just before they ate. There were three glasses with ice and a bottle of soda in the center of the table.

The Green Secret House was thoroughly ventilated, even with the door closed, with a magical contrivance that meant sounds and smells never made it to the outside. But if they left the door open, that protection wouldn’t stay in effect—even if they remained cooped up inside, when Aura returned, she’d find the smell of lunch wafting toward her.

Scents like this traveled farther than most would expect. Ainz knew Aura would never come back without checking her surroundings and making sure it was safe, but if the smell reached her, there was no guarantee it wouldn’t reach someone else. The scent of a tantalizing meal wafting through the woods could alert anyone paying attention that an intelligent being was out there somewhere.

The dark elves themselves did not have animalistic noses. But this world’s class builds could make that sort of thing possible. Even if the dark elf villagers couldn’t, they might have tamed beasts that they could communicate with.

So what Ainz was up to had a decent chance of undermining all Aura's hard work. He was only too aware of that. Why were they hustling about the table anyway? Ainz had put his empty skull to work, and this was the only idea he'd come up with that allowed him to assuage his guilt.

When Aura came home tired from work, he wanted to have a hot meal waiting for her.

Obviously, if that resulted in wasting her efforts, it would blow up in his face. But then he considered the issue from another angle.

All they had to do was prevent anyone else from finding them.

The concern here was that the scent would scatter in all directions, potentially drawing unwanted attention. On the other hand, that meant all they had to do was stop the smell from spreading.

The easiest way to do that would be to put dishes on the table and serve the food only once Aura was back and the door was firmly closed. However, that would lessen the impact.

He wanted the spread laid out the moment she stepped in.

That element of surprise was critical. The whole point, even.

So he'd momentarily returned to Nazarick and asked the head chef for a meal with a minimal olfactory signature. Then he had Mare use a magic item to summon a wind elemental that blew the air in the area skyward. Only when the air rose above the treetops did it begin to truly spread out. Particles that imparted scents were heavier than the surrounding air, but Ainz wasn't completely confident that principle actually held true in this world. They might not fall at all, but even if they did, they would be considerably weakened.

But the upward draft did make the leaves rustle slightly—so little, Ainz himself barely noticed—so if someone with sharp eyes was watching from above, that unnatural movement might catch their attention. However, when Ainz had flown up to scout the other day, there had been nothing in the air but regular birds, so this was not a major concern for him.

"Er, um, Lord Ainz. You can take this back now."

Mare had finished his preparations and was holding out the orb Ainz had given him.

This had been dubbed the randoment and was a top-tier magic item. It appeared to be a clear glass orb with four lights spinning constantly within.

Four times a day, it allowed the user to summon an elemental and have it serve you for an hour.

It could summon fire, water, wind, and earth elementals. As well as compound elementals—fire and earth gave lava, water and wind gave blizzard, earth and water gave bog, fire and water gave steam, earth and wind gave sandstorm, and fire and wind gave sirocco.

The four core elements might provide greater elementals with levels in the low forties, common elementals in the mid-twenties, or lesser elementals in the single digits.

If it summoned a greater elemental, it would be just the one. The common elemental quantity was randomized but could be anywhere from one to three. The lesser quantity was also random but would be at least three, with an upper limit of six.

But with compounds, the greater elementals would be low fifties, common in the low thirties, and lesser in that ten-to-fifteen range. But all compound elementals spawned on their own.

That made it sound very useful, but unfortunately, the type of elemental summoned was also random. And strong elementals had far worse odds of appearing than the weak ones. Getting a greater elemental was every bit as hard as landing a Shooting Star.

Since you couldn't get the elemental you needed when you needed it, it was far too unreliable in tactical situations. If you summoned an earth elemental while flying, all you could do was watch it fall. Mare had actually been forced to use it three times to get a wind elemental.

"No need. You can keep it, Mare. As you've no doubt noticed, it's an odd duck. If you think you can find a use for it, all the better. If it let the user summon superior elementals, or at least elementals with impure and holy attributes—well, that might raise the utility, but it's still only usable by druids. If you don't want it, all we can do is put it on display in the treasury."

It might help out a newbie in a pinch, but at Ainz's and Mare's level, it couldn't even generate a viable tank. He'd been carrying it around in his item box with the intent of handing it off to someone low-level.

"Y-you're sure?"

"By all means. In your hands, it'll be a hundred times more useful than it would ever be gathering dust in the Treasury."

"Th-thank you! Er, um... do you think summons with this would count as using spells of that attribute?"

"Mm?"

"Um, I also have an item that summons elementals, but that item requires I first cast a spell of the desired energy, either primary or secondary."

In other words, if Mare wanted to use that item to generate a fire elemental, he would have to do so after casting a spell that possessed the fire energy attribute—Fireball, for instance (although Mare didn't have access to that spell).

"I believe it would fulfill that condition, but it would be a good idea to test it out when you have time."

"O-okay, I'll do that!"

Once, Ainz had looked into the abilities of all the NPCs—before he fully trusted them—and he'd heard about this accessory then.

Mare's item would always summon a single high-level elemental, but only once every twenty-four hours, and it only stuck around for ten minutes. In essence, it really wasn't worth much. There were plenty of better items out there.

But Mare showed no interest in swapping it out of his kit because BubblingTeapot had given it to him.

Ainz knew all the NPCs shared that sentiment.

They knew full well there was better gear out there, but the NPCs showed no signs of changing their loadouts. If they did swap anything, it was always for other gear they'd

had from the get-go. Naturally, if Ainz handed them something, they'd use it, but none of them would ever voluntarily ask to change their equipment. With the sole exception of Albedo, who had asked to borrow any number of items for combat training purposes.

It was a kind of bondage.

That was hardly a polite way to put it, but the phrase seemed apt.

And Ainz himself—

“Er, um, is something wrong?”

Mare's worried look pulled him back to reality. He'd been dwelling on the futile again.

“Mm? Oh, never mind. It was nothing at all. I was just thinking about how I would use that item in your shoes, Mare. But summoning an elemental in advance may be the only prac—”

Outside the door, Cerberus moved.

When Ainz turned to the door, he heard it growl—all three heads pointed the same way. Clearly a “someone's coming” signal.

Ainz and Mare exchanged glances.

“We took care of the smells... but did someone discover us anyway?”

“I—I doubt that, but...”

The Cerberus had not met Aura or Fenrir. But it had likely picked up her scent from them and would not react like this.

They both followed the guard dog's gazes. The trees made it impossible to see anything. Mare put a hand behind his ear, trying to pick up any aural clues.

“Oh, um, there is something coming this way.”

“So... definitely not Aura, then?”

Aura and Fenrir would make almost no noise.

"S-sorry, I can't say more than... than that. B-but, um. You're right, Lord Ainz, my sister wouldn't make this much noise. Unless... she's checked the area, is certain its safe, and is deliberately making noise to let us know she's headed back..."

So he knew nothing.

"Oh, well. Then I'll step out, as we planned."

Ainz cast Perfect Unknowable and directed Cerberus to accompany him.

Since these instructions were communicated via his mind alone, requiring no words, the concealment spell was no detriment. But Cerberus was unable to locate Ainz—which meant Ainz had to position himself carefully. He didn't want his summon knocking him over.

Hmm, Perfect Unknowable really is great. It's a shame the only other guardian who can use it is Pandora's Actor, when disguised as me. Scrolls might make anything possible, but then we'd run into problems with materials and time limits...

Muttering inside his mind, Ainz let Cerberus lead the way. Soon even Ainz could hear the noises of trampled underbrush—and saw a shadow looming.

A bear?

But this was no ordinary bear. It had six legs, and its fur looked wet and matted. Perhaps a magical beast with a water generation skill?

But Ainz's gaze was drawn upward—to Aura, who was perched on its back. She had a whip in her hands and snapped it occasionally—each time, the bear flinched.

Fenrir was walking beside them.

...I don't think Aura had a beast like this originally. What's going on?

He could always just ask. The returning party members had noticed the Cerberus and were watching with caution—but hadn't yet attacked, unsure if it was a wild Cerberus or one Ainz had summoned.

If it was one of Ainz's minions, his guardians could sense that, but maybe that didn't apply to summons.

Ainz canceled Perfect Unknowable.

"Lord Ainz!" Aura's caution evaporated instantly. She looked delighted. "Come on, move!"

The bear looked reluctant to approach, but Aura cracked the whip again. It let out a squeal that made him want to protest animal abuse as it nervously approached.

When they reached Ainz, Aura jumped off.

"Welcome back, Aura."

"Glad to be back, Lord Ainz! I imagine you have questions, so let me explain. This bear-type magical beast appeared to be the head honcho in this area, so I placed it under my control. The whip convinced it I was stronger. I'm sure I don't need to explain why I did that, right?"

Ainz would have preferred she did, but... well, he could imagine that much.

"Honestly, I'm unsure how strong this creature is. But... enough that the dark elves would fear it?"

"Oh, absolutely. I imagine at your strength, trivial creatures like this all look the same! Um, it's definitely not all *that* strong, but I imagine a normal—I mean, the average dark elf would consider it too dangerous to go near. From what I can tell, everyone's been diligently avoiding its territory. In other words, if we camp here, it's unlikely anyone will intrude. I recommend it!"

"Wonderful news."

Ainz nodded.

Dominating a creature would be more useful than killing it. At this juncture, there was no telling how much time they'd need to locate and observe the dark elves. Killing the area boss prematurely would change the flow of the forest, and the dark elves might well come to investigate—leaving it alive would help prevent such unexpected encounters.

Still—

“Aura, I do not mean to doubt your judgment, but don’t you already have the maximum number of beasts under your command? By dominating this creature, has a Nazarick beast been released?”

Generally speaking, that would not be a conscious decision—the oldest tamed creature would be forcibly released. This applied to summons or creations, as well. *Yggdrasil* rarely showed warning messages or allowed players to choose which creature to free.

“Not a problem! Beast tamers are linked to the creatures under their control, but this is different—there is no link. In other words, it isn’t *completely* under my control. I just convinced it I’m far stronger. So I can’t use any tamer skills, like buffing its abilities.”

“I see... so that makes it not completely safe, either.”

There was a chance its animal instincts would take over, and it would suddenly attack. But he was sure Aura had taken that into account. She must have decided no one here was at any risk of injury. It never hurt to be sure, though.

Trying to figure out what level it was, Ainz remembered his giant pet.

“...How’s it compare to Hamusuke?”

Aura winced.

No need to look chagrined. It’s a bear; looks alone suggest it’s much stronger.

“Permission to speak freely?”

“Of course. I may be Hamusuke’s master but will take no offense. Give me your unvarnished opinion.”

“In that case—if it was pure brawn against brawn, this is stronger than Hamusuke originally was. B-but! Hamusuke can use magic, which makes it hard to predict which of them would actually win. An effective spell could really change the flow of battle. And Hamusuke has the warrior class now. With armor on, she’d absolutely win the fight.”

Ainz could only picture her rolling around, asleep. For some reason, the death knight was with her.

He found himself mildly annoyed.

If she was just a pet, then lazing around was all fine and dandy, and one could argue that parading around with Momon *was* Hamusuke's job. And he knew she'd worked hard to earn that warrior class. But seeing someone goof off while everyone else was hard at work was always frustrating.

He almost said, *No need to bend over backward to defend Hamusuke, Aura*, but swallowed the words instead. He knew how she must feel. This had little to do with Hamusuke's actual skill.

"I see..." What else could he say? He certainly wasn't about to say anything nice about Hamusuke here. He moved on. "And there just happened to be a beast of this quality here. Or are beasts like this common in the forest? We'll have to investigate. We didn't come across anything high-level on the way here, did we?"

"No. Maybe we just breezed past their territories, but I didn't spot anything. We might find more if we go looking, but... should we?"

"Not worth it, no. We did not come here to document the local bestiary."

"Understood, Lord Ainz. Exploring does sound like fun, though! I mean, we didn't find anything like this bear in the Tove Woodlands. There's a strong chance we'd find area-specific herbs or other creatures only found here—adapted for this environment. Maybe we'll find parts of the forest where neat stuff is happening!"

This was a world of magic, and there were places with active anomalies out there.

A waterfall that flowed upward, a hill with a rainbow light column that appeared only when it hailed, a giant tornado that spawned in the desert once every few decades—the world allegedly abounded in extraordinary sights like these. Allegedly because, sadly, there was nothing of the sort in the territories the Nation of Darkness had swallowed up.

In *Yggdrasil*, places like that provided unique effects, rare materials, or unusual monsters.

This principle might well hold true here—for instance, the rainbow column was reputed to leave behind a rainbow-colored stone, as if that light had solidified. The stories claimed it was a huge boon during magic-item creation.

So placing these anomalies under Nation control would help to strengthen Nazarick.

“I doubt the elves know every inch of this forest. Like you said, we should explore it further in the future—perhaps send in our adventurers.”

The undead Ainz created would not be able to identify a new type of herb. At best, they could accompany the adventurers to carry their things.

“Now, let’s head back. We’re keeping Mare waiting.”

“Okay! Oh, Lord Ainz, just to be sure—this Cerberus is your summon?”

“Oh, naturally. It is. I called it out to serve in Fenrir’s stead.”

They began walking. Fenrir and Cerberus followed. The bear clearly didn’t want to join them, but Aura cracked her whip, and it start trudging along.

“...So, Aura, what are your plans for that thing? If you don’t have it fully under control, I assume you have ways of dealing with it?”

“Yup. Mind if I take it back to Nazarick?”

“And let it roam the sixth floor?”

If it was smart enough to converse with, like Hamusuke, that was one thing, but this had little to no intellect, and giving it free rein seemed like a bad idea. Even a beast of this level could easily kill a regular maid.

Naturally, they could simply tell certain NPCs to avoid the sixth floor. But there were plant monsters living there, too. They would need to ensure their safety.

“I wasn’t planning on letting it roam, no. But as a beast tamer, I thought it would be worth having creatures under my control without using my class skills. I figured this would help me experiment with that.”

“Hmm. Well, I certainly want to help with that...”

A power impossible in *Yggdrasil* but achievable in this world. They had little potential for growth in game terms so would need to find other means of heightening their skills—so Ainz would prefer to back Aura's idea. Just—

"Does it have to be this beast? You couldn't start with something weaker? A level-one creature?"

With a beast like that, even if it did assault a regular maid, their equipment alone would let them handle it.

"I could do that, sure," Aura said, looking unconvinced. "If you say so, Lord Ainz—"

"—No, I'm not saying so. I just wondered—why this bear? Do you like bears?"

Aura spun around.

"Fen, don't you dare," she snapped. Then turned back facing front. "Sorry, Lord Ainz. Seemed like Fen was about to do something dumb."

He looked back but spotted nothing amiss. If Aura said so, it must be true.

"Uh, sure, no problem," he said, eyes forward again. "So... why a bear?"

"Well, it might not talk like Hamusuke, but it is relatively intelligent. You know how Fen doesn't talk but is still supersmart? Speech isn't really a good indicator of sentience. And smarter creatures are more easily trained."

True. He had maybe thought similar things while observing Fen in action. Satoru Suzuki had never once had a pet, but Fen's intelligence seemed far beyond what people meant by *smart dog*. Arguably, that was the nature of a *magical* beast.

"That's why Fen listens to Mare sometimes. So I figured, if I want to practice training beasts, it should be a smarter one. That, or start with a baby..."

"Which would take too much time? You'd need something that grew quickly, like dogs do... but that might not relate to training magical beasts."

You needed the right kind of creature for the job. Aura's suggestion was starting to seem like a good one.

"Just... what about outside of Nazarick? I mean, we've got that place filled with people from the kingdom, right? What about there?"

"Oh, the fake Nazarick I made? We've got adventurers using that, too. Like I said, I'm not gonna let it roam free. I'll keep it isolated until I'm sure it's totally trained."

"...I suppose that'll work."

"Great! Thank you, Lord Ainz! I know I pushed for that one."

She bowed her head, and he smiled.

"Not at all. Just as Albedo is doing combat training, I admire your efforts to improve yourself. You NPCs are my—no, the pride of Ainz Ooal Gown."

Aura's eyes went wide, and she stopped in her tracks.

This made Ainz worry he'd said something wrong. He had no memory of anything like that, but...

Did I just not notice? Was there something I said that upset her? Did she want to be exclusively Teapot's pride and no one else's? Or is she... happy? She's not smiling. Hmm. Better to expect the worst than assume the best.

But apologizing arbitrarily would never do. That left him with only one option.

"Oh, right. We prepared a meal in honor of your hard work. Mare and I got it ready together. Naturally, neither of us can cook, so we just brought it here from Nazarick."

That's right—he changed the subject.

He then let out a laugh, one eye on Aura's reaction.

Mm? She's not angry? That might be a fake smile, or just humoring me, but it is a smile.

Aura's smile looked genuine. Maybe she was just happy to hear food was ready. Or happy to have Ainz praise her.

Either way, I should praise the NPCs more.

That was a solemn vow. Gratitude left unspoken would never be understood. If you took it for granted, your wife's frustrations would pile on without your ever realizing it—someone in the guild had said as much, their voice extremely dead.

Was it Touch?

He was still trying to remember when the Green Secret House came into view. As they reached the door, it opened from the inside—Mare had been keeping an eye on things.

“A-Aura, welcome back.”

“Good to be here!”

They could see the table laid out behind him. Aura's gaze ran over it. Ainz grew nervous.

“Wow, that looks great!”

Aura was beaming, and Ainz was greatly relieved. He had feared she might be all, *Awww, I wanted katsudon...* He knew perfectly well she would never do that but couldn't quite shake the thought. It was very rare for him to eat with anyone, and he worried he was growing increasingly oblivious to people's tastes.

“Well, I'm sure the head chef will be delighted to hear that. We have some for Fenrir, too, but...”

There was a giant slab of meat for Fenrir on a stump near their base. A cow raised as livestock, freshly killed and dripping with blood. The ranch itself was a ways from Nazarick, and they were allowed to graze freely on the open fields.

According to the head chef, “This breed tastes better on a diet of grains, not grass.” His influence was strong, or others agreed with him—this meat had not proven popular within Nazarick.

Perhaps they should stop letting them roam and raise them to taste right. But they lacked the hands for it. Few among those forcibly evicted to create E-Rantel's subhuman district—as it was usually known—had the skills to raise livestock, and if they had, they'd been sent to the outlying villages. Still, the people fussing about the flavor were perfectly happy eating magical beasts instead.

“...Do we need anything for the new one?”

“It doesn’t need anything. It ate just before it met me. And not feeding it until it’s convinced I’m in charge and it has to obey is one training technique.”

“I see... Well, I get how that would work. Humans are also much more malleable if we’ve driven them into a corner.”

As they spoke, all three filed into the Green Secret House.

“Go on, eat,” Aura said as she crossed the threshold. Fenrir had been restraining himself, but now he tore into the meat. The bear merely watched. The way its shoulders slumped was distinctly human—Aura was right, it did seem rather intelligent.

The Cerberus did not require food. No use giving anything to summoned beasts. Food that gave buffs *might* take hold, but there was certainly no need to attempt that now. Ainz sensed the Cerberus was going, *For real, though? Bullying is not cool, bro! I'm staaarving!* but chalked it up to his imagination.

They took their places at the table.

“Dig in!”

The twins thanked him. Naturally, Ainz ate nothing. Aura took the first bite.

“Lord Ainz! It’s so good!”

Mare was nodding in agreement. They were both smiling.

“Glad to hear it. I’ll tell the head chef. Keep eating as you listen, but Aura’s inspection suggests this area will work as our base of operations. We’ll have to choose a proper location for the Green Secret House and move it there, and when that’s done, make moves to locate the dark elf village.”

They’d both stopped eating and were listening intently. True, Satoru Suzuki would never have dared eat while his boss talked business.

“Then we’ll establish friendly relations with the dark elves. I have a plan for that—if you’ll allow it, Aura, I’d like to try a Red Ogre Cried strat.”

Ainz grinned. This was a craven plan his old friends had named and carried out. He'd planned to summon a monster for it, but Aura had brought in a better beast. If she'd allow its use, the plan was guaranteed.

Since it wasn't yet fully in her control, it might disrupt things—but that would just ensure they took it seriously.

Monster acting skills varied wildly—he wasn't sure if it was by species or individual. The Evil Lord Wrath had awed the crowds, but Shizu claimed the circlet's performance was *rank*.

He'd intended to hide their identities and strength, but this would ingratiate them faster. If they had all the time in the world, other means might have been available, but with the Theocracy around, they didn't have that luxury.

"An ogre named Clyde? Or... Lord Ainz, what kind of strategy is this?" Aura asked.

Ainz's grin broadened. This was one of many schemes his guild pals had taught him.

The name came from something, but he'd never asked what. But the plan itself, he could explain—he had firsthand knowledge of it. He was about to—

"Oh! Like the legend of the red oni! I read a book about that!"

For the first time, Ainz connected the dots. His jaw closed, and he turned his gaze to the rafters above.

If the blue expanse had stretched out above, perhaps that would have spared him from the agony of having his ignorance turned back in his face by a mere child. Reminded him that he was but a small cog in a vast world.

But all he could see was the ceiling of the Green Secret House. Not a particularly stimulating sight.

Mare beamed up at him, the picture of innocence.

There was a slight chance the boy had jumped to conclusions.

"...Mare, very impressive. I've never read that story. This red oni cries?"

"It does! And based on what happens—I see why we need a bear!"

Mm. He was almost certainly right.

Ainz gave up the fight.

"...Yes, you know your stuff, Mare."

He smiled at them both.



CHAPTER 3

AURA'S TOUGHEST TASK

1

The dark elf village in the great forest was much like any other elf village.

It was worth noting that the race known as the wild elves had once been regular elves. But after they migrated to the open prairie and adapted to their new lives, it fundamentally changed their culture and physiques. Now everyone considered them a separate species entirely.

What about the dark elves? They had always been part of the same race, so by living in the same forest as regular elves, they had experienced no serious physical or magical changes. There had never been any major cultural differences, and their lives also revolved around elf trees. Like the rest of their kind, dark elves mostly took ranger or druid classes.

The only real difference was the color of their skin and a minor custom involving animal deterrents.

The dark elf village used odors to keep the beasts at bay. This was precious knowledge from before they moved to this forest—knowledge taught to them by the treants and other woodland dwellers. This involved planting strongly scented herbs around the village, scattering potions that animals loathed, and using druid spells—spells of limited range and duration that took a considerable portion of their ability to cast.

These techniques proved applicable in the dense forest they now called home, and the dark elf village was safer than just about anywhere in the region save the capital itself.

The other elves knew nothing of this. If the knowledge spread, the odor's effectiveness would be diminished. Animals—magical or otherwise—may seem dumb at a glance, but that was far from the truth. If they learned that prey always lay beyond that unpleasant odor, these same techniques would put the whole village at risk. For that reason, the dark elves could not share this knowledge with their distant relatives, however cordial their relations were otherwise.

But on that fateful day, their much-vaunted safety proved to be but thin ice.

In the distance, the roar of a wild thing echoed.

This alone was an everyday occurrence in the forest. At the break of dawn or deep into the night, they were rarely spared these bestial bellows.

There were tiny creatures capable of unleashing the most prodigious sounds. Hearing yet one more would not normally be cause for concern.

True, howls could be terrifying. There were magic beasts that could enhance their roars in all manner of ways and leave their victims quivering in fear. Other times it would provoke mindless panic, making them too afraid to fight or even render them unconscious.

But when the source of those cries was far away, these afflictions were no threat. A single distant howl suggested no danger; it was simply a part of the ambient sounds of nature.

But *this* time, one dark elf put the village on high alert.

He was of ordinary height for his kind, but his limbs were lithe, and his movements were polished in a way that conveyed the power contained within—it gave him the impression of being larger than he actually was.

His even features and chill disposition were considered quite attractive among the village ladies. Every dark elf in the forest knew this man. He was an experienced ranger and carried the Blueberry name—one of the original thirteen clans, central figures in the great migration.

Blueberry Egnia held a dark elf-style composite bow, one of the scant few the village owned.

When the Becoa bloomed—an event that came once every three years—the village held an archery contest, and only those who achieved truly impressive results were allowed to carry these bows.

Dark elf fighters gathered swiftly in response to Egnia's call. They were not members of an organized militia, merely rangers not currently out on a hunt.

Surrounded by dubious looks, Egnia's ears twitched as he studied distant sounds.

"I called you here for one good reason—that howl," he said, his voice tense. "I've heard it before. It's the roar of an ursus. An adult, fully grown."

He felt a ripple of tension run through the crowd.

As it should. Not a dark elf in this forest, not even the youngest children, could claim to not know of this beast and the threat it posed.

There were any number of dangerous monsters around this village, but the ankyloursus stood at the very top.

An ursus cub was one thing, but challenging a fully grown adult was tantamount to suicide. Arrows bounced off its natural armor, and one swipe of its claws could cleave a dark elf in two. And given the discrepancy in raw physical power, they stood little chance of fleeing successfully. A truly terrifying creature.

“...I heard the roar myself, but how can you be sure it was an ursus? Couldn’t you be mistaken?” a woman asked, frowning.

She was one of three adjutants to the hunt master and a ranger who also wielded a composite bow. Yet, her ears had been unable to discern what species had roared in the distance.

And there were creatures—like the adorable-looking howling bird—with skills that let them imitate the cries of all manner of monsters. Skills like that were not uncommon in this forest.

That made it difficult to hear a distant cry and speak with any authority about what creature was behind it. Her doubt was entirely reasonable. But Egnia was the best ranger in the village. Not just by his skill with a bow but by his honed senses and his knack for taking what they picked up and extrapolating accurately. The woman’s question was less rooted in a lack of trust than a faint hope that this was simply not true.

“Sadly, I’m quite sure. The way that bellow makes your hairs stand on end and threatens to overwhelm you—it is not a sound one simply forgets, no matter how much time passes. It lingers in the crevices of my ears. I will never forget it.”

The next to speak was the hunt master himself.

Power in this village was held by the council of elders and the masters of the hunt, apothecary, and ritual. There were three elders on the council, so he was one of six village leaders.

Yet, his hands held no composite bow. His area of expertise leaned toward trapping, but even with that in mind, his overall skills paled in comparison to Egnia's. Still, he was undoubtedly a highly skilled ranger, and though younger than Egnia, he was composed and well suited for his role.

"If a grown ursus is howling, are we assuming something wandered into its territory?"

Howls were generally reserved for calling out powerful foes or rivals of their own species. Perhaps marking a victory or announcing their location. Or maybe simply a mating call. Whatever the cause, the guess that its domain had been violated was a sound one.

Ankyloursi were territorial creatures. Their domains widened as they grew, but they rarely sought to relocate. It was almost unheard of for them to hunt outside their territory. Much more likely that something had come to them.

"Ugh, what a nightmare," the hunt master grumbled. "I dunno what monster stumbled in, but let's hope they get themselves eaten and peace is restored."

The dark elves all nodded. Egnia managed a strained smile.

By their nature, an ankyloursus left undisturbed would help keep the forest threat level below a certain threshold. Everyone knew this.

"I agree with you there, but we can't be sure that's what happened. The last time I heard one howl, it turned out to be two of them fighting. And that battle raged far outside their territory."

"Um, sorry, Egnia, mind if ask something? I could barely hear it, but if you say it was an ursus, I'm sure it was. But its territory must be pretty far away, right? Why call this gathering?"

The speaker was the youngest man here, but he was hardly the only one wondering.

"Mm, I don't know *what's* going on with this ursus, but something clearly is happening. It might end up changing its territory, or a different ursus will stake a claim to it—maybe something worse. Like... hmm."

He took a deep breath.

"Even if the ursus wins, if the intruder's strong enough to get away, it might come running right at us. In other words, we need to be prepared for anything—and maybe tomorrow we should send a party in that direction to see what's up."

That made sense to everyone.

Nothing good came of missing a change in the forest or keeping things to themselves. This was true for anyone who lived off the forest's bounty.

"Cancel all hunts for the day. Best stay out of the forest entirely. We've got enough food stored?"

"We do. Felled a big one the other day. But best we relay this to the ritual master quickly and have them start making fruit. No clue how long it'll be before safety is assured."

"Then... yeah, better send word to the elders, too. We'll have them do their part to ensure everyone's aware of what's going on and stays out of the woods."

The ideas were coming out smoothly now. No one accused Egnia of being paranoid. The forest provided, but it could also turn on them without warning. Surviving here meant catching any hint of trouble and taking every precaution.

Everyone had to know when the forest was dangerous.

"What about the other villages? Send word once we know more? Or let them know something might be up right away?"

"Both sound like the right thing to do... and either could go terribly wrong. Can we just dump that question on the elders?"

"Hold on—we oughtta make up our own minds first. If those hardheaded fossils come out with some nonsense, a united front is the only thing that'll stand a chance against them."

"...A bit harsh, there, Ganen. Sure, they ain't always flexible, but they speak from experience. They're using that knowledge to pick the path they think is safest."

The hunt master was talking to Plum Ganen, one of his adjutants.

"They—" Ganen turned red, his mouth opening—but Egnia clapped a hand over it.

"Enough. Remember why I called you all here. Stay on topic. You know how dangerous an ursus can be, right?"

After making sure Ganen had shut up, Egnia let go.

He was still sighing on the inside.

I let the conflict with the elders stand—it's not entirely a bad thing. But they really need to learn to pick a time and a place.

"Fair. We can talk about those fossils later. Right now, we gotta focus on the safety of the village. We can't have everyone on lookout."

"Even if we're just on high alert today, we'll have to arrange it in three shifts. Especially if we're sending a party out tomorrow."

Everyone had pulled full days' worth of lookout shifts before, and if they used a spell to eliminate fatigue, they'd be fine for the expedition, too.

But even the slightest lingering sluggishness could prove fatal near ursus territory.

"Yeah. And—"

A second howl. Everyone turned toward it, looking grim.

"...That was a lot closer, right?" someone said, voicing everyone's fears.

Egnia nodded once, confirming them.

"Egnia, you suggested whatever intruded on its territory might come running this way. Could it be giving chase?"

Ankyloursi had been known to fixate on a specific prey. If a creature they were after bolted, they were liable to leave their territory and give chase. Howling in pursuit seemed a bit strange at a glance, but that was a less discomfiting possibility than, say, the ursus losing the fight and being driven out of its territory.

"In that case, if it catches up, it'll eat its fill and our village stays safe. If the prey comes

running our way, do we shoot it down?"

"Don't! That'll just antagonize the ursus. Besides, we're talking about a creature capable of fleeing an ursus; odds are it's pretty dang strong. If it comes this way, we oughtta stick to shooing it away."

"No, wait. If the ursus gets anywhere near the village, we could be in trouble. It might decide this is a prime feeding ground. We gotta send a few out ahead and try and lead them both yonder."

Opinions were flying, but they didn't really have time for debate. Egnia didn't want to speak out of turn but saw a need to bring order. He clapped his hands once, drawing everyone's attention.

"Whatever's going on is highly unusual. We need to act fast. If the ursus heads home, great. If it doesn't... say, it loses track of the prey once it's out of its territory"—he scanned the crowd—"if that happens near the village, then we're in for a very long, very bad day."

Everyone could guess what that meant, and they pursed their lips.

"It's vital we recruit the help of every villager, not just those standing here. We're especially going to need the druids to be on board. And the apothecary might have some poison that's effective against an ursus."

Beast-type monsters like the ursus were easier to handle with spells that inflicted psychic effects (as opposed to using physical attacks). Their thick hides, layers of fat, and corded muscle posed a formidable wall of flesh. But where arrows could not penetrate, magic—like the fire elementals druids liked to summon—would do damage on contact. They would certainly do a lot more than a bunch of archers.

They'd likely never win a stand up-fight, but clever use of spells had managed to eke out a victory again ursus-class monsters in the past.

"But if we gather round and discuss it, we'll just burn through more time. Best we hold the reins. Or rather..." Egnia looked at the hunt master. "Will you take charge?"

"Sigh..." the hunt master said, shaking his head. "I guess I have to. Right, half of you, step up security—starting with the veteran rangers. The other half should start making the rounds, warning everyone. When you're done with that, guard those who

can't fight. I'll leave the shift assignments to you, Benelli. Ganen, you hit up the apothecary master. Ovey, you go to the ritual master. I'll talk to the elders. Let's move! Go! Go! Go!"

Just as Egnia had been about to set off, the hunt master shot him a pointed look. They ran together.

"I've been thinking this awhile, but you're the best the village has. Shouldn't you be the master?"

"That would just make trouble. My name—well, the family thing means the other villages have heard of me."

"That's an understatement."

Egnia ignored that. "That would just widen the rift between villages."

"Ugh, what a headache. Think it would make a difference if the elders would back off a little?"

"Absolutely not. Nothing is ever going to make a difference. Every elder could up and retire, and things would still keep getting worse. Arguably, them being hardheaded has kept things in line."

"How do we fix it?"

"We don't. Not until something serious happens."

That shut the hunt master up.

"I'll lead the defense. The rest is yours."

"Yeah, I'm counting on you."

They split up, and Egnia took his place on the bridge nearest the howl. He watched as word spread rapidly through the village—not just because the rangers were looping people in but because this village was used to monster threats and knew how to get news to everyone quickly.

Inside of ten minutes, the ritual master was leading efforts to make more food with

magic, and the apothecary master was putting a powerful poison *and* the antidote in Egnia's hands.

Time passed slowly. Everyone was on edge.

No more ursus howls. The rangers were starting to relax—Egnia included. His shoulders sagged, and he loosened his grip on the bow.

Maybe it caught its prey. Maybe it simply gave up and went home.

The hunt master joined him.

"We'll need to scout its territory just to be sure. You up to it?"

"I figured that job would come my way. On it."

Egnia was already working on a plan of action.

His eyes were locked in the direction of the ursus's territory, like the beast itself stood before him—and then he thought he glimpsed something through the trees.

"Chee-chee!"

His lips quivered, mimicking a bird cry. This was no ordinary sound—a class he'd raised allowed him to generate a noise that instantly alerted all allies in earshot. No one in range could be caught off guard or flat-footed now.

No trace of relaxation remained.

Feeling their eyes on him, Egnia's gaze never waved. He jerked his chin toward the shadow.

He hoped it had been a trick of his eyes.

He hoped he was jumping at shadows.

He hoped it was all a big mistake.

It had been a fleeting glimpse. Dozens of massive trees had somehow swayed just enough for his gaze to penetrate that far back. It could very well have been his

imagination. But he was a highly skilled ranger, he had very good eyes, and his hopes were soon dashed.

“...An ankyloursus.”

The word spilled from someone’s lips, echoing loud in every ear.

They could all see it now.

That massive bulk lumbering through the trees.

The forest destroyer—an ankyloursus.

But—

“Y-yo, Blueberry! They... aren’t *that* big, right? Do ursi *get* this big?! ”

The young ranger swallowed hard.

There were trees in the way, and it was still far out, so they couldn’t make out the full scale of it. But the trees themselves were a point of comparison. It was too big. Too massive.

“...Sumomo, the ursus I saw was *not* this big. It wasn’t fully grown. This one could have grown faster or be a rare specimen or—” Egnia’s voice broke. “It’s a lord.”

A shiver ran through the air.

If a monster was larger than normal, had visual differences like unusual fur color, or had access to unexpected skills, the village called it a rare specimen. But some managed to evolve into far more powerful creatures, becoming the pinnacle of their species—and occasionally their combat prowess would change *everything*. For that reason, these individuals were referred to as lords.

If this ankyloursus really was a lord, then it was *far* stronger than a typical one.

A normal ankyloursus would be bad enough, but if the whole village banded together, they might be able to fend it off. If they were dealing with a lord, then any conventional tactics would get them all killed.

"No! I mean, I heard there was a lord, but it was supposed to be way to the north!" The ranger was leaning forward, desperation evident, but keeping his voice low, for fear of antagonizing the ursus. "What's happened to Aju?"

Aju was another dark elf village, with a lord living nearby. Lords were not *that* common, so this was likely the Aju lord.

"Think it took 'em out?"

If a lord shifted its territory and moved toward their village, someone in Aju should have come to warn them. But no one had. Yet, here stood the lord.

A silence settled over them. Beyond where they'd heard that first howl—was Aju itself.

If it already fed there, then it knows we're prey. It tracked our scent this far?

No one dared say it, but they were all thinking the same thing.

The tension was taking a dark turn.

Even if it had developed a taste for dark elves in Aju, it might not yet know there was fresh meat here.

Ankylooursi were picky eaters. They could eat anything but had clear preferences. If the dark elves suited its palate, they'd have to abandon the village, and even then, it still might give chase. They'd have to lead it away from the village somehow.

But there was room for doubt.

"We can't be sure Aju's gone," Egnia said. Eyes turned to him. "We've had an ursus living nearby ourselves—the one I spotted years ago. If the lord came here directly from Aju, then it would have crossed that ursus's territory. We'd have heard two howls. I think the ursus we already had just grew up and became a lord."

Sure, it was possible this was Aju's lord. If the lord and the local ursus were of different genders, they might not have fought. Even if the two had bumped into each other, one of them may not have bothered roaring—likely the lord.

But whether Aju still existed was beside the point. All they could spare a thought about now was the lord coming toward them and what to do about it. What was their best

course of action?

"Fighting a lord is suicide. We'll have to summon some elementals and buy time for everyone to run."

"We can't do that! If we're in the woods, we're as good as dead. If we dump all the meat we have stored, maybe it'll eat its fill and be satisfied."

"Yeah, ursi are like bears. They love honey! Spread some on and hand it over—"

Then the earth, the air, the forest, the very cores of their bodies shook from the force of a howl. It was no longer hidden behind any trees.

The ankyloursus lord strode slowly toward them.

The dark elves' breathing grew fast and shallow. Every mind went blank. Every idea they'd had fell by the wayside.

They could feel its strength on their skins and shrank in on themselves. And not because that howl had any psychic effect. It hadn't imparted any supernatural terror or exerted any mind control.

This was simply the effects of unshakable conviction that they were up against a vastly superior life-form. The discrepancy in their powers was far too great, and they were helpless before it.

Shit.

The dark elves were certain of the tragedy approaching and ready to give up. But it was too soon for that.

Egnia roared.

"GO!!"

This cry was half to force *himself* into action.

"G-g-go where?" a girl yelped.

"Anywhere!" Egnia yelled back, like the swing of a machete.

“Y-you don’t even have a place in mind?!”

“Then who does?!”

“Don’t— Look, I got no damn clue what the right answer is here! But we’ve gotta do *something!* Standing around won’t accomplish anything! At least try one of those ideas—”

Was it trying to scare them? The ursus lord was moving awfully slowly.

Its head was down low, sniffing the flowers around the village, as if trying to catch a whiff of dark elves from them. The way it moved was almost... was it weird to call it reluctant? Egnia almost felt sorry for it. Was it injured, sick, poisoned? He almost dared hope so, but he knew stressful situations made you want to deny the plain truth.

Should I shoot it? Not much point worrying about making it angry now. It’s clearly coming to us. Then we should hit it first—it’s in range. A clean shot might get everyone else going. And if it’s focused on me, maybe I can lead it away— Wait, there must be something...

“Oil,” Egnia whispered.

The rangers around them looked briefly puzzled but caught on quickly.

“Right! If we drop oil on it, the fire elementals will light it right up!”

“At that size, it can’t dodge the oil easily.”

“We’ll have to summon water elementals, too, keep the flames from spreading.”

They didn’t *have* much oil. It wasn’t that hard to get, but uses were limited, so they didn’t have a large stock.

“I’ll go,” a dark elf yelled and ran off toward the center of town. The druids manned the stash, and he’d have to brief them. If they were still oblivious to the crisis and wasting mana on food, that would be bad.

Then another howl shook the air. Like the last, it proved how outmatched they were, but their dander was up, and they didn’t let it shake them.

"Huh," a dark elf said, puzzled.

Egnia was not the only one boggling at this, then. Every ranger was.

By their nature, every ankyloursus would always charge the moment they were in sight—yet this one didn't. If they didn't know better, they would've thought its heart wasn't in this. Maybe once it became a lord, its goals and behavior changed.

As they watched, it rose onto its hind legs, howling again.

Making itself look big to intimidate a foe—a common tactic with wild animals. That made sense, but its failure to attack didn't.

This was no mere animal. It was a magical beast, an ursus lord—it had to be fairly smart. Yet, even with clearly inferior beings in view, it was just threatening them.

And what was the point of all these howls?

"Uh, is this practice hunting for its young?" someone asked.

Egnia nodded. That would explain this baffling behavior.

Animal parents would take their young out on hunts and have them watch, learning the tricks to overcome each type of prey. Otherwise, the young would have no idea how to catch food and starve soon after leaving the nest. Perhaps the ursus lord's weird behavior was an attempt to teach a hidden cub about hunting dark elves.

"In that case, maybe we should teach it that dark elves can lay down the hurt? Teach the kid we're a threat? Better than it learning we're edible."

"...If we kill the cub, the lord will go wild, no doubt."

"If we give the cub the honey-covered meat... it won't be fooled. This is hunting practice. It wants fresh meat. But might be worth a shot anyway?"

Suddenly, the ursus lord's nose twitched, and it charged toward the dark elves.

That earlier reluctance had vanished, yet Egnia still sensed no real hostility. Instead, there was something... else. Egnia's eyes flicked over the ursus lord's shoulder, sensing the desperation that was unique to cornered beasts—

Of course there's nothing there. For one, what could corner an ursus lord?

"What in the world is going on?"

Egnia wasn't the only one confused.

They couldn't figure out what this ankyloursus lord was after. Maybe they could never hope to understand the king of the forest, but he'd never faced any beast where his ranger experience and instincts were so thoroughly useless.

Confused or not, the dark elves were sprinting back along the bridges. The ursus was charging at them, and that fact wasn't going anywhere. If they slowed for a second, they'd wind up in its belly.

The lord reached the base of the deserted elf tree and stood up once more.

It was enormous.

So big, it easily reached the height of the bridge.

A massive arm swung down.

The trunk of the elf tree exploded, and the impact shook the entire tree.

The bridges between the trees thrashed, bucking so hard, the dark elves on them had to cling for dear life.

The outer elf trees were particularly sturdy. Spell after spell had urged their growth, and scads of nutrients had made them as thick as they were tall. Trees so durable, any monster attack would simply bounce off—reduced to this, in the blink of an eye. Proof the ursus lord was far more powerful than anything this village had ever seen.

"Damn monster...!"

"I mean, we figured as much, but holy—!"

"No time to be impressed! What now? How do we minimize casualties?"

A single swing had been enough to make people lose hope.

Even getting grazed by that would be deadly. None of them could do anything in the face of that power. What hope was there?

The lord just kept hitting the same spot, like a mad thing.

This was far too strange, but it didn't seem like a spell had driven it berserk. Was it possible the ursus had something against the tree itself? Every now and then, it would stop, glance over at the dark elves, and then resume its onslaught.

That doesn't seem like something you'd teach.

He also couldn't see any cubs.

Egnia glanced at the arrows in the quiver at his hip.

Did a dark elf take a shot at it? Is that why it's enraged by the sight of the elf trees?

The elf trees had no scent, but maybe that was just to the dark elves, and monsters with superior noses—like an ankyloursus—could detect something. In that case, abandoning the village should be enough to keep them safe.

No, I doubt it would be that easy. All this rampaging'll make it hungry... and then it might follow our scent. Should we give it the honeyed meat and pray that's enough? The way it keeps looking at us is unsettling. Like it's observing our response...

And every time it glanced their way, it hit the elf tree again.

“Is it... trying to keep us here?”

“So another one can circle round behind? Why would it need to? It's an ursus lord!”

“If its goal is to drive us out of the village... like, into the waiting jaws of another ursus.”

“Never heard of an ursus hunting like that, but... not like any of this makes sense otherwise. I guess we've just gotta scatter in all directions? Each of you haul some meat with you and hope it'll settle down while it's eating?”

“—What else *can* we do?”

“Don't give me that look. I'm not saying abandon the village. We can always come back

when the ursus is gone."

It was a hollow attempt at placating everyone, but no one really believed those words.

The ursus lord was still scraping away at the elf tree's trunk like it planned to make this its new territory.

In which case their only option would be to abandon everything and run for their lives.

Spells could make elf trees grow rapidly. But getting to this size did not happen overnight. Their lives revolved around these trees, and losing them meant losing their entire livelihoods. They'd have to hope other villages would offer them shelter until they could grow a new grove, and who knew what sacrifices that would involve.

"Okay, let's drop some honeyed meat on the ursus and evacuate the village," the hunt master said. Everyone nodded. "Sumomo, Prune, start spreading honey on the meat. Everyone else, stay put and make sure the lord doesn't move farther into the village."

Two young rangers raced off toward the pantry.

One elf tree was already wrecked, so the ursus lord moved to another, swinging its claws—and then it stopped dead.

Before they could even wonder why, it turned.

Toward the center of town.

"Don't let it!!"

Egnia grabbed two arrows from his quiver and nocked them. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the other rangers flinch and follow suit.

He had a skill that let him shoot two shafts at once.

Both arrows struck the ursus lord's bulk and bounced off.

Several more arrows followed.

A few hit the beast's face or legs, bouncing harmlessly away. Several others merely hit the dirt around the great beast. They hadn't missed. It might be on the move, but given

the sheer size of it, it was an easy target.

These arrows weren't intended to do damage.

They were intended to draw its attention, buy some more time.

But the ursus lord didn't even slow down. It barely glanced their way.

"What the—?!"

This thing's an apex predator! Why would it just ignore an attack from vastly inferior creatures? Does it not realize how feeble we are? It's like it's after something... Has it attacked a dark elf village before? Does it know we've gathered the weak and the young in the center of town? Is it trying to flush them out? If an ursus lord is ignoring us and going for weaker prey, could that be because it learned to hunt that way when it was still weak?

If it had always hunted this way successfully, that would explain the strange actions. Even if it had now gained the strength worthy of a lord, it would repeat what was proven to work.

Maybe the assault on the elf tree had been designed to gather everyone who could fight around it. That would also explain its odd behavior.

Even that was likely just a carryover from successful earlier hunts. But even if this speculation was right, Egnia still had only one option.

Do everything he could to avoid letting the lord reach those kids.

"After it!" the hunt master cried. There was no need—everyone was already off the bridges, racing across the ground.

Following the bridges between the elf trees was hardly a straight line. Down here, the ursus lord could easily reach them—but it was a risk that had to be taken. And—

Egnia glared at the lord in front of him.

—*If the lord turns and attacks us, that counts as buying time.*

For an ursus of this size, running through a village—with its densely packed elf trees—

was not easily done. Its natural running speed was far superior—but it wasn't gaining on them. The fastest of the dark elves—Egnia—was steadily closing in.

He could hear screams up ahead.

No one had been attacked yet.

They'd just seen the lord coming.

Damn it!

There was a “clearing” in the center of town, but not on the ground. It was fixed to the branches of the surrounding trees, like a tray placed in midair.

When the ursus lord reached that area, it reared up, spreading those massive arms and bellowing once more.

This was even louder than the previous howls and more than enough to freeze everyone to the spot. The clearing might not be on the ground, but this beast was more than big enough to reach it.

The roar alone told every living being in earshot that this creature was far superior—and the sheer bulk of it struck awe in the minds of all who saw it. Those who lacked real combat skills to begin with—trainee rangers and children—could no longer move at all.

Egnia tossed his bow aside, leaving his hands free.

That composite bow was a dark elf treasure. Many of the components that went into it could not be found in this forest. They'd been gathered in the lands from whence they came. They were running low on materials to repair it and could never make another. Treating it like this might earn him a tongue-lashing from the elders, but he didn't have time to set it down gently.

“Raghahhhhhh!”

Egnia yelled his own cry, desperate to get the lord's attention and trying to steady himself. He jumped onto the beast, clinging to its side, using its hardened fur to clamber rapidly up the side.

“Grrr!”

The lord bucked and twisted, trying to fling Egnia off.

For a moment, his body floated, and the centrifugal force threatened to tear him away—but somehow, he hung on. He scrambled up behind the head, and it thrashed even harder.

He’d expected this. A dark elf would do the same if a bee landed on their neck.

Clinging to the lord’s neck fur, it was all he could do to keep hold.

He wasn’t sure why it hadn’t tried rolling or simply sliced him away with those claws, but that was a stroke of luck, and he was grateful for it.

Endure.

A blur at the edge of his vision—the villagers, some of them children, were standing still and watching. Suddenly furious, he yelled, “What are you *doing*? Run!”

He didn’t want to speak, but he had to. And the lord reacted to the sound, bucking even harder. An arrow flew in, trying to make it flinch. A skilled marksman could easily avoid hitting Egnia, even in these circumstances.

But this beast’s flesh was so thick, even Egnia’s shot hadn’t pierced it. The new shaft failed to harm the lord at all. And if they couldn’t even scratch the skin, the poison coating the barb would do no good at all.

Egnia tightened his grip. He could not afford to get flung off now.

After a grueling span of time, the ursus lord finally began to slow. All that rampaging may have worn it out, but it was still a *lord*. It had endurance in spades. It would soon recover and be back in action.

Egnia’s hands felt numb. He would not weather the next wave.

This was his last shot.

One hand reached for his hip and drew a dagger.

He scrambled up within reach of the ursus's weak spots—the eyes and nose. The neck itself had spots without armor. But those still had thick hide and plenty of flesh beneath. The dagger's length would do no real damage there.

But then Egnia's body wafted upward.

As he'd released a hand, the ursus lord had shaken itself extra hard. It had taken everything Egnia had to stay put at all, and with his grip halved—he could not maintain his hold.

The world spun. He heard a scream.

Shi—

Realizing what had happened, he tossed the dagger away, reaching for his hip—and the little pouch that hung there.

He slammed into the ground. The impact knocked the air out of him. He couldn't breathe.

There was pain, but the panic overwhelmed it.

Sprawled on the ground, Egnia looked up—and the ursus lord's eyes met his.

He couldn't move.

The sight of the lord looming over him left him stiff as a board.

Any move could spell his doom.

He felt the beast's breath on him. It smelled weirdly good. Surprising—no, it was downright astonishing.

Egnia almost laughed aloud.

He didn't think. He didn't hesitate. His mind had long since been made up.

Come after me. Take one bite of me, and I'll make you swallow this, too.

Getting eaten by an ursus lord would be a horrible way to go. It would teach the

monster that dark elves were *food*.

But what if he could convince it dark elves tasted *bad*?

He loosened the nozzle on the pouch.

This was the poison the apothecary had handed him. Given the ursus lord's size, it was hardly a fatal dose.

But even if he couldn't kill it, the poison would taste beyond foul.

When its maw yawned open, he'd stick his arm out and fling the pouch in as hard as he could.

If it clawed him first, he was done.

Those jaws would likely claim more than just his arm.

Egnia was ready.

He'd *been* ready.

He'd lived for this village, and he would die for it.

This was *why* he'd always been stronger than the others.

Come on, do it! Lemme prove the dark elves here are gonna make you puke!

The ursus lord looked away.

Why?!

The beast howled, its tail snapped, its arms swung, lashing out at the elf trees all around. Like it couldn't even see Egnia, but he knew it had. They'd made eye contact!

“Egnia, now!”

He'd been too thrown to act, but another ranger's cry brought him back to his senses.

Being eaten was a fate he'd accepted—but not what he actually *wanted* to happen.

But was escape possible? The ursus lord seemed to have little interest in him, but he saw it stealing glances his way. Was it after something else?

Is running the right choice here?

He had no idea. He couldn't read this bear at all.

As Egnia's confusion peaked, an arrow came out of nowhere, striking the elf tree right before the beast's eyes.

The snap was high, so clear it gave him goose bumps—and the sound spread out like ripples on a pond. Every dark elf—and the ursus lord—ceased all motion. Like cold water had been splashed in every face.

And a cute little voice rang out.

“Um, that’s enough!”

The world sparkled.

A dark elf child slipped out from behind an elf tree. Not one from this village. He wasn't sure if they were a really cute boy or a really cute girl—no, on closer inspection, this was an astonishingly cute girl. Before he knew it, a single word had slipped from Egnia's lips.

“Exquisite.”

How could any girl be so lovely? Her beauty was far beyond the jewel-like glitter of a dewdrop falling from a leaf and catching the light of the morning sun.

To his eye, she seemed to glow from within. Was that why the world suddenly seemed to glitter?

The gleam of life itself wafted off her. Even at this distance, the aroma was intoxicating.

Egnia's nose twitched.

He was trying to fill his lungs with that scent, absorb it into his blood, and send it to the far corners of his body.

What a fragrance! Every cell in his body was dancing with delight.

The most beautiful girl in the world, and in her hands—on which she wore gloves, hiding her fingers from view, such a tragedy—she held...

“Ohhh...”

...a bow of astonishing quality. The craftsmanship was beyond compare, done not for display but for raw power, greater than anything Egnia had ever seen. All his ranger instincts told him so.

But that was of no consequence.

The fact that the girl held a bow far larger than her frame only served to enhance her appeal.

Everything about her was attractive.

She was radiant.

“Now, now, monster. Go away! I’m not gonna let you rampage anymore.”

Her voice was adorable.

Far too cute.

A veritable delight.

He’d heard it a moment before but had been too distracted by her appearance to savor it. This time, her tinkling voice finally permeated his mind.

He let it echo back and forth, goose bumps rising and falling as it did.

The most beautiful girl he’d ever seen poked the ursus lord in the nose.

Why were those fingers not turned toward him?

Alas.

For shame.

Woe that those eyes were not for him.

“Grrr...”

The ursus lord growled.

It wasn’t to threaten prey—this was a growl of fear.

The lord saw the world’s most beautiful girl as a threat.

Of course it did.

Anyone who saw a girl this lovely would shrivel up at once. As if in the presence of a goddess!

Perhaps some would assume a beast had no capacity to appreciate aesthetics. But those were the thoughts of a fool.

Egnia refuted the very concept.

And he had the grounds to do so.

Magical beasts with great power were beautiful. It stood to reason that a girl this beautiful must command power beyond compare.

Yes. There was absolutely nothing strange about that.

The ursus lord made to move—and Egnia’s eyes widened.

The most beautiful girl in the world already had her bow drawn.

He had not taken his eyes off her since the moment she had graced them with her presence. He was quite sure he had not blinked once in all that time. Yet, he had not seen her nock that arrow.

No, why would he have?

This girl’s beauty had given birth to the world itself. This feat was trivial in comparison.

Egnia was entirely convinced.

There was a flash—

“Graaahhh!”

and the ursus lord screamed.

He didn’t give a damn where that arrow had gone. He wasn’t about to take his eyes off this picture of loveliness for a single instant.

“█, ████?!”

“█!”

“█████?!”

Mouths around him were speaking.

A cacophony.

Silence! What if you talk over the exquisite beauty before me?!

All other sounds were but a distraction from her dulcet tones.

The ursus lord’s footsteps retreated.

Egnia did not care.

“█?!”

Shut up! If I miss her words because of you, there’ll be hell to pay!

“..Are you okay?”

The most beautiful girl in the world spoke to *him*.

To him. To nobody else but him.

To him!

The thrill left him stiff as a board, incapable of speech. His mind would not budge, and he could not find any words within. He wasn't even breathing straight. Acting like this was rude beyond compare. Lack of oxygen might have his thoughts in chaos, but he strained every fiber in his being and forced out the perfect word.

"A... dor... able!"

".....Mm? Huh?... What?"

The world's loveliest girl frowned. That expression was beyond charming, too. He was certain she was incapable of making any expression that wasn't.

"S-sorry, looks like the ursus lord left Egnia too scared to speak straight."

"Huh."

She spared no further words to the hunt master's excuses. This at least brought him somewhat back to earth, and he turned red with shame.

"Eep! Anks... sho...!"

".....? Oh, thanks for shooting that arrow?"

The rangers around them caught up—this was the first thing they should have said to the world-class beauty before them. Dark elves began dropping down out of the trees, bowing before her grace and expressing their humblest gratitude.

"Yeah, sure, you're welcome."

No.

This is all wrong.

He was not thanking her for saving him—he was thanking her for revealing herself before them.

"Mmmph!"

“...Seriously, are you all right? Did you hit your head when you got flung off? Better see a priest... or is a druid here? That beast might have had some weird skill.”

“Yeah, he definitely hit his head. Better carry Egnia away.”

They put him on a stretcher made from two ropes. He felt no pain from the fall, but it was highly likely the excitement of facing a girl this beautiful had simply dulled it. In extreme situations, people often forgot all about the pain they were in. So why would divine loveliness not have the same effect?

He would rather stay by her side. Breathe the air she breathed. But if he was obviously injured, that might cause her pain. Anyone this adorable must have an equally kind heart. It was his duty to avoid causing her any distress.

Egnia’s rational mind won the argument with his desires, and he allowed himself to be carried away.

His eyes on that portrait of loveliness as she chatted with the hunt master, he thought to himself...

My heart is beating so fast... Is this... love?!

Blueberry Egnia, 254 years old. This was the first time he had ever fallen in love.

2

Aura followed the dark elf—the hunt master, he’d called himself. He was in charge of the village’s rangers, but she knew the man who’d collapsed was stronger. So why was *this* man in charge instead? In human societies, the strongest warrior was usually in charge, but...

Is it a different class? Maybe the other guy was a warrior, and this one’s a ranger? Or is it more like the thing with Victim?

Considering the floor guardian on Nazarick’s eighth level, that man might play some other role. Aura let it drop from her mind, focusing on the crowd behind her.

Yup.

Still there.

A whole mass of dark elves followed along behind her and the hunt master. The magical bear she'd sent into the village had done no real damage. Did they have nothing better to do? Were they just that curious? Did they always follow strangers around?

She wasn't getting any fear or hostility from them.

Maybe they were hiding it too well for her to pick up on, but her instincts said otherwise. For one thing, if they were *that* good, they'd have dispatched a beast of that caliber before she had to step in.

...They don't suspect a thing.

No one in the village seemed to be aware that the attack was her doing.

Ugh, Aura thought. *Why did Lord Ainz insist that no one die?*

His stated goal was to have her blend into the village and establish friendly relations no matter what.

If she'd stepped in after several deaths, they'd have been all the more grateful. Maybe some would have said, *Why didn't you come sooner?* but anyone stupid enough to talk like that was probably unpleasant all the time. They'd be a thorn in Aura's—and Nazarick's—side, and that would tell her who should be eliminated.

Maybe she could send in another beast to make that happen.

Hmm. I just don't get what Lord Ainz is thinking. Given my instructions, I think driving them further into a corner would have made the rescue more dramatic and effective... Maybe Albedo or Demiurge would get what he's after?

No matter how she racked her brain, Aura couldn't figure it out. Naturally, no one alive could fathom the brilliance of a Supreme Being or know their true aim. But that didn't mean she should just give up pondering it.

Her master hoped they would all grow. And the floor guardians were the leaders of

Nazarick—they were expected to set an example for the others.

Hnggg... Argh... I know sometimes you kill someone and find out you need them later, but I feel like Lord Ainz has a deeper reason here.

Same with the monster bear.

She'd suggested killing it where the dark elves could see, and he'd said that would be a waste—and that there was a big downside to doing that.

Certainly, she'd never seen anything like it—the bear monster could be super rare. And it was strong by the standards of this world. Until they found another one this strong, she could see her master's point.

She'd proposed other uses for it herself, but killing it made it far less likely anyone would suspect they were in cahoots. Even her master had agreed!

But it seemed like he didn't want Aura killing the beast herself.

She couldn't get him to tell her what the big downside was and was left wondering.

Lord Ainz is very smart, so if I just do what he says, everything will work out, and nothing will ever go wrong, but that alone isn't enough, is it?

Mindlessly obeying orders was second-rate. A first-rate minion would understand the goal and purpose behind those orders and achieve better-than-expected results.

Albedo and Demiurge are doing just that and earning praise all the time. I've gotta keep up! But... uh... maybe I shouldn't have killed the weak bear near this village. If I'd used that one instead, this might have gone better.

Aura glanced at the hunt master's back.

He hadn't said anything in a while.

You'd think if a kid like me saved them from mortal peril, they'd have lots of questions. I haven't even given my name! Is this normal for dark elves? I find that hard to believe.

It didn't feel like he was reluctant or unwilling to speak. She didn't get any sort of rejection from him. She could tell from the way he walked.

He was taking shorter steps to match her pace, so they were both walking quite slow. If he had a grudge against her and still did something so considerate, he'd be a man of many contradictions.

She had to assume he was just a man of few words or not used to speaking to anyone her age.

That made him a pretty bad host, but Aura wasn't looking to be wined and dined, so she had no complaints. Ultimately, it was probably her fault for not striking up a conversation with someone friendlier.

Oh well. I guess I'd better get the ball rolling.

Maybe she should use a lead-in to warn him, but they were almost at their destination. She got right to the point.

"You mentioned the elders, right? They didn't come out even when the bear was going nuts. We're headed to see them now?"

"The bear? Is that what you call an ankyloursus where you're from?"

"Mm, that's right," Aura lied. "What should I know about these elders?"

"Lessee—we're headed to meet them now. If they'd come down, we wouldn't have to go to them, but they were busy making oil in their elf tree."

"Huh. How many are there?"

For the first time, he glanced over his shoulder.

"Three. Is that not the same where you're from?"

Aura sped up a bit, walking next to him.

"I come from a city pretty far from here, and we didn't have a council of elders at all."

"Ah. So not much like our little village. I heard the elves have a city with a king. Cities are what happens when a village gets too many people, right? Are three elders not enough anymore?"

"Huh... I dunno. My country didn't have many dark elves at all, so I can't really say."

Aura wanted information but didn't want to offer much in turn, so she simply shrugged.

She didn't know how much power the elders wielded or even what they did in this village, so she couldn't really offer a better answer. And small numbers didn't necessarily mean they couldn't run a city—her master managed it on his own, after all.

If we had three of Lord Ainz, the whole world would be completely under his control, and he wouldn't even need us anymore.

While her mind was still on her master, the hunt master's eyes widened.

"I thought you came from the dark elf homeland."

"Mm? No. The place I'm from doesn't really have any dark elves at all."

Best not to give him any hard numbers, so she kept it vague.

"It's mostly other races. Humans, goblins, lizardmen, orcs, all kinds. We heard there were dark elves living in this forest and came to check it out."

"You don't say..."

There was a hint of gloom in his voice she didn't understand. She wanted to ask about it but decided it was best not to rush—prying wasn't a good idea. And she'd been hoping he'd ask about that *we*.

"But lots of races living together? That's a shocker!"

"Is it?"

With an absolute being at the top, no matter how many races there were, they'd all bow their heads before that majestic existence. A world where that didn't happen was one that didn't know true might.

That was why they had to spread the word about Ainz Ooal Gown.

Lord Ainz is the absolute ruler, and all creatures in this world belong under his control.

The result of that would be absolute peace. Anyone who desired that should place themselves under the control of the Supreme Beings.

Aura felt pity for these dark elves, ignorant of her master. Like any civilized person would when encountering an ignorant savage.

Albedo would be furious with them for not knowing, but that's just unreasonable. What matters is that they kneel once they do know.

But stupidity alone was not the only reason why they might know but fail to bow.

Namely, they could already be under the thumb of someone comparable to the Supreme Beings.

The Supreme Beings were basically gods, but sadly, that was not their exclusive domain.

Naturally, the Supreme Beings were more divine than even their peers. They'd turned away any and every intruder who'd attempted to defile Nazarick, and one of them had been considered the third-strongest individual in their world.

But the fact remained that there *were* others like them. That was why the one remaining Supreme Being—Aura's master—was always cautious.

Lord Ainz knows that only too well, so I get why he's worried. But I don't think there are any left here. Is it wrong for me to think that while my master's still on guard?

If there was anyone on the Supreme Beings' level, then no matter how cleverly they hid themselves, if they had any contact with the outside world, they'd have gained some measure of reputation or fame. There were figures like that mentioned in the history books. But in the present day, they'd found nary a rumor.

This village was remote—Aura was assuming word about the outside world had simply not reached them yet.

Demiurge thinks there's still a risk.

He'd said the birth of the Nation of Darkness made it impossible for them to stop other

countries from realizing the true scale of their power—and once that news spread across the continent, that was the time to watch for the advent of another player. All floor guardians should be constantly mindful of their master's warnings.

And if a player did join the fray, it would likely be during the chaos and confusion of war—in other words, that was Nazarick's best shot at discovering *them*.

"We ain't exactly friendly with other races, but I supposed we aren't in open conflict, either. More like... life is tough enough as it is. The monsters come for all of us alike, and sometimes trying to keep ourselves safe pits us against others, but then there are times we work together. Are there tough monsters outside the forest?"

The man's question was probing, quietly asking if that's how Aura got to be so strong.

"Uh, hmm. I guess there are? They're no match for me, though." The man made to respond, but before he could, Aura asked, "If you don't know much about the world outside, how long have you been in these woods?"

"The elders said we came here more than three hundred years ago, but I ain't heard of any dark elves leaving since."

"Three hundred years? Secondhand knowledge? That's odd. Weren't you born then?"

This was the first real shift in the hunt master's expression.

"I'm barely over two hundred," he said.

Aura fought the urge to reexamine his face.

Two hundred? Is he lying about his age?! Or do dark elves here count their ages differently?

But she couldn't exactly accuse him of lying. And his tone of voice was clearly pretty gloomy.

It probably—no, definitely—bothered him.

Aura saw no point in consoling him, but maybe doing so would help establish good relations.

"Uh, right. Well, you've got a real mature... grizzled vibe going on."

"...Forget about it. It just shows how tough forest life is."

Aura decided to leave that one alone. If he'd convinced himself, or was trying to, it was nicer to say nothing more.

"Hmm..... in that case, have you ever considered leaving? Coming to my country or...?"

Aura wasn't sure what her master's goal here was, but it couldn't hurt to broach the subject. She could always blow it off as stuff kids say or a passing joke. Her master would never scold her for going off script on something like that.

And if it was actually bad, he could just Message her.

"Might not be the worst idea..."

"You don't sound that excited, though. My place is pretty nice! It's safe, and there are no monsters that might attack a dark elf. I'm sure there'd be other hardships, but there are programs that could help. I doubt it would be *this* tough."

"Sounds like a great place. I can tell from the way you talk that it must be nice. But it's still a scary thought, you know? Going somewhere new, where you're not even sure you could live the way you always have... Just feels like you're better off sticking with what you know, ya know? Maybe I'm just hunkering down."

That was a fairly serious answer for a kid's happy-go-lucky question. Was he just a good guy and almost too earnest... or did he simply have that high an opinion of her? Either way, it felt like once she got him talking, he'd share almost anything. Aura smirked inside.

"You could always send a few people over to try it out!"

"That could work, yeah. Stay or go and how many—the elders will play a big role in deciding what we do. But there's plenty of people who are bucking their ideas, too."

"Oh? Are these elders not too popular?"

The hunt master winced.

"I got nothing against 'em personally. In here."

They'd reached a tree—which looked exactly like every other elf tree.

"I'm sure you know, but it's pretty cramped inside. I'll call them out." He raised his voice. "Elders! I brought our guest!"

Three dark elves emerged from a hole at the back, one at a time. Two men and one woman.

Though called elders, they didn't look that old. In human terms, they'd be midthirties.

It's hard to tell how old dark elves are just by looking. Already blew it with this guy... he's barely even a grown-up. But he doesn't look that much younger than these elders...

While these thoughts drifted through Aura's mind, the dark elves following her spread out in a half circle.

"Traveler, these three are the village elders. Elders, let me introduce you. Our guest here drove off the ursus lord. She's from outside the forest, from a city with many races and few dark elves."

Aura bobbed her head. Less a bow than a nod. She thought acting too servile would impact her future standing in the village. She might be a child, but she'd also saved them. She wasn't about to let them use her age against her.

Lord Ainz said to be friendly, so it's probably best not to be too dominant, either.

"My name is Aura Bella Fiora. A pleasure to meet you."

"Well met, sapling from afar Aura Bella Fiora."

The speaker was the man in the middle, likely the one in charge. He spoke with gravitas, but since his age wasn't evident, it felt like he was trying too hard to act cool.

One of the dark elves behind her muttered loud enough for everyone to hear, "Can't even thank the village savior? Show some respect."

"That's right," a female voice chimed in. "If they felt any gratitude, they'd never treat her like this. They're acting all high and mighty 'cause she's a little girl."

Aura frankly didn't think the elder's words were that out of line. Then again, the exact same actions could seem very different depending on your opinion of the person in question.

The main elder scowled.

"I was about to thank her! Aura Bella Fiora, you have our deepest gratitude for saving the village and driving off the ankyloursus."

"Yes, don't be so impatient, young ones. There is an order to these things," the female elder added.

Another girl's voice muttered, "And we're saying you're getting things all backward. Growing old apparently makes your brains dry out."

Aura glanced at the hunt master, and he looked like his stomach hurt. He must have been asked to pick a side before. The third elder was making the same face. The two who'd spoken look stressed—and the woman was glaring at everyone.

Looking at this... I've gotta be careful about where I stand and think carefully before I take any action.

It seemed reasonable that both factions would be vying to get a powerful outsider like Aura on their side. What stance could she take that would be the most advantageous for Nazarick?

It might be best to do nothing until she'd consulted her master. But sometimes she couldn't afford to wait and had to make her own decisions.

It's so much easier if Lord Ainz just tells me what to do...

One reason he hadn't told her what he was after was likely because he was trying to encourage them—everyone belonging to Ainz Ooal Gown, not just the floor guardians—to grow and be more independent. She was expected to think for herself and act without instruction.

But Aura found that incredibly nerve-racking.

He probably has some brilliant scheme in mind to fix things if I screw up, but...

That didn't mean it was acceptable to just blow it.

Acting careless because your master would clean up your mess was nothing but a betrayal.

She was a floor guardian and had a job to do. Aura *had* to consider her moves carefully and find the path that most benefited Nazarick.

Given what she was wrestling with, it was hard for her to see the dark elves bickering—right in front of a guest, no less—as anything but outright stupidity.

But maybe there was an upside. Could she leverage this conflict for anything? That might prove key to their undertakings here.

Is that what Lord Ainz is after? No, that can't be it. We didn't know there was any conflict here before we arrived. But since he told me to infiltrate and forcibly establish friendly relations...

"Um, are you *trying* to make me regret coming all this way? Otherwise, could you do this while I'm not standing right here? When I go home, I'd rather tell the other races the dark elf village was a nice place, you know?"

It was like she'd thrown a bucket of water on them.

No one spoke. If they had any sense of shame about their actions, they wouldn't want other races to know what had happened so far.

Aura maybe felt she'd overplayed her hand. She might have driven off that bear—the monster they called an ankyloursus—but she was still just a kid mouthing off. She might have turned both factions against her with that comment. But she wasn't ready to call this a blunder yet.

Aura was a passing traveler who'd saved the village. If they forgot that fact, put their own failings aside, and tried to vilify her, then they were just inconsiderate assholes. People like that were not worth knowing. Nazarick would be better off making enemies of them.

Sure, her master had ordered her to establish friendly relations, but he hadn't said she had to make all the dark elves like her. She wasn't sure how much leeway she had here, but if there were dark elves unfit to serve Nazarick, they were better off without them.

And if one of the factions turns on me, then I can probably turn their opposition into my allies. That would be fine by me. I could even try making a third faction with myself at the center.

Even if both factions turned on her, there were dark elves like the hunt master, who she gathered belonged to neither side. Worst-case scenario, she'd just pull them into her orbit. That would probably still require an apology to her master, though.

"Ahem. Aura Bella Fiora, what brings you to our village?"

"Fiora's my last name, so call me that. Um, you may have already gathered, but we heard stories there were dark elves living out in these woods somewhere. So I came to meet others of my kind. There really aren't any of us back home. If you don't mind, I'd like to stay here awhile."

"By all means. Just you?"

"For now."

"For now?"

"Mm. I'm good at moving through the woods, so I was told to go on ahead. The plan is that—in maybe three days' time? My brother and uncle will join us."

Naturally, that uncle was her master, Ainz Ooal Gown.

"Uncle?"

"Mm. Our, uh... parents are missing." She offered a quick apology to BubblingTeapot.
"Our uncle is the one who raised us."

Lying made things simpler, but if someone saw through the deception, it could create headaches later; best to keep things as close to the truth as possible.

"Ah... well, I apologize for digging up painful memories. So that's why you came alone. That was only possible because you have the power to drive off an ankylooursus—and a lord at that—all on your own."

Aura had been expecting more overt pity, so she blinked a bit.

But this was a forest filled with perils. Many a child would have lost parents. That much likely didn't rate overt gestures of sympathy.

"We certainly don't mind your staying here. We can lend you an elf tree if that works?"

"Yeah, please."

"Very well then. Can someone—? Apple. Guide Fiora to a vacant elf tree, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," the hunt master answered. "She's in good hands. I'll take her to the finest elf tree in the village."

"And when her uncle and brother arrive in three days' time, may we throw a banquet for them?"

"Sure! That sounds like fun!"

"Then, Fiora, would you tell us of your journey later on? And of this country you call home, even though there are few dark elves there. We know little of the world outside this forest—but naturally, you need not share anything painful."

Should she?

Aura considered it.

There was nothing to be gained from honesty or revealing who she really was. That would certainly get attention, but she'd already shown off her skills, so there was no need. While blabbing info without a second's thought would be bad, being too secretive wouldn't work, either. Should she lie? Stick to the truth but minimize it? Or mix in some falsehoods?

It would be awkward if their stories don't match mine, so I should check with the others and make sure we're all on the same page. But I can't just say nothing. I'd prefer to deflect and say they should ask Lord Ainz when he gets here, but they might think I'm being shifty...

Best to avoid undue suspicion.

Until she figured out her master's true purpose, better to leave a friendly parting on

the table.

Hmm. If he's not sending me a Message, he wants me to figure this out on my own. But what would he want?

"Is something wrong, Fiora?"

She must have taken too long to answer.

Aura smiled. "Oh, I just felt like my stories would be hard to believe. My trip here and the city I'm from—I can tell you things. Like the fairy path."

"The fairy path?! Isn't that just a legend?" a voice called from the group behind her.

"...The moonlight aisle and fairy path are real." *On the sixth floor of Nazarick, that is.*
"But you can't say where they are or anything else about them to those who aren't chosen by the fairies."

"Heh-heh. Sorry, Fio—no, do you mind if we call you Aura?"

The female elder's eyes were gleaming.

Aura had the answer ready. She didn't like the idea, but given her master's instructions, she had to allow it.

"Go ahead."

"Very well, Aura. That *is* a lovely name."

"Thank you."

Aura smiled, showing no spite at all. The Supreme Beings had given her that name, so it deserved this praise. She could never say a word against it. But she knew it was empty flattery and felt very little desire to prolong the conversation.

But her response seemed to satisfy the elder, who nodded happily.

"Aura, you're a dark elf chosen by the fairies, then. Wonderful. There are many in this village who haven't been chosen. As a result, we don't know how we arrived here from our old homes in the north."

The dark elves came here via the fairy path? Did it work like that?

The fairy path in Nazarick didn't let you travel all that far. Either they were wrong or this was an entirely different thing with the same name.

Prying information out of them was good, but she might have fumbled a bit. Or maybe not. She needed to learn more—

—and have Lord Ainz shower me in compliments!

In her mind's eye, Aura clenched a fist.

•

Aura and the hunt master headed off toward her lodgings.

Ainz had been following her around under cover of Perfect Unknowable. He let out a sigh of relief.

Both because there'd been no indications of a foe on their power level and because Aura's first contact had gone extremely well.

But he could not be sure these positive vibes were genuine. Anyone who'd be nakedly hostile to a child from afar probably had deeper issues. Even if visitors weren't welcome, most people would probably put on a smile.

It might be a needless concern, but he wanted to be sure their reactions weren't a performance. It would be easy enough to kidnap an elf and charm them, but Control Amnesia and the associated cleanup were tricky enough that this should be a last resort. Killing was far easier.

First, Ainz wanted to probe the state of the village.

They weren't used to changes, and everyone was abuzz with the new guest. Everyone here was desperate to talk about Aura.

When she was away, they'd share their true feelings.

With his cloaking spell on, he could easily gather their frank opinions.

The three elders had climbed back up their tree while the other dark elves had scattered in all directions. The question was who to follow, who to eavesdrop on. The crowd earlier had several children Aura's age—or at least Ainz thought that's what they were, judging from their heights.

He initially wanted to follow them and hear what they thought of her.

But he could hear voices up the tree talking about "that girl."

Damn it! I have to listen to the elders!

Clearly, that was the most important conversation here—though not directly related to his goal of letting the twins make friends.

Maintaining Fly, Ainz drifted up to the tree's entrance.

He looked inside and saw no signs of the elders. There was a staircase in back, and their voices came from up above. He could hear fine, but just to be sure, he flew to the top.

"How much of what she said should we believe? She made it sound like she'd used the fairy path to travel."

The eldest elder's tone was a bit different now, but that was to be expected. Ainz changed the way he spoke depending on his company, too. It would be rather creepy not to.

This was likely how the elder spoke when among friends.

"I can't dismiss all of it. Without the fairy paths, a child her age could never travel alone."

"I'm not so sure. She's strong enough to fend off an ursus lord."

"But that strength is the weapon's, surely. You saw that glittering bow! Clearly a masterwork. Perhaps the fairies gave it to her."

The bow Aura carried was one from Ainz's stock, and not considered particularly impressive by *Yggdrasil* standards. But it certainly had visual impact.

Maybe we should try selling them on runes.

As he considered that, they kept talking.

“How long do you think she’ll stay? I’d love to keep her.”

“I doubt that’ll happen. I bet she doesn’t stick around long after this uncle and brother catch up. This is hardly the only dark elf village. They might do a tour of them all, making more friends. We’re not even sure what she’s after—maybe she *is* just here to meet more of her kind. But whatever the reason is, I doubt this particular village is important.”

“Fair enough. We’ll have to ask more about that. More importantly, she said she wants to meet more of her kind, no? A nice big banquet would be the perfect excuse.”

“I agree. Even if she visits other villages, I’d like ours to make the best impression. If we all come together and make this feast a good one—first off, we’ll have to gather food for the next three days.”

“Will the young ones refuse?”

“I doubt it. This feast is dedicated to the girl who saved us. Even they know they need to pitch in.”

“True. And we can ask this uncle about the fairy path then. If we demonstrate they’re welcome, perhaps his lips will loosen.”

“Let’s hope. And maybe they’ll stay!”

“...You’re getting too hung up on that. Is the idea of being chosen by the fairies that alluring?”

“It is! Why wouldn’t it be? We—nearly all the forerunners in the area have lost the fairy’s blessing. But if they remain here—”

“You sure you’re not just hoping to boast about it to the other villages? If so, I’ll oppose you at every turn.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. If we knew how they obtained the fairy’s blessing, then maybe we could figure how to get it back.”

This didn't really sound like they were talking about fairies as a race. More like spirits of some kind. There'd been a similar blessing in *Yggdrasil*. Or did the fairies in this world have the power to confer boons like that?

Maybe it had something to do with classes like the Seelie Court or the Unseelie Court? If memory served, those had a skill that let them teleport—much like the fairy path.

Might be worth having someone look into it.

He should share that info with Aura.

They kept talking as Ainz mulled this over.

“Then those whelps would finally respect us again.”

“Just don’t try and force them to talk. And when they arrive, make sure you show her family respect. When they go back where they came from, I don’t want them to have a bad word to say about us.”

The red lights in Ainz’s eyes—or the cavities—dimmed.

Hmm. Was approaching this village a mistake? I won’t have Aura used as a tool for their inane conflicts.

BubblingTeapot had left the twins in his care, and he would not allow their hearts to be broken. This female elder had already earned his ire.

Best to avoid getting too close to the grown-ups. Let’s hope the children here are pure of heart.

The elders had moved on to talking about the festivities now. Confident they harbored no suspicions, Ainz cast Greater Teleport. Once he was through, he canceled Perfect Unknowable.

“Oh, Lord Ainz! Welcome back.”

Mare had been waiting outside the Green Secret House, and he bowed low.

“I have returned, Mare. Nothing happened here, I take it?”

An eyeball corpse was floating next to Mare—one Ainz had made with Create Upper-Tier Undead. A quick scan of the area didn't turn up anything else.

"Oh, Fenrir still not back?"

"Y-yes, not yet."

Fenrir's job was to bring the ankyloursus back here safely.

If the dark elves had any intelligence, they'd realize that with Aura on their side, they should really track down the bear.

Bringing it back to their base meant they'd have to pull the wool over that search party's eyes.

But given the ankyloursus's bulk and lack of any concealment skills, it had no way of covering its own tracks. Someone else would have to find a way to hide those obvious traces.

The task had fallen to Fenrir. He had the Forestwalk skill. With the ankyloursus on his back, he could make it home without leaving a single footprint behind.

Naturally, Ainz could also move them with Greater Teleportation or pick them up with Fly like Narberal did. Those approaches would have worked fine, too.

But Ainz had been busy following Aura into the dark elf village, gathering information. If anything had gone wrong, he'd been ready to swoop in and help Aura get out or eliminate all enemies. That was why Fenrir had been put in charge of ankyloursus duty.

But I guessed wrong. I assumed they'd be so desperate to take out the ankyloursus, they'd immediately put a squad together with Aura at the center. As is, we had plenty of time. I could have handled the cleanup myself.

"Ah. Then we'll just have to wait. I'm sure it's on your mind, so let me explain. You must know why I'm back alone. Aura's sent no distress signal?" Mare nodded. "There you have it. Her infiltration of the dark elf village was a success."

Mare and Aura had items that let them speak to each other. If Mare had received no emergency message, then Aura was most likely safe. Still, he couldn't be completely

sure she hadn't been overpowered before she could send a signal—Mare always had to keep the worst in mind.

Worse, to aid with the infiltration, they'd changed up her equipment. What she carried now was far inferior to her usual kit. Aura would be far easier to kill in her current state.

Though well aware of this, he had not placed a guard on her—because the decision was not his alone.

After discussing things with the twins, he'd agreed to let her act as she saw fit. It was a decision that left him with a gnawing anxiety—if Ainz had a stomach, it might have turned.

He was still wringing his hands about whether that had been the correct decision. Was there really no better solution? Ainz could make undead that had no corporeal form. They could have hidden one of those somewhere!

Of course, there were two obvious advantages to leaving Aura unguarded. First, if a crisis did crop up, Ainz could more easily summon a monster that was tailored for the exact situation. Second—

Away from Nazarick and its denizens, Aura can clear her mind. Maybe now she can relax and enjoy her time among the dark elves. And...

...maybe she would make a friend.

But at the moment, there was a critical problem standing in the way of that.

Aura had been welcomed as the village's savior.

He wouldn't go so far as to say the Red Ogre Cried strat had backfired. That had clearly been the best way to ingratiate her with the villagers. The problem was that it had been a bit *too* effective.

If Satoru Suzuki had met the members of Ainz Ooal Gown in the real world—where they were far from equals—they would've never become friends. For the same reasons, if everyone saw Aura as the hero who'd saved the village, then she and the village's children could hardly be considered peers.

Ainz would have to do some work to put them on the same level.

Yes—

It was his job to make it clear she was just another child.

Ainz glanced at Mare.

It wouldn't be fair to give Aura a shot at making friends without giving her brother one, too.

BubblingTeapot had left these two children in his care. It was unthinkable to treat them differently.

Naturally, he knew how important it was to pay attention to their individual natures and needs. But that didn't mean they shouldn't enjoy the same opportunities.

What am I talking about? I've never raised children. If only there was someone I could ask about being a dad... Nfirea's face crossed his mind. Not a bad choice. He's a good father. But—

Mare posed one other problem.

It wasn't his timid personality.

BubblingTeapot let her enthusiasm get the best of her and made him cross-dress.

From what he'd seen of the dark elf village, nearly everyone wore long pants. There were a few in long skirts, but they were all women. And even those women appeared to wear long pants under the skirts. Naturally, Ainz hadn't gone around flipping skirts, so he couldn't be totally sure; maybe those were tights underneath.

Aura had explained that bare skin wasn't a great fit for life in the forest. Hence why women wore long pants, too.

If I attack someone under cover of Perfect Unknowable, the spell dissipates. More accurately, it ends if I take an action that harms someone. That leads us to a major question... Does flipping someone's skirt up qualify as an attack?

It had never occurred to him to wonder.

Ainz glanced at Mare.

"Er, um, wh-what is it?"

"Oh, no, never mind."

Have you lost it, man? What are you thinking?!

His rational mind—the part of him with the slightest shred of sense—was furious.

Ainz knew full well this was wrong. But when there was anything about magic he didn't fully understand, curiosity got the better of him.

Don't! Stop it! Don't you dare! The very thought of peeping up Mare's skirt is wildly inappropriate!

If he asked, Mare would likely allow it—

Get your mind out of the gutter!

"I-is something wrong?"

"No, I just had a crazy idea. I might have to experiment with it in the future, but not now. And probably with someone else."

Mare looked baffled, but Ainz refused to linger on this subject any longer.

Besides, Albedo would be a better choice than Mare. At the very least, she would be a less inherently disturbing one.

This finally made him admit the whole thing was fundamentally wrong and push the bundle of curiosity out of his mind.

Either way, if Mare shows up in girls' clothes, they'll probably think it's weird. There's a chance they even shun him over it. We've got to avoid that at all costs. Why did she design him this way to begin with? No, no, this isn't the time. Not worth thinking about now. Teapot wanted him this way, so it would be wrong for me to contradict her. A permanent change would be crossing a line, but a temporary one should be fine, right? She probably wouldn't mind if I have him stop cross-dressing long enough to join Aura in the village. Still...

He had not expected his old friend's predilections to cause him this much worry.

"Um, Mare, question..."

"Yes?"

Mare looked immediately earnest.

Teapot, am I in the wrong?

A pink blob appeared in his mind. For some reason, she was throwing him a thumbs-up. Vexing.

"Er, um..."

"...Sorry, Mare, I got lost in thought." He had no lungs, but he let out a long breath and looked Mare in the eye. "Mare, I'd like you to stop cross-dressing temporarily."

That was wholly inadequate.

Ainz knew that, so before Mare could react, he piled on more words.

"Listen, I only mean temporarily, not forever; you know I want you in the village backing Aura up, right? Just for the duration, I mean, being there is basically an undercover operation and your clothes do rather stand out; so for the sake of the mission I want you wearing something else."

He was talking very fast.

Mare's gaze never wavered. Was this a *why me?* Aura hadn't been told to do anything like this.

But Ainz couldn't bring himself to speak further.

No good excuses came to mind. Claiming that cross-dressing as a girl was weirder than cross-dressing as a boy was totally inconsistent. Had Teapot thought this through?

No, she definitely did this just because she liked it. She satisfied her hobby, and that was all. She is Peroron's sister, after all.

In which case, best to be evasive. Fortunately, Nazarick equipment was a bit too outlandish, and he'd changed up Aura's gear already. He hadn't expected that to be useful here.

"I had Aura change a few things, too, right? If her equipment was too strong, they'd start asking questions. What do you say?"

A dirty trick. Leaving the call up to Mare is like forcing the blame onto him.

"O-kay. I can do this, Lord Ainz!"

"You're sure?"

"I-I'm sure. I-if it's undercover work, I think, um, Lady BubblingTeapot would understand."

He could feel Mare's love for his creator in those words—and found himself wondering how she'd react to them.

Odds are high she'd let out a wail and apologize profusely. Or... maybe it would be the other way around?

But this meant they could advance to the final phase of the Friends for Aura and Mare project.

"Good. Then let's get you kitted out and meet up with Aura."

3

A decent distance from the dark elf village, Aura raised a bow in her hand. Made of metal, it was significantly bulkier than what the other villagers used.

The bow was also longer than she was tall.

When she drew it, it creaked.

This bow belonged to the village, but even their strongest ranger had been unable to draw it. When they watched a kid draw it like it was nothing, their eyes shot wide—and then they all nodded.

"This wasn't well looked after. That noise is because bits of it have gone bad. Could be less *nobody could use it* than it being unusable. Ugh, not sure about the aim, though. Will the arrow go where I want it to?"

Aura was aiming at a magic beast known as the Gigahorn Elk. Like the name implied, the horns were extremely oversize, but it had Forestwalk and could easily move around the forest—and when it charged, the destructive force it packed was devastating.

If Aura had her gaze laser focused on it, she might have appeared like a top-class hunter—but to Ainz's eyes, she looked just like always—completely stress-free. Like she was about to nonchalantly toss a pebble.

Near Aura were three rangers from the dark elf village—two male, one female—and their reactions were quite the opposite. They were all equally grim while hiding carefully, doing their best to stop their prey from spotting them. Ainz had no way to tell for sure, but he assumed they were holding their breaths and stifling their heartbeats.

They carried bows but hadn't raised any.

Ordinarily, everyone would fire at once to ensure their prey was downed and to avoid a dangerous counterattack. They'd abandoned that tactic to avoid getting in Aura's way.

He could tell that much from their positioning alone. They were all waiting on the ground below.

Dark elf hunters lived in fear of retaliation, so they nearly always took positions in the relative safety of the trees above, waiting for the right prey to appear—an ambush-centric approach to hunting. Their current tactics were a show of faith in Aura's skill.

Ainz was the worst at stealth in this hunting party, so naturally, he was doing what he always did—abusing the hell out of Perfect Unknowable. He'd used it so much lately, he was starting to worry he'd turned into a one-trick pony. But it *did* make him virtually impossible to detect, and neither prey nor dark elves had noticed him there. He'd been following them around the whole time, but only Aura seemed to have picked up on it.

Aura released the drawstring.

A short beat later and the Gigahorn Elk turned its head, looking around.

The loosing of an arrow made a sound that would never be heard in nature. Had its ears caught that somehow?

Ainz found it hard to believe.

The sound was very faint. And the target was far enough away that it should render this feat impossible. So how had the elk managed to react?

Coincidence was likely the best answer. Or did it have some relevant skill? If not, perhaps it had somehow picked up on that subtle shift in the hunter's disposition the instant she took her shot. Ultimately, that was nothing more than Ainz's speculation.

Aura may have even predicted this reaction, because her shaft struck the creature's head as it moved, ignoring all resistance the flesh offered and burying itself deep.

The Gigahorn Elk staggered but did not fall, despite the arrow piercing its brain.

Great beasts—magical or otherwise—were tenacious in life.

Aura's standard *Yggdrasil* bow would easily have robbed it of that vitality, but the bow borrowed from the dark elves could not fell this elk in a single shot.

This goes to show what a difference the right equipment and weapons make. Aura herself seems to be refraining from using any support skills. Those might have changed the outcome.

Despite the arrow impaling its head, the elk bounded off. Its injuries were grave enough that the animal chose flight over fight.

But Aura had seen that coming, too. She was already loosing a second shaft.

Shot through the head a second time, the Gigahorn Elk hit the ground.

"There you have it."

"Most impressive, Lady Fiora!"

She acted like it was no big deal, but the man closest to her gasped with adoration.

Plum Ganen was a hunt adjutant and the leader of the group accompanying Aura.

His reaction was clearly genuine, and he was a considerable ally. But not one Ainz welcomed.

This man was a bit *too* enthusiastic.

The glow in his eyes contained a blend of admiration, awe, appreciation, and ardor. Ainz had seen this in the Sacred Kingdom—it reminded him of the girl with the scary eyes after she came back to life. And frankly, not the sort of look you gave someone who appeared to be a much younger child.

This was their second hunt together, and he hadn't acted like this during the first one.

Aura *had* driven off the ankylooursus.

But that had simply been a display of her raw strength. From the dark elves' perspective, hunting skills were a different thing entirely. The ranger who'd invited her on the hunt had been mainly curious to see what she could do—Ainz had heard him say as much under cover of Perfect Unknowable.

But he'd shuddered at how nimbly Aura had walked the forest, gasped at how utterly she'd hidden herself, and gaped at the accuracy of her shots. It was downright comical how wide his mouth opened. Now, he was likely the most ardent of Aura's admirers in the village.

But given Ainz's goals, people like him were a headache.

It made it that much harder to remind everyone she was just a child.

If he'd been trying to use Aura for his own goals, that would have been easily handled. But this was quite the opposite.

Killing him should be a last resort...

“Oh, please. You can praise me later. Dress the thing first.”

“Right! As you wish, Lady Fiora! Come on, rangers!”

The others were wincing slightly at Plum's antics. They had plenty of respect for Aura,

but Plum's behavior was something else.

They moved in, tied ropes around the Gigahorn Elk's legs, slung them over a branch, and pulled it into the air, upside down. Given the sheer size of it, this was a tall order even with three of them pulling.

Aura reached out and grabbed the end, going, "Hup!" and giving it a tug. The beast easily lifted off the ground.

"Amazing, Lady Fiora!" Plum gushed.

Aura frowned at this.

Ainz knew why. He nodded, picturing the faces back in Nazarick.

Unwarranted praise was creepy enough, but effusive praise for the simplest acts could also be generally uncomfortable. Almost like they were making fun of you.

As Ainz wondered if this boiled down to a lack of real confidence on the ranger elf's part, the hunting party carved up the elk.

A male dark elf pointed his arm at their prey and emitted a white mist—apparently a skill that would keep the meat chilled. As far as Ainz knew, standard rangers had no such skill, so either this was a druid ability or this dark elf had some other class.

They slit the elk's throat and let the blood pool in a bowl below. This was to prevent any pathogens present in the blood from multiplying and to keep the meat from spoiling. Perhaps that dark elf's ability couldn't cool a beast of this size without help.

The blood was also often used in cooking.

Carrying blood around would draw in carnivores, so they rarely bled beasts when hunting on their own. Ainz had heard them discussing this exact thing during the first hunt.

The head and organs were discarded and went into a hole they'd dug. Normally, they would haul some of those organs back, but the Gigahorn Elk's meat alone was more than enough.

That was all they did here.

The dark elves skinned their game only once they were back at the village.

Ainz acted like he was an expert on the subject, but if anyone asked how people did things in the rest of the world, he would've promptly admitted he knew little about hunting. Maybe the way dark elves did things was typical.

The hunting party lowered the carcass back to the ground and ran a pole through the rope. Grunting in unison, they hefted it up. It looked pretty heavy. Ainz wasn't sure what the actual carcass yield was, but it looked well over 50 percent.

Aura didn't help with any of this. Her job was to watch the perimeter.

Now that their catch was ready for transport, the party started heading back to town.

Since they usually waited in ambush, it could normally take a while to fell any prey, but thanks to Aura, they were headed back early, more than pleased. The dark elves spent their entire lives in this forest, but leaving the safety of the village was still nerve-racking.

"Great work again, Lady Fiora. Another magnificent shot."

Plum was the first to speak. This was not empty flattery—he clearly meant every word.

"Oh? I mean, maybe it's better than what you can do, but there's always someone better. Um, I've got fam— No, that's too rude to say. Anyway, trust me, there are far more impressive people out there. Oh! In this case, not my uncle."

"You said your uncle and brother will be here today or tomorrow. Are they also great rangers?"

"Nope, neither one's a ranger at all."

"Really? I figured if they were navigating these woods without help, they must also be highly skilled rangers. So what are they?"

"They *are* highly skilled. Skilled how...? Well, you'll find out soon. Look forward to it. And sorry—mind letting me focus on keeping watch? I'm sure I could get away on my own, but with you all along, spotting things a second faster could make all the difference."

She'd probably been unsure how to describe Ainz's and Mare's abilities and found a great excuse to end the conversation itself. But how would that play with Plum?

When you were happily chatting with someone, getting shut down—even for good reason—was hard to accept. Some people might even turn on you.

He's a believer, so he probably won't do that. Then again, he does have some authority. If he holds a grudge and starts trash-talking her, I'll need to have a plan in place.

Maybe her reputation could afford to take a hit or two, but he didn't want it dropping too hard.

But Ainz's fears proved unfounded.

“My apologies! I should have realized.”

Plum's head snapped down. Had he not been carrying game, he likely would have dropped to his knees—or whatever the elf equivalent was. These overreactions were proof he was a true believer.

“Uh, I mean, you’re pretty good. I’d bet you’re on the ball normally, and you’re just overrelaxed ’cause I’m with you. In a way, it’s a sign of how much you trust me. That’s always nice. Just gotta bear in mind that there’s a time and a place, you know?”

Sweet. That's a good trick, doling out praise as a superior. Maybe using her floor-guardian experience. That has to be a sign the NPCs are growing. That's a nice thought. Or is it something she inherited from BubblingTeapot? An even nicer thought. It's almost like she lives on inside Aura.

Ainz pictured a pink blob floating behind Aura—a pretty uncanny image, really—and a smile flitted across his unmoving features.

Like Aura suggested, the party moved on in silence, keeping a careful watch. They reached the village without further encounters. Only when he was sure they were on safe ground did Plum call out.

“Rejoice, everyone! Lady Fiora took down another big one!”

Ainz clicked his tongue.

He'd expected as much and knew he could do nothing to stop it. Hunters took all the risk for the sake of the village. It was natural for them to boast about their prey and appropriate to give credit where it was due. And Aura was an outsider, so he was taking pains to secure her position.

But Ainz didn't want this kind of attention.

The villagers on the bridges above gasped at the size of the elk.

"I'll go on home, then."

"Okay! We'll take it from here, Lady Fiora!"

Leaving Plum to it, Aura slipped through the gathering crowd, heading for the quarters they'd lent her.

Ainz wanted to follow after her, but he had to keep track of any subtle shifts in her position here. That wasn't an option.

A few steps out, Aura turned her head, looking up to where Ainz was floating.

She looks lonely.

He might simply be reading too much into it, but he caught a distinct whiff of melancholy from her profile.

Some dark elves feared her, others revered her. But not one of them acted like a friend.

She'd earned respect—not as a child traveling the world but as a superior being. Not to repeat himself, but that position itself was not a bad thing.

It just didn't match his goals here.

Aura is the village's hero, so they can't treat her like a kid. That makes things tricky. If the pedestal she's on crumbles before I get here, they might send me packing. Can't blame them. Even if we're related, a latecomer won't have the achievements Aura's racked up.

As Ainz hovered, the dark elves gathered round. Some of them were no bigger than Aura herself.

The meat was dressed, portioned, and passed into waiting hands.

"Help yourselves! And thank Lady Fiora for it!"

The dark elves smiled, expressing their gratitude.

Even veteran dark elf hunters didn't always bring back prey. And game of this quality was rare indeed. Ainz had heard as much during his scouting missions.

The mountain of meat steadily dwindled away. Each time a piece was taken off, Plum told them who to thank.

Again, that alone didn't bother Ainz.

Aura had felled this beast. If they hadn't been grateful, he would've been livid. Still—

"Lady Fiora is amazing. She's the sort of person who should lead our village."

"You can say that again. She not only drove off that ursus lord, but she's a top-class hunter. If she stays, the village is secure."

"True, true."

Plum had five grown dark elves gathered around him.

Their opinion of Aura was only growing. And the children were listening—that was the problem.

"...But she's just a child?" one man said. A man who smelled of grass.

The faithful's brows furrowed.

"That's what the elders think. They're a bunch of fossils!"

A roar of anger.

Plum had been smiling happily a moment before, but now his words came out in a shout.

"Does growing old make you better? Of course not! Sure, you gain some measure of

experience, and some acquire improved skills. But age alone doesn't guarantee either! Age is a useless metric on its own! Real skills are all that matter!"

Ainz agreed on this point.

He'd seen plenty of workplaces. Those with skills did well, and those who didn't would be humps their whole lives.

"Ability! That is what is most important in a world this dangerous! Skill is the only real measure! No matter how young they might be!"

"But... isn't Fiora a little *too* young?" a woman ventured.

Another faithful glared at her. "How is that different from what the elders say? Are you one of them?"

"Wha—?"

The woman glared at the speaker. The elders clearly had few fans among the villagers.

Honestly, they don't seem to be doing anything that bad...

Ainz didn't understand why the younger villagers were so prejudiced. But he'd only been watching the village a couple of days and hadn't learned everything about them in that time. Maybe there was a reason he just hadn't figured out yet.

"If we're gonna banish the elders' stupid outdated beliefs, we need to follow a truly skilled dark elf—like Lady Fiora! Maybe we should even appoint her our new leader!"

Stop.

Ainz winced.

That was *not* why he'd sent her here.

If she heard them talking, she might even agree and take over the village on the basis that it would benefit Nazarick. That wasn't what Ainz wanted.

Ainz turned to the children who were watching the grown-ups argue.

Their delight at the hunt's bounty was gone, and they looked nervous.

This is bad.

Ainz wanted the twins to make friends.

These weren't like the children in the world Satoru Suzuki came from. Nemu was a good example—the children of this world were innocent, and curiosity alone should have made them approach Aura by now. But from what he'd seen, not one of them had gone near her. Aura's reports corroborated this.

The children of this village had grown up with the peril of the forest always looming. Perhaps that had stifled their natural curiosity. But it was more likely they'd picked up on how the grown-ups felt and believed she was out of their league. Aura was a child, but not one of *them*. And that distance kept them apart.

If her reputation took a hit, maybe it would be easier for them to approach Aura.

It's hard to be friendly or get close to someone the grown-ups admire, even if they are the same age. That might be why she seems unapproachable. From what I've heard, their parents aren't telling them to stay away or mind their manners, which is some small salvation... or is that also bad?

Ainz let out a sigh.

At this rate, they'd never make friends.

Guess I'll have to step in. I can ask them myself. That won't guarantee the outcome... but I'll have to hope it makes a difference. Do all parents struggle like this?

Ainz had to wonder. The last thing he heard before casting Greater Teleportation was—

“—And how dare you call her just Fiora! She's Lady Fiora to you!”

4

A dream.

This was a dream.

And I knew that.

What was that called?

Right. A lucid dream.

A dream where you know you're dreaming.

In the dream, I was still a kid.

Taking a hard hit.

The world spinning before my eyes.

I felt no pain—this was a dream, after all.

But it still hurt.

My head throbbed, and I must have had a cut inside my mouth—

I could taste the blood.

Even though I was dreaming.

How strange.

Was this really a dream?

I spotted my hand.

Small and dirty.

Definitely a dream.

My hands aren't that small now.

What a relief.

Just a dream.

My eyes moved.

No. I don't wanna stand. But I have to.

I picked up the club and got to my feet.

My mother stood before me.

No expression. Like she was wearing a mask. Glaring down at me, her eyes cold.

A club in her hands, the better to beat me with.

She swung.

Now, I could block that. But at the time, that was impossible.

A sharp pain, and I was in the air.

Slammed into the ground—more pain.

My vision blurred.

Tears.

I found myself wondering when was the last time I cried.

My eyes moved.

My mother was speaking.

I'd lost my club again, and my eyes sought it out.

Had my mother told me to get back up?

I couldn't.

It hurt. This was too much.

I must have whined about it.

Her expression never changed. She just slowly raised that club.

Another voice.

My eyes moved and saw a plump woman running over.

She'd helped with the housework. Made great food.

Nazul.

She'd made the best omelets. My favorite. Her cooking was ingrained in my memories, my standard for good eating.

Sadly, she'd long since passed. I'd rather be dreaming about eating her food than training with my mother.

Later, I'd learned other people's mothers cooked for them, but I'd never once had that happen. Someone said she didn't have time for anything but training me.

I was dumb enough to buy that back then.

But now that I was grown up, I could see that farce for what it was.

I barely even remembered sharing a meal with her. I mostly ate alone.

“Good morning...”

The world took on color. Was I waking up? Then let's get that over with.

I never once forgot.

I knew all too well.

My mother hated me.

I was a child of rape, and she had no love for that.

She'd never once celebrated my birthday.

She gave me no blessings.

No thank-yous.

No congratulations.

Not even a good job.

Everyone else gives those freely.

Had I ever heard her speak my name?

Who named me?

If she hated me that much, why hadn't she just killed me?

That would have been easy.

But she kept me alive.

So she must not have completely hated me.

Or was I just clinging to a forlorn hope?

"W-wait, Lady Faine. She's still so young. Training past this point will achieve nothing."

My mother glared, but Nazul did not back down.

In hindsight, Nazul was made of pretty stern stuff.

"Sh-she needs a rest. I have refreshments ready..."

"We're fine."

"Lady Faine, while you drink, we can tend to these injuries..."

“We’re fine.”

My mother waved a hand, and all my wounds closed.

The pain was gone.

“You’re fine, right?”

My mother leaned in.

Eyes like marbles, face devoid of emotion. Sinister.

“...Mm, I’m fine.”

“See?” My mother turned back to Nazul. “...You heard her. She’s not done yet. And I’ve already made her strong enough that she can be brought back if she dies. See? Nothing to worry about.”

“..... As you—”

“—Good morning. Um, Lady No Death, are you here?”

It was the faint voice of a woman—it went beyond timid and verged on fearful. That wasn’t part of the dream. It was real.

Consciousness arrived.

The ceiling above was her own. Movement in the next room. The fog of sleep was not yet cleared, but she sensed no hostility.

“If I must dream, let it be chaotic and wild,” she muttered. Sighing, she pulled a hand into view. Her fingers damp—with tears? “I’m up,” she said, louder. “Gimme a minute.”

“A-absolutely! Pray do not rush for the likes of me. I can wait as long as it takes!”

She’d said nothing that could be construed as a threat, but the woman took it as one. Repressing the urge to sigh again, she got up, grabbing a robe from the chair nearby.

She knew her visitor's voice.

With a female colleague, she need not worry about making herself decent. And she didn't want to make her wait out there that long.

She opened the door, stepped out, and found the woman standing at attention. Like she had no clue what else to do with herself.

“—Sorry for the delay. You should have sat down, at least.”

“No, no, this hardly counts as a delay. And, um, eh-heh-heh. Lady No Death, I cannot apologize enough for disturbing your slumber. I hope you will forgive this trespass.”

She was forcing a smile and bobbing her head. Worse—though likely unconscious—she was rubbing her hands together. A pathetic bearing for one of the Theocracy's finest, a hero of humanity, the eleventh seat of the Black Scripture, the one they called Infinite Mana.

“Then have a seat.”

“No, no, no, no, that won't be necessary. I'll be on my way the moment I've said my piece. I could not sully the couch in your room...”

Her hands were waving all over the place.

No Death could not imagine why she was being so extreme.

“Sitting won't do any harm, and I'd never be angry with you for it. You... really don't need to be so servile. We're colleagues.”

The woman's smile grew all the more obsequious.

“Eh-heh-heh, an insect like me is not worthy of that designation, Lady No Death.”

“Seriously, don't— Look, of all the Black Scripture members who've sparred with me, you're by far the most servile. And you started out so cocky!”

The Black Scripture were heroes. And that could go to people's heads, make them overconfident. One of No Death–No Life's roles was to beat that out of them. The result was that the only Scripture members who knew her were the ones who'd gotten

arrogant.

But most Black Scripture members made that error eventually. This woman was no exception. The captain had also survived training with her—frankly, she regretted going too far with him—but was now talking to her normally. This lady was the only one who acted like this.

Maybe she'd beaten too much of her.

I'll have to factor core personality in next time.

“Being arrogant’s a problem, but you can act like yourself.”

“Eh... eh-heh-heh. I could never do that before you, Lady No Death.”

Her hands were rubbing faster.

No Death didn’t think she’d done anything to provoke this.

She’d just received all her spells head-on and emerged without so much as a scratch, walked right up to her, knocked her down, climbed on top, and then repeatedly punched her in the face. Since it was *training*, she’d been careful not to kill her.

Even on her back, the woman had refused to concede, desperately casting more spells. No Death had considered her one of the tougher cookies. And one who clearly burned with ambition. Her efforts had paid off, and now she could keep casting through pain.

And that high opinion of her made this attitude all the sadder.

“...So what brings you here? I think I can guess.”

“O-oh? You are a brill—”

“Spare me the flattery”

“Erm. Right. The elf extermination army have made further advances, so I’ve been sent to ask you to ready yourself, Lady No Death.”

“Ah...”

When No Death smiled, the woman before her winced. Was her face that frightening?
This was her usual smile.

“Then I can finally get this bone out of my throat.”



INTERMISSION

There is a creature known as the night lich, a superior form of elder lich born from the absorption of still more mana. Throughout history, only a handful have ever existed—a fact for which the living are eternally grateful.

The power of a night lich is immense.

They have access to spells beyond human reach—ranging into the ultrahigh-level spells of the sixth tier. With that power, they are a match for even high-ranked dragons, no matter how long-lived. Worse, they possess all manner of skills, command hordes of undead, boast brilliant minds, and ensconce themselves within nigh-invulnerable fortresses.

They are rulers of countries, undead kings.

There were three night liches of considerable fame.

The dragon night lich, Kuphantera Argoros.

The titan night lich, Hyaeon.

And Fear, the Shadow Lord, whose true name was unknown but presumed to be a night lich.

Each held sway over a domain the equivalent of a small country, terrorizing the lands around. For this reason, the race itself was a symbol of horror, discussed in terms otherwise reserved for creatures of myth that had wrought havoc upon the heaven and earth.

Though a member of that terrifying species, Banejieli “The Abyss” Anshas, had remained shrouded in darkness, unknown to the world.

And yet, here he was, bowing low as he exited a massive room. With six arms and two heads, he had not only mastered the sixth tier of arcane magic but the other disciplines to the same degree. He was a fearsome creature no human could ever hope to defeat. If he ever emerged into the light, the three night liches of infamy would soon become the *four*. Instead, he had founded a clandestine society and remained the most senior member.

He called this society The Abyssal Corpus.

They were a group of undead casters, and the original goal of this organization had been to ensure their mutual interests did not come into conflict.

Every manner of undead being would live eternally and, if devoted to the study of magic, they would inevitably clash with others of their ilk given enough time.

Lacking the three core drives of the living, undead were often consumed by lusts of another nature—and if that undead was a caster, then this was almost always a thirst for knowledge. When the same knowledge was sought, it was all too easy for those conflicts to get out of hand, resulting in all-out war that continued until one was eliminated from this world.

Where the living divided their energies among food, sleep, and sex, the undead were singularly focused—and that made it impossible to dissuade them once they were committed.

Many an undead had met their end in this manner, and still more had tried to profit off the intervening conflict only to get swept into the chaos themselves.

Rather than attempt to monopolize knowledge and magic items in the face of certain destruction, it was better to cooperate whenever possible, smart to negotiate a peaceful solution. Those who understood this had had their names added to a register.

In later days, this would be known as the Graniezzo Inscription. A stone engraved with the names of all members—though none had enchanted it, enchanted it became.

At the time, they'd been a loose-knit group of four night liches and three elder liches. Their little band had a handful of rules as well as the implicit understanding that anyone who broke them could expect the others to dole out appropriate punishment.

Two hundred years later, they'd become a proper society, with a solid rule book.

And more undead had joined them. An inner circle of seven but an outer circle of forty-eight. Fifty-five members was a decent size for any clandestine society, and the average difficulty rating of the inner circle was around 150.

Yet, few knew they even existed.

Their membership was split between two types of undead.

One cultivated power among the living and used that to further their own ends. The other had absolutely no contact with the living and simply worked quietly toward their goals in the shadows of the world.

There were few in the former group and far more in the latter. As a result, their actions had escaped wider notice.

Gaining power in the world of the living made it that much easier to make enemies. Since undead were seen as the enemies of the living, it was not uncommon for multiple countries to band together and wipe them out.

For that reason, the first type had steadily dwindled in number. Naturally, there were those who lurked in the underworld, with none the wiser—but not many undead had the talents that required.

The upshot was that The Abyssal Corpus remained barely more than a tall tale. In fact, they had pointedly avoided inviting the three night liches of infamy to maintain their low profile.

Outside the room in which IT sat was a massive corridor. To one side, a room illuminated by dim lamps.

A waiting room for those seeking an audience with IT. Naturally, IT would never think to prepare the like—IT was not a creature of consideration—but Banejeli and the others had pleaded their case and been granted permission to do what was necessary.

A voice within called to him.

“You’re out? Then I guess it’s my turn.”

Banejieli had been waiting there prior to his audience, so he knew who spoke without looking. Only those who'd been summoned ever came here. Arriving unprompted would incur IT's wrath. All those summoned today were a part of the inner circle. Four hundred years since the society's founding, that circle now contained nine members.

"The Abyss." "Her Holiness in White." "The Rider of Death." "The King of Rot." "Lord Redeye." "The Wise Wolf." "The Hordes of Yore." "The Devourer." "The Golden Ghoul."

They had all been together and been called in one at a time. Now there was but one left.

Her Holiness in White, Grazen Rocca.

A female undead with alabaster skin. She was on the cusp of reaching the ninth tier, and Banejieli had been forced to admit she was a finer researcher than he. She was a favorite of the one who controlled their society.

No—

IT favors no one. IT merely stomachs us and uses us.

That much was clear from the way IT spoke.

IT did not even try to disguise it, going so far as to describe their spells as *defiled*.

Thus, Grazen took no pleasure in her position.

IT merely took, providing little in return, let alone satisfaction. Perhaps that was only worse for a researcher of real skill.

But no one dared voice these concerns before IT. Even if the whole society banded together, they had no chance at victory.

"...Yeah, you're up. When you're done... can we speak? It's been so long."

"...About...? Oh. Yes, yes, naturally, I'd be delighted. The usual place?"

"Indeed. I'll be waiting there."

Banejieli left her there, walking through darkness. Undead needed no light. There was

little point in having one in the waiting room. He knew not who'd added it, but it was likely purely decorative.

Magical means had contrived to make the floor look like a single polished board, but the walls and ceiling were rough, bored out of the rock itself.

This colossal cavern was no natural formation. The society's controller had carved it himself over a considerable amount of time.

He visited this cavern only every few years—each time IT summoned them—and each time, the thought of all that effort made him chuckle.

Not because he was a night lich, and his skill at magic made him contemptuous of physical means, but because it was a symbol of IT's cowardice—a marked contrast to the arrogance displayed before them.

Certain he was far enough away, Banejieli cast Teleportation twice, quickly reaching his destination.

He was outside a castle in the mountains, one belonging to Lord Redeye—Krunui Log Entesh Na, one of the inner circle.

By far the most fastidious member, Krunui took great pride in his appearance. His home was held to the same standard.

He had paid—in magical knowledge, magic items, or jewel-encrusted treasures—other races to create the castle's decor, and even those with no eye for these things could sense its somber gravitas. This was one reason the inner circle always gathered here.

Banejieli moved to the front gate and found one of Krunui's undead waiting to guide him in.

He was led to a room. Everyone else had already arrived, save Grazen.

“I’m here.”

“IT give you a hard time?”

The speaker was the castle’s owner, Krunui.

Humanoid, pallid skin—not a naturally occurring undead but a human who had used magic to transform himself. Perhaps that was why he was so particular about the fineries—traces of his old life. The others always dressed the same—bedecked in magic items that radiated mana—but he alone wore a new suit each time. Smartly tailored but little to no magic infused in the fabric.

The others saw clothing as a means to strengthen themselves, but to him it was merely decorative.

“Unless anyone objects, I thought we’d start once Grazen arrives.”

Banejieli sat down on one of several benches, addressing his cohorts. No one complained.

This was yet another in a long line of discussions, preparing to rebel against IT.

Sheer strength was the only reason they’d ever accepted IT’s control.

IT had learned of The Abyssal Corpus from someone in the outer circle. There had been no warning before that first appearance and initial show of force.

Rather than flee, they’d bowed their heads—believing that IT could serve as a deterrent against the other great powers of the world. Not in the hopes of expanding their society.

But IT was the worst kind of ruler.

The Abyssal Corpus had not been founded to overturn the order in the continent’s center. They had no business being counted as pawns as part of their pact.

They needed a new deterrent. That was a belief held by all in the inner circle, those who regularly met with IT.

Ordinarily, the more people who were involved, the more likely someone would betray them or leak information. The fact that no one here had considered doing so proved how little loyalty IT commanded.

Banejieli could say with confidence that no one had betrayed them yet. The fact that they still lived proved it.

If anyone had leaked their plans, they'd have long since been annihilated. IT controlled the society, stole their research, and made itself stronger. IT was little more than a parasite. But it would never deem its gains were worth allowing a little scheming.

They knew for a fact that IT would act swiftly and mercilessly.

IT had neither the tolerance nor the generosity a ruler should have. Perhaps it was just overly cautious.

Either way, their continued survival meant IT had not yet noticed.

Perhaps they were lucky that IT had no means to control undead. Given ITs raw strength advantage, if IT had honed such skills, they would've been helpless to resist.

We're not going to let you feed off us forever!

Banejieli pictured the creature's bulk and swore under his breath.

OVERLORD
Character Profiles



SHIHOUTSU TOKITSU

SUBHUMAN

The Passionate Chef

Position —— Head Chef to the Great Tomb of Nazarick

Residence — Break Room Adjacent to the Cafeteria

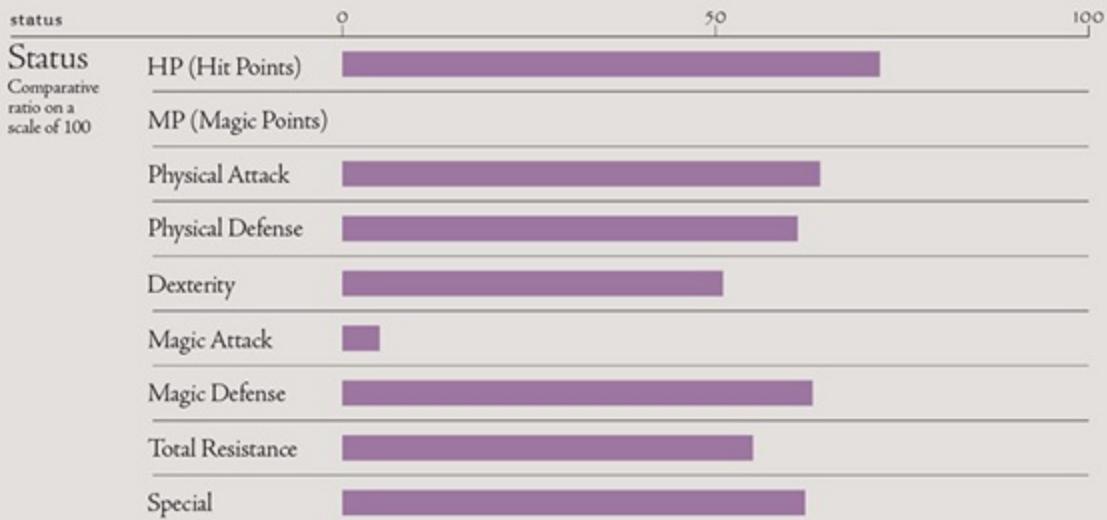
Alignment — Neutral ~ Bad (Karma Points: -80)

Class Levels	Cook	5 lv
	Super Cook	8 lv
	Master Chef	2 lv
	Berserk	2 lv
	Fury	7 lv

[Race levels] + [Class levels] _____ 78 levels

Race levels

Class levels



ANKYLOURSUS LORD

GROTESQUE

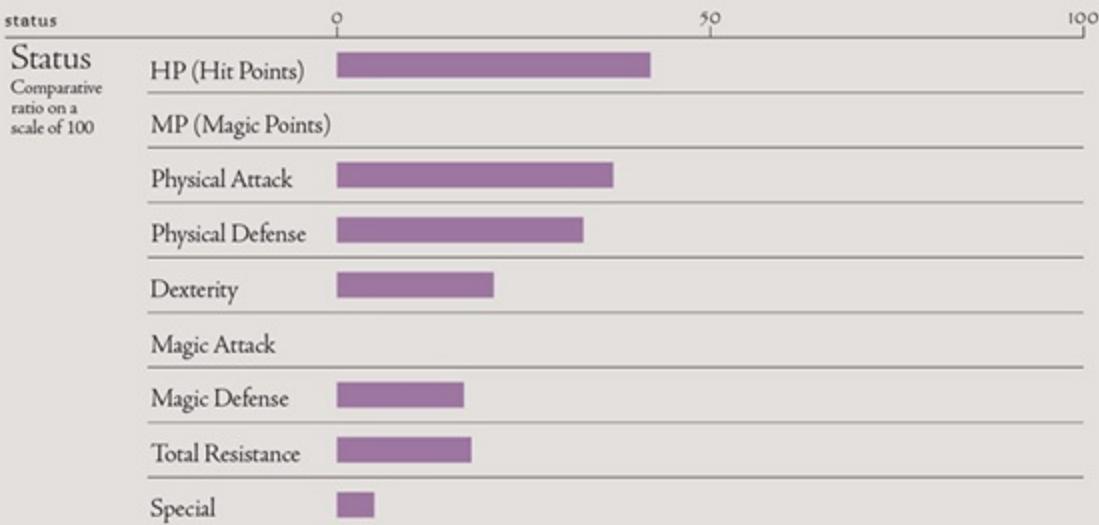
One of Fifteen Lords of the Forest

Position ——— Aura's Guinea Pig

Residence ——— Forest

Alignment ——— Neutral (Karma Points: 0)

Class Levels ——— None (No equivalent in
Yggdrasil, so unknown)



VARIABLE TALISMAN

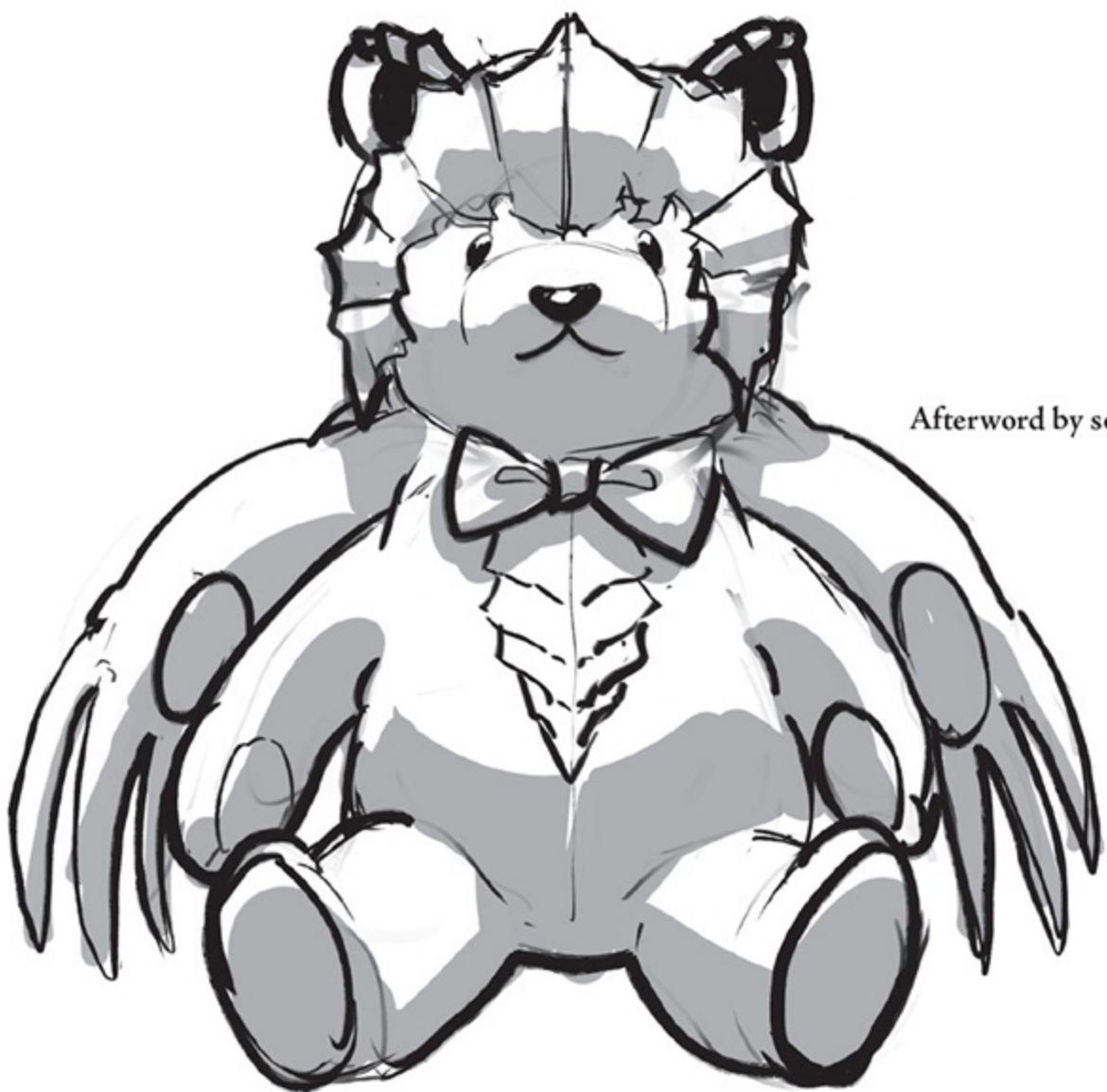
GROTESQUE

Keep Your Armor On



{ personal character }

His starting race, Centipistrum, were thieves and not suited for playing a tank. But he liked the look and never changed the race. Thus, his abilities were second-rate. He had little sense for builds, skill as a player, technique, or passion for the game. He was less a gamer than a filthy casual. He's probably still out there dabbling in one game or another, healing the wounds real life inflicts on him.



Afterword by so-bin

A TWO-YEAR GAP!!
AND ANOTHER NEW VOLUME
NEXT MONTH!!
SO MUCH WORK!!!!

so-bin

THE THEOCRACY
INVADERS ARE
KNOCKING AT
THE DOOR OF
THE ELF CAPITAL.

AINZ HAS A
PLAN—BUT WHEN
THEY ARRIVE, THE
ELF KING STANDS
IN THEIR WAY.
AND THE THEOC-
RACY'S BEST—

NO DEATH—
NO LIFE!

STRIKE FEAR IN
THE HEARTS OF
LIVING LEGENDS!

16

Volume
Sixteen



OVERLORD

Volume 16: The Half-Elf Demigod PART II

Kugane Maruyama | Illustration by so-bin

Coming soon from  YEN!

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

[Sign Up](#)

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink



PtFF by: traktorA7EN